

**SHIFTING
SANDS**

Sara Ware
BASSETT

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AFTER days of fog Stanley Heath, a stranger whose power-boat runs aground on the treacherous Cape Cod shoals, stumbles into the Homestead and into the life of Marcia Howe, a young widow with whom half the men in the village are already in love. Out of his clothing falls a leather case crammed with gems and the enigma of this puzzling possession provides the pivot around which the story revolves. Marcia's blind, intuitive belief in the man's innocence brings its own reward. The hamlets of Wilton and Belleport, already so well known to Miss Bassett's readers, are again the setting of this new novel. A sparkling love story of Cape Cod.

Shifting Sands

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Shifting Sands

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Our lives are like the ever shifting sands

*Which ocean currents whirl in the ebb and flow
Of their unresisting tides*



Chapter I

THE WIDDER lived on the spit of sand jutting out into Crocker's Cove.

Just why she should have been singled out by this significant sobriquet was a subtle psychological problem. There were other women in Belleport and in Wilton, too, who had lost husbands. Maria Eldridge was a widow and so was Susan Ann Beals. Indeed death had claimed the head of many a household in the community, for to follow the sea was a treacherous business.

Nevertheless, despite the various homes in which solitary women reigned, none of their owners was designated by the appellation allotted to Marcia Howe.

Moreover, there seemed in the name the hamlet had elected to bestow upon her a ring of satisfaction, even of rejoicing, rather than the note of condolence commonly echoing in the term. Persons rolled it on their tongues as if flaunting it triumphantly on the breeze.

"Marcia ought never to have married Jason Howe, anyway," asserted Abbie Brewster when one day she reminiscently gossiped with her friend, Rebecca Gill. "She was head an' shoulders above him. Whatever coaxed her into it I never could understand. She could have had her pick of half a dozen husbands. Why take up with a rollin' stone like him?"

"She was nothin' but a slip of a thing when she married. Mebbe she had the notion she could reform him," Rebecca suggested.

"Mebbe," agreed Abbie. "Still, young as she was, she might 'a' known she couldn't. Ten years ago he was the same, unsteady, drinkin' idler he proved himself to be up to the last minute of his life. He hadn't changed a hair. Such men seldom do, unless they set out to; an' Jason Howe never set out to do, or be, anything. He was too selfish an' too lazy. Grit an' determination was qualities left out of him. Well, he's gone, an' Marcia's well rid of him. For 'most three years now, she's been her own mistress an' the feelin' that she is must be highly enjoyable."

"Poor Marcia," sighed Rebecca.

"Poor Marcia?" Abbie repeated. "Lucky Marcia, I say. 'Most likely she'd say so herself was she to speak the truth. She never would, though. Since the day she married, she's been close-mouthed as an oyster. What she thought of Jason, or didn't think of him, she's certainly kept to herself. Nobody in this village has ever heard her bewail her lot. She made her bargain an' poor as 'twas she stuck to

it."

"S'pose she'll always go on livin' there on that deserted strip of sand?" speculated Rebecca. "Why, it's 'most an island. In fact, it is an island at high tide."

"So 'tis. An' Zenas Henry says it's gettin' to be more an' more so every minute," Abbie replied. "The tide runs through that channel swift as a race horse an' each day it cuts a wider path 'twixt Marcia an' the shore. Before long, she's goin' to be as completely cut off from the mainland at low water as at high."

"It must be a terrible lonely place."

"I wouldn't want to live there," shrugged the sociable Abbie. "But there's folks that don't seem to mind solitude, an' Marcia Howe's one of 'em. Mebbe, after the life she led with Jason, she kinder relishes bein' alone. 'Twould be no marvel if she did. Furthermore, dynamite couldn't blast her out of that old Daniels Homestead. Her father an' her grandfather were born there, an' the house is the apple of her eye. It is a fine old place if only it stood somewheres else. Of course, when it was built the ocean hadn't et away the beach, an' instead of bein' narrow, the Point was a wide, sightly piece of land. Who'd 'a' foreseen the tides would wash 'round it 'til they'd whittled it down to little more'n a sand bar, an' as good as detached it from the coast altogether?"

"Who'd 'a' foreseen lots of pranks the sea's played? The Cape's a-swirl with shiftin' sands. They drift out here, they pile up there. What's terra firma today is swallered up tomorrow. Why, even Wilton Harbor's fillin' in so fast that 'fore we know it there won't be a channel deep enough to float a dory left us. We'll be land-locked."

"Well, say what you will against the sea an' the sand, they did a good turn for Marcia all them years of her married life. At least they helped her keep track of Jason. Once she got him on the Point with the tide runnin' strong 'twixt him and the village, she'd padlock the skiff an' there he'd be! She had him safe an' sound," Abbie chuckled.

"Yes," acquiesced Rebecca. "But the scheme worked both ways. Let Jason walk over to town across the flats an' then let the tide rise an' there he be, too! Without a boat there was no earthly way of his gettin' home. Marcia might fidget 'til she was black in the face. He had the best of excuses for loiterin' an' carousin' ashore."

"Well, he don't loiter and carouse here no longer. Marcia knows where he is now," declared Abbie with spirit. "I reckon she's slept more durin' these last three years than ever she slept in the ten that went before 'em. She certainly

looks it. All her worries seem to have fallen away from her, leavin' her lookin' like a girl of twenty. She's pretty as a picture."

"She must be thirty-five if she's a day," Rebecca reflected.

"She ain't. She's scarce over thirty. I can tell you 'xactly when she was born," disputed the other woman. "But thirty or even more, she don't look her age."

"S'pose she'll marry again?" ventured Rebecca, leaning forward and dropping her voice.

"Marry? There you go, 'Becca, romancin' as usual."

"I ain't romancin'. I was just wonderin'. An' I ain't the only person in town askin' the question, neither," retorted Mrs. Gill with a sniff. "There's scores of others. In fact, I figger the thought is the uppermost one in the minds of 'most everybody."

Abbie laughed.

"Mebbe. In fact, I reckon 'tis," conceded she. "It's the thought that come to everyone quick as Jason was buried. 'Course, 'twouldn't be decent to own it—an' yet I don't know why. Folks 'round about here are fond of Marcia an' feel she's been cheated out of what was her rightful due. They want her to begin anew an' have what she'd oughter have had years ago—a good husband an' half a dozen children. There's nothin' to be ashamed of in a wish like that. I ain't denyin' there are certain persons who are more self-seekin'. I ain't blind to the fact that once Jason was under the sod, 'bout every widower in town sorter spruced up an' began to take notice; an' before a week was out every bachelor had bought a new necktie. Eben Snow told me so an' he'd oughter know bein' the one that sells 'em."

"Abbie!"

"It's true. An' why, pray, shouldn't the men cast sheep's eyes at Marcia? Can you blame 'em? She'd be one wife in a hundred could a body win her. There ain't a thing she can't do from shinglin' a barn down to trimmin' a hat. She's the match of any old salt at sailin' a boat an' can pull an oar strong as the best of 'em. Along with that she can sew, cook, an' mend; plow an' plant; paper a room. An' all the time, whatever she's doin', she'd bewitch you with her smile an' her pretty ways. It's a marvel to me how she's kept out of matrimony long's this with so many men millerin' 'round her."

"She certainly's takin' her time. She don't 'pear to be in no hurry to get a husband," smiled Rebecca.

"Why should she be? Her parents left her with money in the bank an' the Homestead to boot, an' Marcia was smart enough not to let Jason make ducks

and drakes of her property. She dealt out to him what she thought he better have an' held fast to the rest. As a result, she's uncommon well-off."

"All men mightn't fancy havin' a wife hold the tiller, though."

Rebecca Gill pursed her lips.

"Any man Marcia Howe married would have to put up with it," Abbie asserted, biting off a needful of thread with a snap of her fine white teeth. "Marcia's always been captain of the ship an' she always will be."

Gathering up her mending, Rebecca rose.

"Well, I can't stay here settlin' Marcia's future," she laughed. "I've got to be goin' home. Lemmy'll be wantin' his supper. He can't, though, accuse me of fritterin' the afternoon away. I've darned every pair of stockin's in this bag an' there was scores of 'em. You turn off such things quicker when you're in good company."

A scuffling on the steps and the sound of men's voices interrupted the words.

The kitchen door swung open and Zenas Henry's lanky form appeared on the threshold. Behind him, like a foreshortened shadow, tagged his crony, Lemuel Gill.

"Well, well, 'Becca, if here ain't Lemmy come to fetch you!" Abbie cried. "'Fraid your wife had deserted you, Lemmy? She ain't. She was just this minute settin' out for home."

"I warn't worryin' none," grinned Lemuel.

"What you two been doin'?" Abbie inquired of her husband.

"Oh, nothin' much," answered the big, loose-jointed fellow, shuffling into the room. "We've been settin' out, drinkin' in the air."

The carelessness of the reply was a trifle overdone, and instantly aroused the keen-eyed Abbie's suspicions.

She glanced into his face.

"Guess we're goin' to have rain," he ventured.

"I wouldn't wonder," rejoined Lemuel Gill.

Humming to prove he was entirely at his ease, Zenas Henry ambled to the window and looked out.

"Where you been settin'?" demanded Abbie.

"Settin'? Oh, Lemmy an' me took sort of a little jaunt along the shore. Grand day to be abroad. I never saw a finer. The sea's blue as a corn-flower, an' the waves are rollin' in, an' rollin' in, an'—"

"They generally are," Abbie interrupted dryly. "Just where'd you particularly notice 'em?"

Lemuel Gill stepped into the breach.

"'Twas this way," began he. "Zenas Henry an' me thought we'd take a bit of a meander. We'd been to the postoffice an' was standin' in the doorway when we spied Charlie Eldridge goin' by with a fish-pole—"

"Charlie Eldridge—the bank cashier?" Rebecca echoed. "But he ain't no fisherman. What on earth was he doin' with a fish-pole?"

"That's what we wondered," said Lemuel.

"Charlie Eldridge with a fish-pole," repeated Abbie. "Mercy! Where do you s'pose he was goin'?"

"I never in all my life knew of Charlie Eldridge goin' a-fishin'," Rebecca rejoined. "Not that he ain't got a perfect right to fish if he wants to outside bankin' hours. But—"

"But Charlie fishin'!" interrupted Abbie, cutting her friend short. "Why, he'd no more dirty his lily-white hands puttin' a squirming worm on a fish-hook than he'd cut off his head. In fact, I don't believe he'd know how. You didn't, likely, see where he went."

"Wal—er—yes. We did."

Zenas Henry wheeled about.

Clearing his throat, he darted a glance at Lemuel.

"Havin' completed the business that took us to the store—" he began.

"Havin', in short, asked for the mail an' found there warn't none," laughed Abbie, mischievously.

Zenas Henry ignored the comment.

"We walked along in Charlie's wake," he continued.

"Followed him?"

"Wal—somethin' of the sort. You might, I s'pose, call it follerin'," Zenas Henry admitted shamefacedly. "Anyhow, Lemmy an' me trudged along behind him at what we considered a suitable distance."

"Where'd he go?" Rebecca urged, her face alight with curiosity.

"Wal, Charlie swung along, kinder whistlin' to himself, an' ketchin' his pole in the trees and brushes 'til he come to the fork of the road. Then he made for the shore."

"So he was really goin' fishin'," mused Abbie, a suggestion of disappointment

in her voice.

"He certainly was. Oh, Charlie was goin' fishin' right 'nough. He was aimed for deep water," grinned Zenas Henry.

"He wouldn't ketch no fish in Wilton Harbor," sniffed Rebecca contemptuously. "Wouldn't you think he'd 'a' known that?"

"He warn't," observed Zenas Henry mildly, "figgerin' to. In fact, 'twarn't to Wilton Harbor he was goin'."

With a simultaneous start, both women looked up.

"No-siree. Bank cashier or not, Charlie warn't that much of a numskull. He was primed to fish in more propitious waters."

"Zenas Henry, do stop beatin' round the bush an' say what you have to say. If you're goin' to tell us where Charlie Eldridge went, out with it. If not, stop talkin' about it," burst out his wife sharply.

"Ain't I tellin' you fast as I can? Why get so het up? If you must know an' can't wait another minute, Charlie went fishin' in Crocker's Cove."

"Crocker's Cove!" cried two feminine voices.

Zenas Henry's only reply was a deliberate nod.

"Crocker's Cove?" gasped Abbie.

"Crocker's Cove?" echoed Rebecca.

"Crocker's Cove," nodded Zenas Henry.

"Mercy on us! Why—! Why, he—he must 'a' been goin'"—began Abbie.

"—to see *The Widder*," Rebecca interrupted, completing the sentence.

"I'd no notion he was tendin' up to her," Abbie said.

"Wal, he warn't 'xactly tendin' up to her—least-way, not today. Not what you could really call tendin' up," contradicted Zenas Henry, a twinkle in his eye. "Rather, I'd say 'twas t'other way round. Wouldn't you, Lemmy? Wouldn't you say that instead 'twas she who tended up to him?"

Sagaciously, Lemuel bowed.

The tapping of Abbie's foot precipitated the remainder of the story.

"You see," drawled on Zenas Henry, "no sooner had Charlie got into the boat an' pulled out into the channel than he had the usual beginner's luck an' hooked a stragglin' bluefish—one of the pert kind that ain't fer bein' hauled in. Law! You'd oughter seen that critter pull! He 'most had Charlie out of the boat.

"I shouted to him to hang on an' so did Lemmy. We couldn't help it. The idiot had no more notion what to do than the man in the moon.

"In our excitement, we must 'a' bellered louder'n we meant to, 'cause in no time *The Widder* popped outter the house. She took one look at Charlie strugglin' in the boat, raced down to the landin' an' put out to him just about at the minute he was waverin' as to whether he'd chuck pole, line, an' sinker overboard, or go overboard himself.

"Quicker'n scat she had the fish-pole, an' while we looked on, Charlie dropped down kinder limp on the seat of the boat an' begun tyin' up his hand in a spandy clean pocket handkerchief while *The Widder* gaffed the fish an' hauled it in."

"My soul!" exploded Abbie Brewster. "My soul an' body!"

"Later on," continued Zenas Henry, "Charlie overtook us. He'd stowed away his fish-pole somewheres. Leastway, he didn't have it with him. When Lemmy an' me asked him where his fish was, he looked blacker'n thunder an' snapped out: 'Hang the fish!'

"Seein' he warn't in no mood for neighborly conversation, we left him an' come along home."



Chapter II

IN THE meantime, Marcia Howe, the heroine of this escapade, comfortably ensconced in her island homestead, paid scant heed to the fact that she and her affairs were continually on the tongues of the outlying community.

She was not ignorant of it for, although too modest to think herself of any great concern to others, her intuitive sixth sense made her well aware her goings and comings were watched. This knowledge, however, far from nettling her, as it might have done had she been a woman blessed with less sense of humor, afforded her infinite amusement. She liked people and because of her habit of looking for the best in them she usually found it. Their spying, she realized, came from motives of interest. She had never known it to be put to malicious use. Hence, she never let it annoy her.

She loved her home; valued her kindly, if inquisitive, neighbors at their true worth; and met the world with a smile singularly free from hardness or cynicism.

Bitter though her experience had been, it had neither taken from, nor, miraculously, had it dimmed her faith in her particular star. On the contrary there still glowed in her grey eyes that sparkle of anticipation one sees in the eyes of one who stands a-tiptoe on the threshold of adventure. Apparently she had in her nature an unquenchable spirit of hope that nothing could destroy. No doubt youth had aided her to retain this vision for she was still young and the highway of life, alluring in rosy mists, beckoned her along its mysterious path with persuasive hand. Who could tell what its hidden vistas might contain?

Her start, she confessed, had been an unpropitious one. But starts sometimes were like that; and did not the old adage affirm that a bad beginning made for a fair ending?

Furthermore, the error had been her own. She had been free to choose and she had chosen unwisely. Why whine about it? One must be a sport and play the game. She was older now and better fitted to look after herself than she had been at seventeen. Only a fool made the same blunder twice, and if experience had been a pitiless teacher, it had also been a helpful and convincing one.

Marcia did not begrudge her lesson. Unquestionably, it had taken from her its toll; but on the other hand it had left as compensation something she would not have exchanged for gold.

The past with its griefs, its humiliations, its heartbreak, its failure lay behind

—the future all before her. It was hers—hers! She would be wary what she did with it and never again would she squander it for dross.

Precisely what she wished or intended to make of that future she did not know. There were times when a wave of longing for something she could not put into words surged up within her with a force not to be denied. Was it loneliness? She was not so lonely that she did not find joy in her home and its daily routine of domestic duties.

On the contrary, she attacked these pursuits with tireless zeal. She liked sweeping, dusting, polishing brasses, and making her house as fresh as the sea breezes that blew through it. She liked to brew and bake; to sniff browning pie crust and the warm spiciness of ginger cookies. Keen pleasure came to her when she surveyed spotless beds, square at the corners and covered with immaculate counterpanes. She found peace and refreshment in softened lights, flowers, the glow of driftwood fires.

As for the more strenuous tasks connected with homemaking, they served as natural and pleasurable vents for her surplus energy. She revelled in painting, papering, shingling; and the solution of the balking enigmas presented by plumbing, chimneys, drains and furnaces.

If there lingered deep within her heart vague, unsatisfied yearnings, Marcia resolutely held over these filmy imaginings a tight rein. To be busy—that was her gospel. She never allowed herself to remain idle for any great length of time. To prescribe the remedy and faithfully apply it was no hardship to one whose active physique and abounding vigor demanded an abundance of exercise. Like an athlete set to run a race, she gloried in her physical strength.

When she tramped the shore, the wind blowing her hair and the rich blood pulsing in her cheeks; when her muscles stretched taut beneath an oar or shot out against the resistance of the tide, a feeling of unity with a power greater than herself caught her up, thrilling every fibre of her being. She was never unsatisfied then. She felt herself to be part of a force mighty and infinite—a happy, throbbing part. Today, as she moved swiftly about the house and her deft hands made tidy the rooms, she had that sense of being in step with the world.

The morning, crisp with an easterly breeze, had stirred the sea into a swell that rose rhythmically in measureless, breathing immensity far away to its clear-cut, sapphire horizon. The sands had never glistened more white; the surf never curled at her doorway in a prettier, more feathery line. On the ocean side, where winter's lashing storms had thrown up a protecting phalanx of dunes, the coarse grasses she had sown to hold them tossed in the wind, while from the Point, where her snowy domains dipped into more turbulent waters, she could hear the

grating roar of pebbles mingle with the crash of heavier breakers.

It all spoke to her of home—home as she had known it from childhood—as her father and her father's father had known it. Boats, nets, the screaming of gulls, piping winds, and the sting of spray on her face were bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh. The salt of deep buried caverns was in her veins; the chant of the ocean echoed the beating of her own heart.

Lonely?

If she needed anything it was a companion to whom to cry: "Isn't it glorious to be alive?" and she already had such a one.

Never was there such a comrade as Prince Hal!

Human beings often proved themselves incapable of grasping one another's moods—but he? Never!

He knew when to speak and when to be silent; when to be in evidence and when to absent himself. His understanding was infinite; his fidelity as unchanging as the stars. Moreover, he was an honorable dog, a thoroughbred, a gentleman. That was why she had bestowed upon him an aristocratic name. He demanded it.

She would never want for a welcome while he had strength to wag his white plume of tail; nor lack affection so long as he was able to race up the beach and race back again to hurl himself upon her with his sharp, staccato yelp of joy.

When easterly gales rocked the rafters and the wind howled with eerie moanings down the broad chimney; when line after line of foaming breakers steadily advanced, crashing up on the shore with a fury that threatened to invade the house, then it was comforting to have near-by a companion unashamed to draw closer to her and confess himself humbled in the presence of the sea's majesty.

Oh, she was worlds better off with Prince Hal than if she were linked up with someone of her own genus who could not understand.

Besides, she was not going to be alone. She had decided to try an experiment.

Jason had had an orphaned niece out in the middle west—his sister's child—a girl in her early twenties, and Marcia had invited her to the island for a visit.

In fact, Sylvia was expected today.

That was why a bowl of pansies stood upon the table in the big bedroom at the head of the stairs, and why its fireplace was heaped with driftwood ready for lighting. That was also the reason Marcia now stood critically surveying her preparations.

The house did look welcoming. With justifiable pride, she confessed to herself that Heaven had bestowed upon her a gift for that sort of thing. She knew where to place a chair, a table, a lamp, a book, a flower.

She was especially desirous the old home should look its best today, for the outside world had contributed a richness of setting that left her much to live up to. Sylvia had never seen the ocean. She must love it. But would she? That was to be the test.

If the girl came hither with eyes that saw not; if the splendor stretched out before her was wasted then undeterred, she might go back to her wheat fields, her flat inland air, her school teaching.

If, on the other hand, Wilton's beauty opened to her a new heaven and a new earth, if she proved herself a good comrade—well, who could say what might come of it?

There was room, money, affection enough for two beneath the Homestead roof and Sylvia was alone in the world. Moreover, Marcia felt an odd sense of obligation toward Jason. At the price of his life he had given her back her freedom. It was a royal gift and she owed him something in return.

She was too honest to pretend she had loved him or mourned his loss. Soon after the beginning of their life together, she had discovered he was not at all the person she had supposed him. The gay recklessness which had so completely bewitched her and which she had thought to be manliness had been mere bombast and bravado. At bottom he was a braggart—small, cowardly, purposeless—a ship without a rudder.

Endowed with good looks and a devil-may-care charm, he had called her his star and pleaded his need of her, and she had mistaken pity for love and believed that to help guide his foundering craft into port was a heaven-sent mission.

Alas, she had over-estimated both her own power and his sincerity. Jason had no real desire to alter his conduct. He lacked not only the inclination but the moral stamina to do so. Instead, day by day he slipped lower and lower and, unable to aid him or prevent disaster, she had been forced to look on.

Her love for him was dead, and her self-conceit was dealt a humiliating blow.

She was to have been his anchor in time of stress, the planet by which when he married her he boasted that he intended to steer his course. But she had been forced to stand impotent at his side and see self-respect, honor, and every essential of manhood go down and he shrivel to a fawning, deceitful, ambitionless wreck.

Sometimes she reproached herself for the tragedy and, scrutinizing the past,

wondered whether she might not have prevented it. Had she done her full part; been as patient, sympathetic, understanding as she ought to have been? Did his defeat lay at her door?

With the honesty characteristic of her, she could not see that it did. She might, no doubt, have played her role better. One always could if given a second chance. Nevertheless she had tried, tried with every ounce of strength in her—tried and failed!

Well, it was too late for regrets now. Such reflections belonged to the past and she must put them behind her as useless, morbid abstractions. Her back was set against the twilight; she was facing the dawn—the dawn with its promise of happier things.

Surely that magic, un-lived future touched with hope and dim with the prophecy of the unknown could not be so unfriendly as the past had been. It might bring pain; but she had suffered pain and no longer feared it. Moreover, no pain could ever be as poignant as that which she had already endured.

And why anticipate pain? Life held joy as well—countless untried experiences that radiated happiness. Were there not a balance between sunshine and shadow this world would be a wretched place in which to live, and its Maker an unjust dealer.

No, she believed not only in a fair-minded but in a generous God and she had faith that he was in his Heaven.

She had paid for her folly—if indeed folly it had been. Now with optimism and courage she looked fearlessly forward. That was why, as she caught up her hat, a smile curled her lips.

The house did look pretty, the day was glorious. She was a-tingle with eagerness to see what it might bring.

Calling Prince Hal, she stood before him.

"Take good care of the house, old man," she admonished, as she patted his silky head. "I'll be home soon."

He followed her to the piazza and stopped. His eyes pleaded to go, but he understood his orders and obeying them lay down with paws extended, the keeper of the Homestead.



Chapter III

THE train was ten minutes late, and while she paced the platform at Sawyer Falls, the nearest station, Marcia fidgeted.

She had never seen any of Jason's family. At first a desultory correspondence had taken place between him and his sister, Margaret; then gradually it had died a natural death—the result, no doubt, of his indolence and neglect. When the letters ceased coming, Marcia had let matters take their course.

Was it not kinder to allow the few who still loved him to remain ignorant of what he had become and to remember instead only as the dashing lad who in his teens had left the farm and gone to seek his fortune in the great world?

She had written Margaret a short note after his death and had received a reply expressing such genuine grief it had more than ever convinced her that her course had been the wise and generous one. What troubled her most in the letter had been its outpouring of sympathy for herself. She detested subterfuge and as she read sentence after sentence, which should have meant so much and in reality meant so little, the knowledge that she had not been entirely frank had brought with it an uncomfortable sense of guilt. It was not what she had said but what she had withheld that accused her.

Marcia Howe was no masquerader, and until this moment the hypocrisy she had practiced had demanded no sustained acting. Little by little, moreover, the pricking of her conscience had ceased and, fading into the past, the incident had been forgotten. Miles of distance, years of silence separated her from Jason's relatives and it had been easy to allow the deceit, if deceit it had been, to stand.

But now those barriers were to be broken down and she suddenly realized that to keep up the fraud so artlessly begun was going to be exceedingly difficult. She was not a clever dissembler.

Moreover, any insincerity between herself and Sylvia would strike at the very core of the sincere, earnest companionship she hoped would spring up between them. Even should she be a more skillful fraud than she dared anticipate and succeed in playing her role convincingly, would there not loom ever before her the danger of betrayal from outside sources?

Everyone in the outlying district had known Jason for what he was. There had been no possibility of screening the sordid melodrama from the public. Times without number one fisherman and then another had come bringing the recreant

back home across the channel, and had aided in getting him into the house and to bed. His shame had been one of the blots on the upright, self-respecting community.

As a result, her private life had perforce become common property and all its wretchedness and degradation, stripped of concealment, had been spread stark beneath the glare of the sunlight.

It was because the villagers had helped her so loyally to shoulder a burden she never could have borne alone that Marcia felt toward them this abiding affection and gratitude. They might discuss her affairs if they chose; ingenuously build up romances where none existed; they might even gossip about her clothes, her friends, her expenditures. Their chatter did not trouble her. She had tried them out, and in the face of larger issues had found their virtues so admirable that their vices became, by contrast, mere trivialities.

Moreover, having watched her romance begin, flourish, and crumble; and having shared in the joy and sorrow of it, it was not only natural, but to some degree legitimate they should feel they had the right to interest themselves in her future.

Not all their watchfulness was prompted by curiosity. Some of it emanated from an impulse of guardianship—a desire to shield her from further misery and mishap. She was alone in the world, and in the eyes of the older inhabitants who had known her parents, she was still a girl—one of the daughters of the town. They did not mean to stand idly by and see her duped a second time.

The assurance that she had behind her this support; that she was respected, beloved, held blameless of the past, not only comforted but lent to her solitary existence a sense of background which acted as a sort of anchor.

Not that she was without standards or ideals.

Nevertheless, human nature is human nature and it did her no harm to realize she was not an isolated being whose actions were of no concern to anyone in the wide world.

Separated though she was by the confines of her island home, she was not allowed to let her remoteness from Wilton detach her from it, nor absolve her from her share in its obligations. She had her place and every day of the year a score of lookers-on, familiar with her general schedule, checked up on her fulfillment of it.

If, given limited leeway, she did not appear for her mail or for provisions; if she was not at church; if the lights that should have twinkled from her windows were darkened, someone unfailingly put out across the channel to make sure all

was well with her. Nay, more, if any emergency befell her, she had only to run up a red lantern on the pole beside her door and aid would come. What wonder then that, in face of such friendliness, Marcia Howe failed to resent the community's grandmotherly solicitude?

She had never kept secrets from her neighbors—indeed she never had had secrets to keep. Her nature was too crystalline, her love of truth too intense.

If she had followed her usual custom and been open with Jason's sister, the dilemma in which she now found herself would never have arisen. Granted that her motive had been a worthy one had it not been audacious to make of herself a god and withhold from Margaret Hayden facts she had had every right to know, facts that belonged to her? Such burdens were given human beings to bear, not to escape from.

Why should she have taken it upon herself to shield, nay prevent Jason's flesh and blood from participating in the sorrow, shame, disappointment she herself had borne? The experience had had immeasurable influence in her own life. Why should it not have had as much in Margaret's?

Alas, matters of right and wrong, questions of one's responsibility toward others were gigantic, deeply involved problems. What her duty in this particular case had been she did not and would now never know, nor was it of any great moment that she should. Margaret was beyond the reach of this world's harassing enigmas. If with mistaken kindness she had been guided by a pygmy, short-sighted philosophy, it was too late, reflected Marcia, for her to remedy her error in judgment.

But Sylvia—Jason's niece?

With her coming, all the arguments Marcia had worn threadbare for and against the exposure of Jason's true character presented themselves afresh. Should she deceive the girl as she had her mother? Or should she tell her the truth?

She was still pondering the question when a shrill whistle cut short her reverie.

There was a puffing of steam; a grinding of brakes, the spasmodic panting of a weary engine and the train, with its single car, came to a stop beside the platform.

Three passengers descended.

The first was a young Portuguese woman, dark of face, and carrying a bulging bag from which protruded gay bits of embroidery.

Behind her came a slender, blue-eyed girl, burdened not only with her own

suit-case but with a basket apparently belonging to a wee, wizened old lady who followed her.

"Now we must find Henry," the girl was saying in a clear but gentle voice. "Of course he'll be here. Look! Isn't that he—the man just driving up in a car? I guessed as much from your description. You need not have worried, you see. Yes, the brakeman has your bag and umbrella; and here is the kitten safe and sound, despite her crying. Goodbye, Mrs. Doane. I hope you'll have a lovely visit with your son."

The little old lady smiled up at her.

"Goodbye, my dear. You've taken care of me like as if you'd been my own daughter. I ain't much used to jauntin' about, an' it frets me. Are your folks here? If not, I'm sure Henry wouldn't mind—"

"Oh, somebody'll turn up to meet me, Mrs. Doane. I'll be all right. Goodbye. We did have a pleasant trip down, didn't we? Traveling isn't really so bad after all."

Then as Marcia watched, she saw the lithe young creature stoop suddenly and kiss the withered cheek.

The next instant she was swinging up the platform.

The slim figure in its well-tailored blue suit; the trimly shod feet; the small hat so provokingly tilted over the bright eyes, the wealth of golden curls that escaped from beneath it all shattered Marcia's calculations. She had thought of Sylvia Hayden as farm-bred—the product of an inland, country town—a creature starved for breadth of outlook and social opportunity. It was disconcerting to discover that she was none of these things.

In view of her sophistication, Marcia's proposed philanthropy took on an aspect of impertinence.

Well, if she herself was chagrined, there was consolation in seeing that the girl was equally discomfited.

As she approached Marcia, she accosted her uncertainly with the words:

"Pardon me. I am looking for a relative—a Mrs. Howe. You don't happen to know, do you—"

"I'm Marcia."

"But I thought—I expected—" gasped the girl.

"And I thought—I expected—" Marcia mimicked gaily.

For a moment they looked searchingly into one another's faces, then laughed.

"Fancy having an aunt like you!" exclaimed the incredulous Sylvia, still

staring with unconcealed amazement.

"And fancy having a niece like you!"

"Well, all I can say is I'm glad I came," was the girl's retort. "I wasn't altogether sure I should be when I started East. I said to myself: 'Sylvia you are taking a big chance. You may just be wasting your money.'"

"You may still find it's been wasted."

"No, I shan't. I know already it has been well spent," announced the girl, a whimsical smile curving her lips.

"Wait until you see where you're going."

"I am going to Paradise—I'm certain of it. The glimpses I've had of the ocean from the train have convinced me of that. Do you live where you can see it, Aunt Marcia? Will it be nearby?"

"I shall not tell you one thing," Marcia replied. "At least only one, and that is that I flatly refuse to be Aunt Marcia to you!"

"Don't you like me?" pouted Sylvia, arching her brows.

"So much that your aunt-ing me is absurd. It would make me feel like Methuselah. I really haven't that amount of dignity."

"Ah, now my last weak, wavering doubt is vanquished. Not only am I glad I came but I wish I'd come before."

She saw a shadow flit across her aunt's face.

"You weren't asked until now," observed Marcia with cryptic brevity.

"That wouldn't have mattered. Had I known what you were like, I should have come without an invitation."

In spite of herself, Marcia smiled.

"Here's the car," she answered. "What about your trunk?"

"I didn't bring one."

"You didn't bring a trunk! But you are to make a long visit, child."

"I—I wasn't sure that I'd want to," Sylvia replied. "You see, I was a wee bit afraid of you. I thought you'd be a New England prune. I had no idea what you were like. If I'd brought my things, I'd have been obliged to stay."

"You're a cautious young person," was Marcia's dry observation. "'Twould serve you right if I sent you home at the end of a fortnight."

"Oh, please don't do that," begged Sylvia. "It's in *The Alton City Courier* that I have gone East to visit relatives for a few weeks. If I should come right back, everybody would decide I'd stolen the family silver or done something

disgraceful. Besides—my trunk is all packed, locked, strapped and I've brought the key," added she with disarming frankness. "It can be sent for in case—"

"I see!" nodded Marcia, her lips curving into a smile in spite of herself, "I said you were cautious."

"Don't you ever watch your own step?"

As the myriad pros and cons she had weighed and eliminated before inviting her guest passed in quick review before Marcia's mind, she chuckled:

"Sometimes I do," she conceded grimly.



Chapter IV

THE village store, grandiloquently styled by a red sign the Wilton Emporium, was thronged with the usual noontime crowd.

It was a still, grey day, murky with fog and the odors of wet oilskins, steaming rubber coats, damp woolens blended with a mixture of tar, coffee and tobacco smoke, made its interior thick and stuffy. Long ago the air-tight stove had consumed such remnants of oxygen as the room contained. The windows reeked with moisture; the floor was gritty with sand.

These discomforts, however, failed to be of consequence to the knot of men who, rain or shine, congregated there at mail time. They were accustomed to them. Indeed, a drizzle, far from keeping the habitués away, rendered the meeting place unusually popular. Not but that plenty of work, capable of being performed as well in foul as in fair weather, could not have been found at home.

Zenas Henry Brewster's back stairs were at the very moment crying out for paint; the leg was off his hair-cloth sofa; the pantry window stuck; the bolt dangled from his side door and could have been wrenched off with a single pull.

Here was an ideal opportunity to make such repairs. Yet, why take today?

Nobody really saw the stairs. If the sofa pitched the brick tucked underneath, it at least prevented it from lurching dangerously. The pantry window was as well closed as open, anyway. And as for the side door—if it was not bolted at all, no great harm would result.

"Nobody's got in yet," Zenas Henry optimistically philosophized as, despite his wife's protests, he slipped into his sou'wester, "an' I see no cause to think thieves will pitch on today to come. Fur's that goes, Wilton ain't never had a burglary in all its history. We could leave all the bolts off the doors."

To this cheery observation he added over his shoulder a jaunty "Goodbye!" and, striding out through the shed, was off to join his cronies.

The argument with Abbie had not only delayed him, but had left him a bit irritated, and he was more nettled still to find, when he crossed the threshold of the post-office, that the daily conclave was in full swing. Nevertheless, the session had not become as interesting as it would after those who dropped in simply to call for mail or make purchases had thinned out. He had, to be sure, missed seeing the letters distributed, but the best yet remained.

Shuffling over to the counter where his friends were huddled, Zenas Henry unostentatiously joined them.

"Yes-siree, there'll be somethin' doin' in Wilton now," Enoch Morton, the fisherman, was saying. "That sand bar's goin' to be the centre of the town, if I don't miss my guess. There'll be more'n Charlie Eldridge fishin' in the channel."

A laugh greeted the prediction.

"Who's seen her?" Captain Benjamin Todd inquired.

"I have," came the piping voice of Lemuel Gill. "Me and 'Becca rowed over from Belleport Saturday. We went a-purpose, takin' some jelly to Marcia as an excuse. The girl's Jason's niece all right, same's folks say, though she looks no more like him than chalk like cheese. A prettier little critter 'twould be hard to find. It 'pears that at the outset Marcia invited her for no more'n a short visit. Inside the week, though, the two of 'em have got so friendly, Sylvia's sent home for her trunk, an' is plannin' to stay all summer. She's head over heels in love with the place. I'm almighty glad she's come, too, for it's goin' to be grand for Marcia, who must be lonely enough out there with only the setter for company."

"It's her own fault. She could have other companions was she so minded," declared Captain Phineas Taylor, significantly.

"Oh, we all know that, Phineas," agreed the gentle Lemuel Gill. "There's plenty of folks hankerin' to be comrades to Marcia. The only trouble is she doesn't want 'em."

"With this girl at her elbow, she'll want 'em even less, I reckon," Asaph Holmes interposed.

"Mebbe. Still, I figger that ain't a-goin' to discourage her admirers none. Why, within the week Sylvia's been here, I happen to know Marcia's had four buckets of clams, a catch of flounders, an' a couple of cuts of sword-fish presented to her," Ephraim Wise, the mail carrier announced.

"That stray blue-fish of Charlie Eldridge's must 'a' swelled the collection some, too," put in Lemuel. "When I asked Charlie what he done with it, he owned he left it over at the Homestead. He said he never wanted to see another fish long's he lived."

"That ain't all the gifts The Widder's had, neither," volunteered Silas Nickerson, the postmaster, who now joined the group. "Not by a long shot. I can see the whole of that spit of sand from my back porch, an' often after I've had my supper an' set out there smokin' an' sorter—"

"Sorter keepin' a weather eye out," chuckled a voice.

"Smokin' an' takin' the air," repeated Silas, firmly. "I look in that direction,

'cause it's a pleasant direction to look. That's how I come to know more'n one lobster's been sneaked to Marcia after dusk."

"I don't so much mind folks makin' Marcia friendly donations," Captain Jonas Baker declared with guilty haste. "In my opinion, it's right an' proper they should. But when it comes to Eleazer Crocker, who's head of the fire department an' undertaker as well, goin' over there for the entire evenin' with the keys to the engine house in his pocket, I think the town oughter take some action 'bout it. S'pose there was to be a fire an' him hemmed in by the tide t'other side the channel? The whole village might burn to the ground 'fore ever he could be fetched home."

"That certainly ain't right," Zenas Henry agreed. "Eleazer'd either oughter hang the keys on a bush near the shore or leave 'em with some responsible person when he goes a-courtin'."

"When you went courtin', would you 'a' wanted the whole town made aware of it?" queried Enoch Morton.

Chagrined, Zenas Henry colored.

"Well, anyhow, he's got no business goin' off the mainland. Even if there ain't a fire, somebody might die. He's a mighty important citizen, an' his place is at home."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that fur," soothed peace-loving Lemuel Gill. "Fires an' dyin' don't happen every day."

"No. But when they do come, they're liable to come sudden," maintained Zenas Henry stoutly.

"Not always. Besides, we've got to go a bit easy with Eleazer. Remember from the first he warn't anxious to be undertaker, anyway. He said so over an' over again," put in the gruff voice of Benjamin Todd. "He 'xplained he hadn't a mite of talent for the job an' no leanin's toward it. It was foisted on him 'gainst his will."

"Well, somebody had to be undertaker. I didn't hanker to be town sheriff, but I got hauled into bein'," rejoined Elisha Winslow. "In a place small as this honors sometimes go a-beggin' unless folks muster up their public spirit."

"I don't see, 'Lish, that the duties of sheriff have been so heavy here in Wilton that they've undermined your health," grinned Captain Phineas Taylor. "You ain't been what one could call over-worked by crime. Was you to need a pair of handcuffs in a hurry, it's my belief you wouldn't be able to find 'em. As for Eleazer—nobody's died for nigh onto a year; an' the only fire that's took place was a brush one that we put out 'most an hour 'fore the key to the engine-house

could be found, the door unlocked, an' the chemical coaxed into workin'."

"That's true enough," conceded Captain Benjamin. "Still, I'll bet you a nickel was you to come down hard on Eleazer, an' tell him that in future he'd have to choose 'twixt undertakin' an' courtin', he'd pick the courtin'. He's human. You can't press a man too hard. Besides, you've no right to blame that mix-up 'bout the engine-house key on him, Cap'n Phineas. Give the devil his due. Eleazer warn't responsible for that. His sister borrowed the brass polish for her candlesticks an' afterward slipped the key into her pocket by mistake. Remember that? At the minute the fire broke out she was leadin' a women's missionary meetin' at the church an' was in the act of prayin' for the heathens out in China. It didn't seem decent to interrupt either her or the Lord. Unluckily the prayer turned out to be an uncommon long one an' in consequence the chemical got delayed."

"Well, anyhow, I'm glad this niece of Marcia's come," broke in Lemuel Gill, shifting the subject. "She's a pleasant little critter an' will kinder stir things up."

"Oh, there's no danger but she'll do that all right, Lemmy," Zenas Henry drawled. "You can generally depend on a pretty girl to raise a rumpus. Give her a month in town an' she'll most likely have all the male population cuttin' one another's throats."

Fortunately both Marcia and Sylvia were at the moment too far out of ear-shot for this menacing prediction to reach them. Cut off by curtains of fog and a tide that foamed through the channel, they were standing in the homestead kitchen.

The builder of it would have laughed to scorn the present day apology for an interior so delightful.

Here was a room boasting space enough for an old-fashioned brick oven; an oil stove; two sand-scrubbed tables, snow white and smooth as satin; a high-backed rocker cushioned in red calico; braided rugs and shelves for plants. A regal kitchen truly—one that bespoke both comfort and hospitality.

The copper tea kettle, singing softly and sending up a genial spiral of steam, gleamed bright as sunshine; and the two big pantries, through which one glimpsed rows of shining tins and papered shelves laden with china, contributed to the general atmosphere of homeliness.

Fog might shroud the outer world in its blanket of unreality, but it was powerless to banish from Marcia's kitchen the cheer which perpetually reigned there.

Before the fire, stretched upon his side, lay Prince Hal, his body relaxed, his eyes drowsy with sleep; while from her vantage-ground on the rocking-chair above, the tiger kitten, Winkie-Wee, gazed watchfully down upon his slumbers.

It was Sylvia, however, who, in a smock of flowered chintz, lent the room its supreme touch of color. She looked as if all the blossoms in all the world had suddenly burst into bloom and twined themselves about her slender body.

Out of their midst rose her head, golden with curls and her blue eyes, large and child-like.

With her coming, a new world had opened to Marcia.

The girl's lightness of touch on life; her irrepressible gaiety; her sense of humor and unique point of view all bespoke a newer generation and one far removed from her aunt's environment. Not that she was without moral standards. She had them, but they were kept far in the background and were not the strained and anxious creeds which the woman of New England ancestry had inherited.

To see Sylvia jauntily sweep aside old conventions; to behold the different emphasis she put upon familiar problems; to witness her audacious belittling of issues her elders had been wont to grapple with was an experience that continually shocked, stimulated, challenged and amused.

Yet, there was something big and wholesome in it withal; something refreshingly sincere and free from morbidity; a high courage that took things as they came and never anticipated calamity.

Marcia found herself half reluctantly admiring this splendidly normal outlook; this mixture of sophistication and naïveté; her niece's novel and definitely formed opinions.

For, youthful though Sylvia was, she had personality, character, stratum of wisdom far in advance of her years. A very intriguing companion, Marcia admitted, one of whose many-sidedness she would not soon tire.

"Now what shall our menu be, Marcia, dear?" she was asking. "Remember, according to our compact, it is my turn to get the dinner."

"Anything but fish!" Marcia answered with a groan. "I'm so tired of salt-water products it seems as if never again could I touch another."

"But my dear, if you will have a stag line of nautical admirers, what can you expect? You must pay the penalty. Besides, I think you're ungrateful," Sylvia pouted. "I love clams and other sea foods."

"You've not had so many of them in your lifetime as I have. Besides, I suspect you are not telling the truth. Come, confess. Aren't you a wee bit fed up on clams? Clam chowder Monday night, steamed clams Tuesday noon; clam fritters Tuesday night. And then that blue-fish. Why, it was big as a shark! I almost lost my courage when the sword-fish and the flounders came, but fortunately with the aid of Prince Hal and the kitten, we disposed of them fairly well. The

lobsters, alas, yet remain. I used to think it would be romantic to be a Lorelei and live deep down beneath the waves; but this avalanche of fish—!" Despairingly she shrugged her shoulders.

Sylvia laughed.

"I don't feel at all like that. I've had a feast of fish and enjoyed it. But if I were to express a preference it would be for the hard-shelled suitors. Do select one of those for a husband, Marcia," begged she, whimsically. "The others are all very well. Indeed, that blue-fish swain was magnificent in his way, but me for the crustaceans."

"Sylvia! You absurd child!"

"Just consider the clam character for a moment—so silent, so close-mouthed; never stirring up trouble or wanting to be out nights. In my opinion, he would be an ideal helpmate. Not sensitive, either; nor jealous. Marcia, do marry one of the clams!"

"I'm not so sure," went on the girl reflectively, "whether he would be affectionate. He seems somewhat undemonstrative. Still, contrast him with the lobster. Oh, I realize the lobster has more style, originality, and is more pretentious in every way. However, say what you will, he is grasping by nature and has a much less gentle disposition. Besides, he is restless and always eager to be on the move.

"Yes, all things taken together, I lean strongly toward a nice, peaceable clam husband for you, Marcia. He'd be twice as domestic in his tastes. I acknowledge the blue-fish has more back-bone, but you do not need that. You have plenty yourself. Most women, I suppose, would be carried away by his dash, his daring, his persistence. He has a certain sporty quality that appeals; but he is so outrageously stubborn! He never gives in until he has to. He'd be dreadful to live with."

"Sylvia, you are ridiculous!" Marcia protested. "You forget I am your aunt."

"My mistake. I did forget it, I'll confess; and what's more I probably always shall. To me you are just a girl I'd be head-over-heels in love with if I were a man. I don't blame all the clams, lobsters, and flounders for flocking over here to make love to you."

"Stop talking nonsense."

"But it isn't nonsense. It's the truth. Isn't that precisely what they're doing? You certainly are not deluding yourself into thinking these men come gallivanting out here over the flats with the mere philanthropic purpose of seeing you don't starve to death, do you?" Sylvia demanded.

"Perhaps they come to see you," hedged Marcia feebly.

"Me! Now Marcia, pray do not resort to deceit and attempt to poke this legion of mermen off on me. As a relative, I insist on having a truthful, respectable aunt. Consider my youth. Isn't it your Christian duty to set me a good example? Whether you wed any of these nautical worshippers or not is your own affair. But at least honesty compels you to acknowledge they're your property."

A shadow, fleet as the rift in a summer cloud, passed over Marcia's face, but transient as it was Sylvia, sensitively attuned and alert to changes of mood in others, noticed it.

"What a little beast I am, Marcia," she cried, throwing her arm impulsively about the other woman. "Forgive my thoughtlessness. I wouldn't have hurt you for the world. You know I never saw Uncle Jason. He left home when I was a child and is no reality to me. Even mother remembered him only as he was when a boy. She kept a little picture of him on her bureau, and on his birthdays always placed flowers beside it. She was fond of him, because he was only six when Grandmother died. After that, Mother took care of him and brought him up. She worried a good deal about him, I'm afraid, for it was a great responsibility and she herself was nothing but a girl. However, she did the best she could."

Sylvia stole a look at Marcia who had stiffened and now stood with eyes fixed on the misty world outside.

"Mother felt sorry, hurt, that Uncle Jason should have left home as he did, and never came back to see her. He was an impulsive, hot-headed boy and she said he resented her watchfulness and authority. But even though he ran away in a moment of anger, one would think years of absence would have smoothed away his resentment.

"For a little while he wrote to her; then gradually even his letters stopped. She never knew what sort of a man he became. Once she told me she supposed there must be lots of mothers in the world who merely sowed and never reaped—never saw the results of their care and sacrifice."

"Jason—Jason loved your mother," Marcia murmured in a voice scarcely audible. "I am sure of that."

"But if he loved her, why didn't he come to see her? I know it was a long journey, but if he could only have come once—just once. It would have meant so much!"

"Men are selfish—unfeeling. They forget," replied Marcia, bitterly. "You give your life to them and they toss aside your love and devotion as if it were so much rubbish."

The outburst, sharp with pain, burst from her involuntarily, awing Sylvia into silence.

What did she know of Jason, that dim heritage of her childhood? Of Marcia? Of their life together, she suddenly asked herself.

Dismayed, she stole a glance at her companion.

It was as if idly treading a flower-strewn path she had without warning come upon the unplumbed depths of a volcano's crater.

To cover the awkwardness of the moment, she bent to caress Prince Hal who had risen and stood, alert and listening beside her.

Only an instant passed before Marcia spoke again—this time with visible effort to recapture her customary manner.

"Suppose we have lobster Newburg this noon," suggested she. "I'll get the chafing-dish. What's the matter, Hal, old man? You look worried. Don't tell me you hear more fish swimming our way?"



Chapter V

THE nose of the setter quivered and, going to the window, he growled.

"He does hear something," asserted Sylvia. "What do you suppose it is?"

"Gulls, most likely. They circle above the house in clouds," was Marcia's careless answer. "The Prince regards them as his natural enemies. He delights to chase them up the beach and send them whirling into the air. Apparently he resents their chatter. He seems to think they are talking about him—and they may be for aught I know—talking about all of us."

A faint echo of her recent irritation still lingered in the tone and, conscious of it, she laughed to conceal it.

Again the dog growled.

Almost immediately a hand fumbled with the latch, and as the door swung open, a man staggered blindly into the room.

He was hatless, wet to the skin, and shivering with cold, and before Marcia could reach his side, he lurched forward and fell at her feet.

"Quick, Sylvia, close the door and heat some broth. The poor fellow is exhausted. He's chilled to the bone."

"Who is it?"

"No one I know—a stranger. Bring that pillow and help me to slip it under his head. We'll let him rest where he is a moment."

Her fingers moved to the bronzed wrist.

"He's all right," she whispered. "Just cold and worn out. He'll be himself presently."

She swept the matted hair, lightly sprinkled with grey, from the man's forehead and wiped his face.

An interesting face it was—intelligent and highbred, with well-cut features and a firm, determined chin.

A sweater of blue wool, a blue serge suit, socks of tan and sport shoes to match them clung to the tall, slender figure, and on the hand lying across it sparkled a diamond sunk in a band of wrought gold.

It was not the hand of a fisherman, tanned though it was; nor yet that of a sailor. There could be no doubt about that. Rather, it belonged to a scholar, a

writer, a painter, or possibly to a physician, for it was strong as well as beautifully formed.

Sylvia bent to adjust the pillow, and her eyes and Marcia's met.

Who was this man?

Whence came he?

What disaster had laid him here helpless before them?

As if their questions penetrated his consciousness, the stranger slowly opened his eyes.

"Sorry to come here like this," he murmured. "The fog was so thick, I lost my bearings and my power-boat ran aground. I've been trying hours to get her off. She's hard and fast on your sand-bar."

"Not on the ocean side?" Marcia exclaimed.

The man shook his head.

"Luckily not. I rounded the point all right, but missed the channel."

He struggled to rise and Marcia, kneeling beside him, helped him into an upright position where he sat, leaning against her shoulder.

"I seem to have brought in about half the sea with me," he apologized, looking about in vague, half-dazed fashion.

"No matter. We're used to salt water here," she answered. "How do you feel? You're not hurt?"

"Only a little. Nothing much. I've done something queer to my wrist."

Attempting to move it, he winced.

"It isn't broken?"

"I don't know. I was trying to push the boat off, and something suddenly gave way."

Turning his head aside, he bit his lip as if in pain.

"We'll telephone Doctor Stetson. The town is fortunate in having a very good physician. Meantime, you mustn't remain in these wet clothes. There is no surer way of catching cold. Do you think you could get upstairs if Sylvia and I guided you?"

"I guess so—if it isn't far. I'm absurdly dizzy. I don't know why. I suppose, though, I must shed these wet togs."

"You certainly must. Come, Sylvia, lend a hand! We'll help him up."

"Oh, I'm not in such a bad way as all that. I can get up alone," he protested. "Only please wait just another minute. The whole place has suddenly begun to

pitch again like a ship in midocean. Either I've lost my sea-legs or I'm all sea-legs, and nothing else. Perhaps I may be faint. I haven't eaten anything for a day or two."

"Why didn't you tell me? The soup, quick, Sylvia. I only wish I had some brandy. Well, at least this is hot, and will warm you up. I'll feed you."

"No, no. I needn't trouble you to do that. I'm sure I can manage with my left hand."

"Don't be silly. You'll spill it all over yourself. Goodness knows, you're wet enough as it is. Hand me the cup and spoon, Sylvia."

"But I feel like a baby," fretted the stranger.

"No matter. We must get something hot inside you right away. Don't fuss about how it's done," said the practical-minded Marcia. "There! You look better already! Later you shall have a real, honest-to-goodness meal. Run and call Doctor Stetson, Sylvia, and open the bed in the room opposite mine. You might light the heater there, too."

As the girl sped away, Marcia turned toward her visitor.

"Suppose we try to make the rocking-chair now. Shall we? We won't aspire to going upstairs until the doctor comes. You're not quite good for that yet. But at least you needn't sit on the floor. What worries me is your wet clothing. I'm afraid you'll take your death of cold. Let me peel off your shoes and socks. I can do that. And I believe I could get you out of your water-soaked sweater if I were to cut the sleeve. May I try? We needn't mind wrecking it, for I have another I can give you."

The man did not answer.

Instead, he sat tense and unsmiling, his penetrating brown eyes fixed on Marcia's face. Apparently the scrutiny crystalized in him some swift resolution, for after letting his glance travel about the room to convince himself that no one was within hearing, he leaned forward:

"There is something else I'd rather you did for me first," he whispered, dropping his voice until it became almost inaudible. "I've a package here I wish you'd take charge of. It's inside my shirt. But for this infernal wrist, I could reach it."

"I'll get it."

"I'd rather you didn't talk about it," continued he, hurriedly. "Just put it in a safe place. Will you, please?"

"Certainly."

Puzzled, but unquestioning, Marcia thrust her hand beneath his sodden clothing and drew forth a small, flat box, wrapped in a bedraggled handkerchief.

"If you'll look out for it, I'll be tremendously obliged."

"Of course I will," smiled Marcia. "Is it valuable?"

The question, prompted by a desire to perform faithfully the service entrusted to her, rather than by curiosity, produced a disconcerting result.

The man's eyes fell.

"I shouldn't like to—to lose it," he stammered.

"I'll be careful. You yourself shall see where it is put. Look! Here is my pet hiding-place. This brick in the hearth is loose and under it is plenty of space for this small box. I'll tuck it in there. Just hold it a second until I pry the brick up. There we are! Now give it to me."

She reached hurriedly for the package, but as their hands met, the moist, clinging handkerchief became entangled in their fingers and slipping from its coverings a leather jewel-case dropped to the floor.

Out of it rolled a flashing necklace and a confusion of smaller gems.

Marcia stifled an involuntary cry.

Nevertheless, she neither looked up nor delayed.

"Sorry to be so clumsy," she muttered, as she swiftly scooped up the jewels.

It was well she had made haste, for no sooner was the clasp on the box snapped and the treasure concealed beneath the floor than Sylvia returned, and a moment later came both Doctor Jared Stetson and Elisha Winslow.

"Mornin', Marcia," nodded the doctor. "'Lish happened to be in the office when your niece called up, an' hearin' you had a man patient, he thought mebber he might be of use. What 'pears to be the trouble, sir?"

"I've done something to my right wrist."

"H—m—m! Keepin' your diagnosis private, I see. That's wise. A wrist can be broken, fractured, dislocated, or just plain sprained an' still pain like the deuce." With skilled hand, he pushed back the dripping sleeve.

"You're a mite water-logged, I notice," observed he. "Been overboard?"

"Something of the sort," returned the man with the flicker of a smile.

"Mr.—" for the fraction of a second, Marcia hesitated; then continued in an even tone, "—Mr. Carlton grounded his boat and had to swim ashore."

"You don't say! Well, I ain't surprised. 'Tain't no day to be afloat. You couldn't cut this fog with a carvin'-knife. But for knowin' the channel well's I do, I might

'a' been aground myself. How come you to take your boat out in such weather?" the doctor demanded.

"I was—was cruising."

"Oh, an' the fog shut down on you. I see. That's different. Fog has a trick of doin' that, unless one keeps an eye out for fog symptoms. Now, what I'd recommend for you first of all, Mr. Carlton, is a warm bed. You look clean beat out. Had an anxious, tiresome trip, I'll wager."

"Yes."

"I 'maged as much. Well, you can rest here. There'll be nothin' to disturb your slumbers. We sell quiet by the square yard in Wilton."

A kindly chuckle accompanied the words.

"Better let 'Lish an' me help you upstairs, an' out of your wet things, 'cause with a wrist such as yours, I figger you won't be very handy at buttons. Not that 'Lish is a professional lady's maid. That ain't exactly his callin'. Still, in spite of bein' town sheriff, he can turn his hand to other things. It's lucky he can, too, for he don't get much sheriffin' down this way. Wilton doesn't go in for crime. In fact, we was laughin' 'bout that very thing this noon at the post-office. 'Pears there's been a robbery at one of the Long Island estates. Quantities of jewelry taken, an' no trace of the thief. The alarm was sent out over the radio early yesterday an' listenin' in 'Lish, here, got quite het up an' not a little envious. He said he 'most wished the burglary had took place in our town, excitement bein' at a pretty low ebb now."

"Zenas Henry suggested mebbe we might hire an up-to-date robber, was we to advertise," put in the sheriff, "but on thinkin' it over, we decided the scheme wouldn't work, 'cause of there bein' nothin' in the village worth stealin'." He laughed.

Marcia, standing by the stove, spun about.

"Now, Elisha, don't you run down Wilton. Why, I have twenty-five dollars in my purse this minute," she asserted, taking a worn pocket-book from her dress and slapping it with challenging candor down upon the table. "I keep it in that china box above the stove."

"That might serve as a starter," remarked the stranger, regarding her quizzically.

She faced him, chin drawn in, and head high and defiant.

"Besides that, in my top bureau drawer is a string of gold beads that belonged to my great-grandmother," she continued, daring laughter curling her lips. "They are very old and are really quite valuable."

"We'll make a note of those, too," nodded the man, his eyes on hers.

"I'm afraid that's all I can offer in the way of burglary inducements."

"That bein' the case, s'pose you an' me start gettin' the patient upstairs, 'Lish," broke in Doctor Stetson. "If we don't, next we know he'll be havin' pneumonia as well as a bad wrist. Besides, I want to get a good look at that wrist. Mebbe 'tain't goin' to be bad as it 'pears."

The stranger's admiring glance fixed itself on Marcia's.

"What is my next move?" he inquired.

"I told you before—you must take off your wet things and rest," she repeated.

"You still prescribe that treatment?"

"I still prescribe it."

"In spite of the—the symptoms?"

"Why not?" was her quick answer.

"Very well. I am ready, gentlemen." Erect, even with a hint of defiance in his mocking smile, the man rose to his full height. "Before we go, however, I must correct a slight error. You misunderstood my name. It is not Carlton. It is Heath—Stanley Heath."



Chapter VI

"AND yet you told me, Marcia, this was a quiet, adventureless place!" burst out Sylvia, the instant the door had closed.

"Isn't it?"

"It doesn't seem so to me. When shipwrecked mariners fall into your arms entirely without warning, I call it thrilling. Who do you suppose he is?"

"He told us his name."

"Of course—Heath. Stanley Heath. It's quite a romantic name, too. But I didn't mean that. I mean where did he come from and why? Didn't he tell you?"

"Not a word."

Obviously the girl was disappointed.

"I thought perhaps he might have while I was upstairs. I was gone long enough for him to pour out to you his entire history. At least it seemed so to me. I ransacked every closet and drawer in sight trying to find something for him to put on. It wasn't until I struck that old sea-chest in the hall that I discovered pajamas and underwear. I hope you don't mind my taking them."

A shiver passed over Marcia.

"No. They were Jason's. I ought to have told you they were there. I kept them because I thought they might sometime be useful."

"Well, they certainly are," replied Sylvia. "They will exactly fit Mr. Heath. He must be lots like Uncle Jason."

"He isn't," contradicted Marcia sharply. "He isn't at all like him."

"In size, I mean," amended Sylvia, timidly.

"Oh, in size. Possibly. I haven't thought about it," came tersely from Marcia. "Let me see! We planned to have lobster this noon, didn't we? But that won't do for him. He will need something more substantial."

"There are chops," suggested Sylvia, following to the door.

"So there are!" Marcia brightened. "I'd forgotten that. We have had such a confusing morning—" absently she reached for the plates.

"Shall I put some potatoes in the oven?"

"What?"

"Potatoes. Shall I put some in the oven? For him, I mean."

"Oh, yes—yes. Of course. Chops and—" regarding the girl vaguely, Marcia fingered the dishes in her hand.

"And baked potatoes," Sylvia repeated, a trifle sharply.

"Yes. Chops and baked potatoes," echoed Marcia, dragging her mind with an effort from the thoughts she was pursuing. "That will do nicely. And hot tea."

"Won't tea keep him awake?"

"I don't believe anything could keep him awake."

Marcia was herself now and smiled.

"Where do you suppose he came from? And how long has he been knocking about in that boat, I wonder," ventured Sylvia, her curiosity once again flaring up.

"How do I know, dear?" Marcia sighed, as if determined to control her patience. "You know as much about him as I do. I mean," she corrected, honesty forcing her to amend the assertion, "almost as much. I did, to be sure, talk with him a little while waiting for the doctor, but he did not tell me anything about himself."

"One would never suspect you were such a matter-of-fact, unimaginative person, Marcia," laughed Sylvia, "Now I am much more romantic. I am curious—just plain, commonplace curious—and I don't mind admitting it."

Again Marcia's conscience triumphed.

"I am curious, too," she confessed. "Only perhaps in a different way."

The moving of chairs overhead and the sound of feet creaking down the stairway heralded the return of Jared Stetson and Elisha.

She went to meet them.

"'Tain't a broken wrist, Marcia," was the doctor's greeting on entering the kitchen. "Leastways, I don't think it is. I've bandaged it an' 'Lish an' me have your friend snug an' warm in bed. Tomorrow I'll look in again. Mebbe with daylight, I'll decide to whisk him down to the Hyannis Hospital for an X-ray just to make sure everything's O.K. There's no use takin' chances with a thing so useful to a feller as his wrist. But for tonight, the bandage will do. A hot water-bottle mightn't be amiss. Nor a square meal, neither. Beyond them two things, there ain't much you can do at present, but let him sleep."

"We were starting to broil some chops."

"Fine!" Doctor Stetson rubbed his hands. "Nothin' better. He was a mite fretted 'bout the boat; but I told him some of us men would ease her up 'fore dark an' see she was anchored good an' firm. There's a chance she'll float at high tide,

I wouldn't wonder—that is if she ain't stuck too firm. The Life-Savin' crew will lend us a hand, I reckon. Cap'n Austin an' the boys have been itchin' for a job. Anyhow, I told Mr. Heath to quit troublin' 'bout his ship an' go to sleep, an' he promised he would. Seems a nice sort of feller. Known him long?"

"Not so very long."

"Why, Marcia—" broke in Sylvia.

"One sometimes comes to know a person rather well, though, even in a short time," went on the older woman, ignoring the interruption.

"S'pose 'twas a-comin' to see you that brought him down this way," Elisha volunteered. "Somehow I don't recall meetin' him before."

"He hasn't been here before," was the measured response.

"Oh, so he's new to Wilton waters, eh? That prob'ly accounts for his runnin' aground. I was certain I'd 'a' remembered his face had I seen it. I'm kinder good at faces," declared the sheriff. "Fine lookin' chap. Has quite an air to him. Nothin' cheap 'bout his clothes, neither. They was A1 quality clear through to his skin. Silk, with monograms on 'em. Must be a man of means."

Silence greeted the observation.

"Likely he is—havin' a power-boat an' leisure to cruise round in her," persisted the undaunted Elisha.

"I really couldn't say."

"Well, apparently he ain't one that boasts of his possessions, an' that's to his credit," interposed Jared Stetson good-humoredly.

Elisha's interest in the stranger was not, however, to be so easily diverted.

"Seen the boat?" he inquired.

"No."

"Oh, you ain't! I forgot to ask Heath the name of her. I'm sort of a crank on the names of boats. It always riles me to have a foolish name given a boat. No matter how small she is, her plankin' is all that divides her owner from fathoms of water, an' in view of the fact he'd oughter regard her soberly an' give her a decent name."

Elisha stroked his chin, rough with the stubble of a reddish beard.

"Years ago," he continued, "folks stood in awe of ships an' understood better what they owed 'em. In them days there warn't no wireless, nor no big ocean liners an' a man that sailed the deep warn't so hail-feller-well-met with the sea. It put the fear of God into him. When he started out on a cruise across the Atlantic or round the Horn, there warn't no slappin' his ship on the back. He respected her

an' named her accordin'ly. *The Flyin' Cloud!* Can you beat that? Or *Sovereign of the Seas*? Them names meant somethin'. They made you want to lift your hat to the lady. But now—! Why, last season a feller come into the harbor with as pretty a knockabout as you'd want to see. Small though she was, every line of her was of the quality. A reg'lar little queen she was. An' what do you s'pose that smart aleck had christened her? The *Ah-there!* Thought himself funny, no doubt. 'Twould 'a' served him right had she capsized under him some day when he was well out of sight of land an' left him to swim ashore. Yes-siree, it would. If a man has no more regard for the keel that's under him an' the floorin' that's 'twixt him an' forty fathoms of water than that he deserves to drown an' I wouldn't care the flip of a cod's tail if he did," Elisha blustered.

"Oh, come now, 'Lish—you know you wouldn't stand by an' see no feller drown, no matter what kind of a fool he was," laughed the doctor.

"Yes, I would," Elisha insisted, tugging on his coat.

"Well, all I can say is I hope the name of Mr. Heath's boat will meet with your approval," ventured Sylvia archly.

"I hope 'twill," was the glum retort, as the sheriff followed Doctor Stetson through the doorway.

The moment the door banged behind them, Sylvia turned toward Marcia.

"Forgive my butting in, dear," apologized she. "But I was so surprised. You did say you didn't know Mr. Heath, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But—but—"

"Sometimes it's just as well not to tell all you know—especially in a place like this," was the evasive response.

Was the reply a rebuke or merely a caution?

Sylvia did not know.

And what was the meaning of the rose color that flooded the elder woman's cheek?

Had Marcia really meant to give the impression that she knew Stanley Heath? And if so, why?

Sylvia wracked her brain for answers to these questions.

Why, only an hour before, she and Marcia had been on the frankest footing imaginable. Now, like a sea-turn, had come a swift, inexplicable change whose cause she was at a loss to understand and which had rendered her aunt as remote as the farthest star.

Sylvia would have been interested indeed had she known that while she wrestled with the enigma, Marcia, to all appearances busy preparing the tray for the invalid upstairs, was searching her heart for answers to the same questions.

Why had she sought to shield this stranger?

Why had she evaded Doctor Stetson's inquiries and deliberately tried to mislead him into thinking she and Stanley Heath were friends?

What had prompted the deception?

The man was nothing to her. Of his past she had not the slightest knowledge, indeed he might be the greatest villain in the world. In fact, circumstances proclaimed him a thief. Nevertheless, she did not, could not, believe it. There was something too fine in his face; his eyes.

True, he had made no attempt either to defend himself or to explain away the suspicions he must have known would arise in her mind. On the contrary, with a devil-may-care audacity that fascinated her, he actually appeared to have tried to deepen in her mind the impression of his guilt.

Still she refused to believe. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence she clung to her unreasoning faith in him.

Suppose he had stolen the gems and fled with them from Long Island? Suppose he had lost his bearings in the fog; tossed aimlessly on the sea for a day and a night; and then run aground at her doorstep? It was possible, quite possible, even probable.

Yet was it?

Not for a man like Stanley Heath. Marcia stubbornly insisted. So deep was the conviction, she shrank lest he should feel called upon to justify or defend himself.

Far from demanding explanations, she resolved she would give him no chance to make them.

Therefore, when his meal was ready and every last inviting touch had been given the tray, she said casually to Sylvia:

"Suppose you take it up, dear?"

"I?"

"Yes. Why not? Do you mind?"

"Not at all. I just thought perhaps you'd rather."

Marcia shook her head.

"I want to stir the Newburg and see it doesn't catch," she explained, avoiding the girl's eyes. "We are too hungry to risk having our dinner spoiled. You might

just wait and cut the chops for Mr. Heath and fix his potato. Find out, too, if there is anything more he wants. You needn't hurry back. I'll keep things hot."

The task suggested did not, apparently, displease Sylvia.

She dimpled and sauntering to the mirror, she glanced in giving her mass of golden curls a feminine poke. She even slipped a vanity-case from her pocket and powdered her wee, up-tilted nose.

"We may as well look our best," laughed she over her shoulder.

"Certainly."

"Perhaps I might take off my smock and go up in my dark dress."

"I wouldn't. The smock is gay and suits you. Invalids need cheering up."

"So they do," agreed Sylvia demurely, now quite self-possessed.

A flutter of anticipation had put a sparkle into her eyes and faint color into her cheeks. She looked bewilderingly pretty.

"Here goes Red-Ridinghood," she murmured, taking up the tray. "All is, if I don't come back, you'll know the wolf has eaten me."

In spite of herself, Marcia smiled.

She opened the door and stood watching while the girl ascended the stairs, for the hall was unlighted and the tray heavy.

"I'm safe," called a merry voice from the topmost stair.

Marcia came back into the kitchen. She finished preparing the lobster, straightened the silver on the table, let in Prince Hal who came bounding to her side, picked a few dead blossoms from the geraniums, and sat down to wait.

Ten minutes passed!

Fifteen!

Half an hour went by.

She fidgeted and stooped to pat the setter. Then she went to the window. Slowly the fog was lifting. It hung like a filmy curtain, its frayed edges receding from a dull steel-blue sea and through it she could discern the irregular sweep of the channel and the shore opposite where dimly outlined stood the spired church and the huddle of houses clustered like wraiths about the curving margin of the bay.

Yes, it was clearing.

The tide had turned and a breeze sprung up.

By afternoon the weather would be fine—just the right sort to get the boat off. She would go up the beach and watch the men while they worked. The house

was close. She longed for air and the big reaches of the out-of-doors.

A jingle of glass and silver! It was Sylvia returning with the tray. Her eyes were shining.

"He ate every bit!" she cried. "You should have seen him, Marcia. It would have done your heart good. The poor lamb was almost starved. He asked for you the first thing. I don't think he altogether liked your not carrying up the tray, although of course, he was too polite to say so."

"You explained I was busy?"

"Yes. But at first he didn't seem satisfied with the excuse. However, he soon forgot about it and became gay as a lark. Didn't you hear us laughing? The potato would fall off the fork. I'm not as good a nurse as you. My hands weren't so steady. I'm going back again for his wet clothes. We can dry them here by the fire, can't we?"

"Yes, indeed."

"It's a pity there isn't a tailor at hand. His suit ought to be pressed."

"I can do it," Marcia declared with eagerness. "I'm quite used to pressing men's clothes. I always pressed Jason's."

This time the name dropped unnoticed from her lips. Indeed she was not conscious she had uttered it. She was not thinking of Jason.



Chapter VII

IT was late afternoon and, alone in the kitchen, Sylvia yawned.

Since noontime she had sat reading and straining her ears for a sound in the room overhead, but there had been none. He was sleeping after his hearty dinner and that was encouraging.

Doctor Stetson had hoped the wrist would not be painful enough to interfere with the rest the patient so obviously needed, and apparently this hope was being realized.

Sylvia was glad he was asleep—very glad indeed. She did not begrudge him a moment of his slumber. But what a delightful person he was when awake! His eyes were wonderful—so dark and penetrating. They bored right through you. And then he listened with such intentness, watching every curve of your lips as if fearing to lose a word. Such attention was distinctly flattering. Even though your chatter was trivial, he dignified it and transformed it into something of importance.

How interested, for example, he had been in Marcia; in learning she had been married and now lived a widow in the old Daniels Homestead! And what a host of inquiries he had made about Jason—the sort of man he was and how long ago he had died!

Sylvia had not been able to answer all his questions, but of course she had asserted that Marcia had adored her husband because—well, not so much because she actually knew it, as because widows always did. Certainly Marcia had declared she loved the Homestead so deeply she never intended to leave it, and was not that practically the same thing as saying she loved Jason, too?

Anyway, how she had felt toward him was not really a matter of any great importance now because he was dead.

The thing that really mattered was Mr. Heath's interest in her—Sylvia; in her trip East and her description of Alton City, the little mid-western town which was her home. How he had laughed at her rebellion at being a school-teacher, and how insidiously he had hinted she might not always be one! And when she had tossed her curls at him as she often tossed them at Billie Sparks, the soda fountain clerk, how cleverly he had remarked that sunlight was especially welcome on a grey day.

Oh, he knew what to say—knew much better than Billie Sparks or even

Horatio Fuller, the acknowledged beau of the town. In fact he made both of them seem quite commonplace—even Hortie. Fancy it!

Probably that was because he had traveled.

Apparently he had been almost everywhere—except to Alton City. Odd he should never have been there when he had visited just about every other corner, both of America and of Europe. Not that he had deliberately said so. He was far too modest for that.

It was while trying to find out where his home was that she had stumbled upon the information.

And come to think of it, she did not know now where he lived, she suddenly remembered.

At the time she thought he had named the place; but she realized on reviewing the conversation that he had not. In fact, he had not told her much of anything about himself. It had all been about surfboating in the Pacific; skiing at Lake Placid and St. Moritz; climbing the Alps; motoring in Brittany.

She actually did not know whether he had a father or a mother; a brother or a sister.

At Alton City you would have found out all those things within the first ten minutes.

Perhaps that was the reason he piqued her interest—because he was not like Alton City—not like it at all.

Why, were Stanley Heath to stroll up Maple Avenue on a fine, sunny afternoon everybody—even the boys that loafed in front of Bailey's cigar store and the men who loitered on the post-office steps—would turn to look at him.

He would be so different from everybody else he would seem a being from another planet.

It would be fun, she mused, to walk with him through this main street while those on both sides of it craned their necks and asked one another who he was. More fun yet to dash through its shaded arch of trees in a smart little car, talking and laughing with him all the way, and pretending to be unconscious of the staring spectators, although of course she would be seeing them all perfectly well out of the corner of her eye.

She had done this sometimes with Hortie Fuller, simply because she knew every girl in Alton City envied her his devotion.

But what was Hortie compared with Mr. Stanley Heath?

Sylvia tilted her small up-tilted nose even higher.

So occupied was she with these dramatic fancies she had not thought once of Prince Hal. In fact she had supposed that he had gone up the beach with Marcia.

Now she suddenly became aware that he stood sniffing about the hearth, scratching at its surface as if he scented something beneath.

He must not do that, and she told him so in no uncertain terms.

Nevertheless, in spite of the rebuke, he continued to poke away at the spot, whining faintly, until his persistence aroused her curiosity and she went to see what disturbed him.

One brick projected ever so slightly from the others, and it was at this the setter was clawing.

"What is it, Prince? What's the matter?" whispered she.

Delighted to have gained her attention, the dog barked.

"Oh, you mustn't bark, darling," she cautioned, muzzling his nose with her hand. "You'll wake Mr. Heath. Tell Missy what the trouble is. Do you smell a mousie under there?"

For answer the dog wagged his tail.

"I don't believe it," Sylvia demurred. "You're only bluffing. Between you and Winkie-Wee there isn't a mouse about the place. Still, you seem terribly sure something is wrong. Well, to convince you, I'll take up the brick."

Fetching from the pantry a steel fork, she inserted the prongs in the crack and pried the offending brick out of its hole.

Instantly the dog snatched from the space beneath a handkerchief containing a small, hard object.

Sylvia chased after him.

"Bring it here, Hal! That's a good dog! Bring it to Missy."

The setter came fawning to her side and unwillingly dropped his prize at her feet.

As it fell to the ground, out rolled such a glory of jewels the girl could scarcely believe her eyes.

There was a string of diamonds, dazzling as giant dewdrops; a pearl and sapphire pendant; several beautiful rings; and an oval brooch, its emerald centre surrounded by tier after tier of brilliants.

Sylvia panted, breathless. She had never seen such gems, much less held them in her hands. How she longed to slip the rings upon her fingers and try the effect of the diamonds about her slender throat!

Prudence, however, overmastered the impulse. Marcia might return and

surprise her at any moment. Before that the treasure must be returned to the place from which it had been taken.

Gathering the rainbow heap together, she reluctantly thrust it into its blue leather case, snapped the catch, and placed it once more under the brick.

Then with relief she stood up and wiped the perspiration from her forehead.

It was not until she was again in her chair, book in hand, and struggling to quiet her quick breathing that she discovered she still held in her hand the handkerchief that had been wrapped about the jewel-case.

How stupid of her! How insufferably careless!

Well, she dared not attempt to replace it now. There was no time. Instead, she smoothed it out and inspected it.

It was a man's handkerchief of finest linen and one corner bore the embroidered initials S. C. H.

She had known it all the time! There was no need to be told the jewels were his. What puzzled her was when he had found time to hide them. He had not, so far as she knew, been left alone a moment and yet here was his booty safe beneath the floor.

She rated it as booty, because there could be no doubt he had stolen it. He had stolen it from that Long Island estate, escaped in his speed boat and here he was—here, under this very roof!

A robber—that was what he was!

A robber—a bandit, such as one saw in the movies!

That explained why he was so well-dressed, so handsome, had such fascinating manners. He was a gentleman burglar.

All up-to-date villains in these days were gentlemen. Not that she had ever encountered a villain in the flesh. Still, she had read romances about them and was there not one in every moving-picture? They were not difficult to recognize.

Now here she was, actually in the same house with one! How thrilling! Here was an adventure worthy of the name. She was not in the least frightened. On the contrary, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet she tingled with excitement. She could feel the hot, pulsing blood throb in her throat and wrists. It was exhilarating—wonderful!

Of course Marcia must not know.

She, with her Puritan ideas, would unquestionably be shocked to discover that the man she was sheltering was a thief. She would probably feel it her Christian duty to surrender him to Elisha Winslow.

How unsuspecting she had been! How naïvely she had clapped her purse down on the table and proclaimed exactly where her gold beads were kept!

A thief in the room overhead! Think of it! The very thief for whom all the police in the countryside were searching! He was no small, cheap type of criminal. He did things on a big scale—so big that radio announcements had been broadcast about him and no doubt at this instant detectives and crime inspectors were chasing up and down the highways; dashing through cities; and keeping telephone wires hot in wild search for the gentleman asleep upstairs!

Sylvia stifled her laughter. The whole thing was ironic.

Why, that very morning had not Elisha Winslow, the Wilton sheriff, who had frankly admitted he yearned for excitement, helped undress the wretch and put him comfortably to bed? The humor of the situation almost overcame her.

It seemed as if she must have someone to share the joke. But no one should. No! Nobody should be the wiser because of her. The poor, hunted fellow should have his chance. He was an under-dog and she had always been romantically sorry for under-dogs.

It was a little venturesome and risky, she admitted, to obstruct justice and should she be found out she would, without doubt, be clapped into jail. Still she resolved to take a chance.

After all, who could prove she had known Stanley Heath to be what he was? Nobody. She would not even let him suspect it.

The important thing was to await an opportunity and soon—before he was able to be about—return the handkerchief she held in her hand to its place beneath the brick. Then all would be well. This should not be difficult. It would be quite easy to get Marcia to take up Mr. Heath's supper.

In the meantime, the situation was intensely amusing. Its danger appealed to her. She had always enjoyed hair-breadth escapades. Anything but dullness. That had been the trouble with Alton City—it had been dull—deadly dull.

But Wilton was not dull. In spite of the fact that only this morning Elisha Winslow had complained the town was in need of a stirring up, it seethed with electricity. If she chose, she could hurl a bomb-shell into its midst this very minute. But she did not choose.

Instead she intended to play her own quiet game and keep what she knew to herself. She wondered why. Perhaps she was falling in love with this adventurer. Yes, that must be it. She was in love with him—in love with a bandit!

How scandalized Alton City would be! How the whole town would hold up its hands in horror if it knew!

Horatio Fuller—dubbed Hortie because of his high-hat manners and because his father owned the largest store in town—picture his dismay if he guessed her guilty secret! Perhaps he would shoot the fellow—or the fellow shoot him. That was what usually happened in moving-pictures, somebody always shot somebody else.

She wouldn't want Hortie to be shot. The thought of it sobered her. After all, Hortie was a dear, she liked him—liked him very much. On the other hand, she would not want Stanley Heath shot either.

Perhaps it would be just as well to leave out all this shooting, why heap horror upon horror? To be married to a bandit was adventure enough without being the wife of a murderer.

Sylvia's imagination had traveled so swiftly and so far that it came to earth with a crash when Marcia opened the door.

Her hair, tossed by the wind, clustered about her face in small, moist ringlets; her cheeks were scarlet, her eyes shone.

It was not alone the buffeting of the salt breeze nor the exhilaration of walking against it that had transformed her into something radiantly lovely. From within glowed a strange fire that made her another creature altogether.

"Why—why—Marcia!" breathed Sylvia, bewildered.

"I've had such a glorious walk, dear!" cried Marcia. "The fog has lifted and the sky is a sheet of amethyst and gold."

"Did the men get the boat off?"

"Yes. She is floating tranquilly as a dove."

"What is her name?"

"*My Unknown Lady.*"

"Mercy on us! That ought to satisfy even Elisha."

"It did," said Marcia.



Chapter VIII

SYLVIA'S plans, so well laid and apparently so easy of execution did not, to her chagrin, work out, for instead of awaking and demanding supper Stanley Heath slept without a break until morning.

Had not Marcia insisted on leaving her door ajar lest the invalid call, the girl might have slipped down stairs in the darkness and returned the handkerchief.

As it was, fate forced her to put it into her bureau drawer and await more favorable opportunity.

This, alas, did not come.

Sun was tinting the lavender sands to rose and gilding the water with its first flecks of gold when she saw Marcia standing at the foot of her bed.

"Mr. Heath has a high fever and can scarcely speak aloud," explained she. "I'm afraid he is quite ill. I wish you'd call up Doctor Stetson."

"Mercy on us!"

The girl, drowsy and heavy-eyed, sprang out of bed.

"I'll be down in just a minute," she exclaimed. "How do you happen to be up so early?"

"I've been up off and on all night," answered Marcia. "Mr. Heath was restless and thirsty. About midnight I heard him tossing about, and thinking he might be hungry, I heated some broth and took it to him."

"I didn't hear you. I must have been dead to the world. Why didn't you speak?"

"There was no need of it. You were tired."

"No more than you."

"I was wakeful, anyway. I don't know why. Perhaps I had him on my mind. If so, it is fortunate, for he did not call."

"I'm dreadfully sorry he feels so miserable."

"He won't admit it. He declares he is going back to New York today."

"But he can't—he mustn't."

"He is determined to. He says he has something very important to attend to. Of course I have no authority over him but perhaps Doctor Stetson can exert some. That is why I am anxious to reach him before he goes out," explained

Marcia, moving toward the door.

"I will call him right away."

"I'll go down and start breakfast, then. Mr. Heath is dozing. He has promised not to get up for at least an hour. We must have the doctor here within that time."

"I'll tell him to hurry."

Marcia tiptoed down the stairs.

The freshness of early morning was upon the day. Through the kitchen window pale shafts of light shot across the floor, brightening the colored rugs and making brass and copper glisten. Starting the fire, she threw open the door to let in the salt breeze.

The dampness and chill of the night had disappeared and the air was mild with the breath of coming spring. Mingling with the gulls' cries she could hear the twitter of sparrows and the occasional chirp of a robin. The village, still hazy in mist, was taking on sharper outlines and from the bay the voices of fishermen and the chug of a motor-boat drifted distinctly across the water.

Prince came bounding into the house from some distant pilgrimage of his own, almost knocking her down in his eagerness for breakfast.

She glanced far up the shore and saw, serenely rocking with the tide, *My Unknown Lady*.

As she whispered the name, she was conscious of hot blood rushing to her cheeks.

How ridiculous! Stanley Heath was simply a stranger of a night, he was nothing to her.

Well indeed was it, too, that he was not!

During her hours of sleeplessness the ardor of her faith in him had, to a degree, cooled. True, she still maintained her belief in his innocence; but that belief, she now realized, was only a blind unfounded intuition. Both the circumstances and sober second thought failed to back it up. The man's impatience to be gone, his complete silence with regard to the jewels, although perfectly justifiable, did not strengthen it.

Marcia conceded he had every right to keep his affairs to himself. She was close-mouthed and therefore sympathetic with the quality in others.

But such an unusual happening! What more natural than that one should offer some explanation?

Last night, transported by emotion to a mood superheroic, she had wished none; nay, more, she had deliberately placed herself beyond the reach of it.

Today she toppled from her pedestal and became human, shifting from goddess to woman.

Had Stanley Heath started to confide his secret to her, she would even now have held up her hand to stay him.

It was the fact that through the dim hours of the night, while she sat at his elbow trying to make the discomforts he suffered more bearable, he talked of almost everything else but the thing uppermost in both their minds. That was what hurt. She did not want to know. She wanted to be trusted; to help; to feel his dependence upon her. Instead he held her at arm's length.

Oh, he voiced his gratitude for what she had done. He did that over and over again, apologizing at having caused her so much trouble. As if she minded! Why, she was glad, glad to be troubled!

He spoke with almost an equal measure of appreciation of the crew who had dragged his boat off the sand-bar, appearing to consider them also tremendously kind—as undoubtedly they were! Still, they had not begun to come into the close contact with him that she had.

Marcia caught herself up with a round turn. Here she was being sensitive, womanish. How detestable! Why should Stanley Heath pour out his soul to her? She had never laid eyes on him until yesterday. In a day or two he would be gone never again to come into her life. She was glad of it. It was better so.

She had just reached a state of complete tranquillity and happiness. Why have her serenity stirred into turmoil and she herself transformed once more from a free woman to a slave? Her mind should dwell no more on this man or his affairs. If he decided to go back to New York today, ill as he was, she would not attempt to deter him. His business was his own and he must manage it as he thought best.

This decision reached, she drew in her chin, lifted her head a wee bit and began to get the breakfast.

Even Doctor Stetson's arrival and his subsequent verdict that the patient had bronchitis and would take his life in his hands should he leave his bed, afforded her only scant satisfaction.

So she was to keep Stanley Heath under her roof after all—but against his will. It was not a very flattering situation.

She sent Sylvia up with his coffee and toast, and began her usual round of morning duties.

And then just as they were finished and the clock was striking eleven, he called.

She went up, cheerful but with her head still held high, and paused on the threshold.

Glancing at her he smiled.

"You look like a bird about to take flight. Won't you sit down?"

She went nearer. Nevertheless she did not take the chair he indicated.

"I see you are busy," he said. "I thought perhaps your housework might be done by this time and you might have a moment to spare. Well, I mustn't interrupt. Forgive me for calling."

"I'm not busy."

"You seem hurried."

"I'm not. I haven't a thing in the world to do," Marcia burst out.

"Good! Then you can stay a little while," he coaxed. "Now answer this question truthfully, please. You heard what Doctor Stetson said about my returning to New York today. I don't want to be pig-headed and take a risk if it is imprudent; that is neither fair to others nor to myself. Still, it is important that I go and I am anxious to. What is your advice?"

"I think you are too ill."

A frown of annoyance wrinkled his forehead.

"If you will consent to stay where you are a few days, you will then be all right to go," she added.

Obviously the suggestion did not please him. However, he answered more mildly:

"Perhaps you're right. Yet for all that I am disappointed. I want very much to go. It is necessary."

"Can't anything be done from here?" queried she.

"Such as—?"

"Letters, telegrams—whatever you wish. I can telephone or telegraph anywhere. Or I can write."

Surprise stole over his face, then deepened to admiration.

"You would do that for me—blindfolded?"

"Why not?"

"You know why."

"I simply want to help. I always like to help when I can," she explained hurriedly.

"Even when you do not understand?"

Piercingly his eyes rested on her face.

"I—I—do not need to understand," was her proud retort.

For the fraction of a second, their glances met. Then she turned away and a pause, broken only by the crash of the surf on the outer beach, fell between them.

When at last he spoke his voice was low—imperative.

"Marcia—come here!"

She went—she knew not why.

"Give me your hand."

Again, half-trembling, half reluctant, she obeyed.

He took it in his and bending, kissed it.

"I will stay and you shall telegraph," was all he said.

She sprang to fetch paper and pencil, as if welcoming this break in the tension.

"I'm afraid I cannot write plainly enough with my left hand," he said. "Will you take down the message?"

"Certainly."

"*Mrs. S. C. Heath*"

Her pencil, so firm only an instant before, quivered.

"Have you that?"

"Yes."

"*The Biltmore, New York City.*"

"Yes."

"*Everything safe with me. Do not worry. Marooned on Cape Cod with cold. Nothing serious. Home soon. Love. Stanley.*"

"Got that?"

"Yes."

Had something gone out of her voice? The monosyllable was flat, colorless. Heath looked at her. Even her expression was different—or did he merely imagine it?

"Perhaps I would better just glance over the message before you send it—simply to make sure it's right."

"Let me copy it first," she objected.

"Copy it? Nonsense! What for? Nobody's going to see it."

He reached for the paper.

Still she withheld it.

"What's the trouble?"

"It isn't written well enough. I'd rather copy it."

"Why?"

"It's wobbly. I—I—perhaps my hands were cold."

"You're not chilly?"

"No—oh, no."

"If the room is cool you mustn't stay here."

"It isn't. I'm not cold at all."

"Will you let me take the telegram?"

She placed it in his hand.

"It is shaky. However, that's of no consequence, since you are to 'phone Western Union. Now, if you truly are not cold, I'd like to dictate a second wire."

"All right."

"This one is for Currier. *Mr. James Currier, The Biltmore, New York City. Safe on Cape with My Lady. Shall return with her later. Motor here at once, bringing whatever I need for indefinite stay.*

Stanley C. Heath

"Got that?"

"O.K.," nodded Marcia.

This time, without hesitation, she passed him the paper.

"This, I see, is your normal hand-writing," he commented as he placed the messages side by side. "I must admit it is an improvement on the other."

Taking up the sheets, he studied them with interest.

"Hadn't I better go and get off the messages?" suggested Marcia, rising nervously.

"What's your hurry?"

"You said they were important."

"So I did. Nevertheless they can wait a few minutes."

"The station might be closed. Often it is at noontime."

"It doesn't matter if they don't go until afternoon."

"But there might be some slip."

He glanced at her with his keen eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"Matter?"

"Yes, with you? All of a sudden you've turned easterly."

"Have I?" Lightly, she laughed. "I probably have caught the habit from the sea. Environment does influence character, psychologists say."

"Nevertheless, you are not fickle."

"How do you know? Even if I were, to change one's mind is no crime," she went on in the same jesting tone. "The wind bloweth whither it listeth, and the good God does not condemn it for doing so."

"But you are not the wind."

"Perhaps I am," she flashed teasingly. "Or I may have inherited qualities from the sands that gave me birth. They are forever shifting."

"You haven't."

"You know an amazing amount about me, seems to me, considering the length of our acquaintance," she observed with a tantalizing smile.

"I do," was the grim retort. "I know more than you think—more, perhaps than you know yourself. Shall I hold the betraying mirror up before you?"

"The mirror of truth? God forbid! Who of us would dare face it?" she protested, still smiling but with genuine alarm. "Now do let me run along and send off the messages. I must not loiter here talking. You are forgetting that you're ill. The next you know your temperature will go up and Doctor Stetson will blame me."

"My temperature has gone up," growled Stanley Heath, turning his back on her and burying his face in the pillow with the touchiness of a small boy.



Chapter IX

SYLVIA, meanwhile, had heard Stanley Heath call Marcia and hailed her aunt's departure from the kitchen as the opportunity for which she had so anxiously been waiting.

No sooner was the elder woman upstairs and out of earshot than she tiptoed from her room, the monogrammed handkerchief in her pocket.

She had pried out the brick and had the jewel-case in her hand, wrapped and ready for its return when conversation overhead suddenly ceased and she heard Marcia pass through the hall and start down stairs.

Sylvia gasped. She must not be found here. Yet what was she to do?

There was no chance now to put the package back and replace the brick which fitted so tightly that its adjustment was a process requiring patience, care, and time.

Flustered, frightened, she jammed the jewel-case into her dress and frantically restoring the brick to the yawning hole in the hearth as best she could, she fled up the back stairs at the same moment Marcia descended the front ones.

Once in her room, she closed and locked the door and sank panting into a chair to recover her breath.

Well, at least she had not been caught and in the meantime the jewels were quite safe.

Mr. Heath was too ill to be up and about for several days and until he was able to leave his room there was not the slightest danger their absence would be discovered. Long before that time, Marcia would doubtless go to walk or to the village for mail and leave her ample opportunity to put the loot back where Mr. Heath had hidden it.

She took the case stealthily from her pocket.

Now that the gems were in her possession, it certainly could do no harm for her to look at them—even try them on, as she had been tempted to do when she first discovered them. Probably never again in all her life would she hold in her hand so much wealth and beauty. No one, not Heath himself, could begrudge her a peep at the trinkets.

Accordingly she unwound the handkerchief and opened the box.

There lay the glistening heap of treasure, resplendent in the sunshine, a far

more gorgeous spectacle than she had realized.

Going to the bureau, Sylvia took out the jewels, one by one.

She clasped the diamonds about her neck; fastened the emerald brooch in place; put on the sapphire pendant; then added the rings and looked at herself in the gold-framed mirror.

What she saw reflected dazzled her. Who would have believed jewels could make such a difference in one's appearance? They set off her blonde beauty so that she was suddenly transformed into a princess.

No wonder Stanley Heath had risked his life and his freedom for spoils such as these!

If she could have only one of the jewels she would be satisfied—the string of diamonds, the brooch, a ring—which would she choose?

Of course she never could own anything so gorgeous or so valuable. Notwithstanding the certainty, however, it was fun to imagine she might.

Slowly, and with conscious coquetry, like a preening bird, she turned her head this way and that, delighting in the creaminess of the neck the gems encircled, and in the fairness of her golden curls.

She really ought to have jewels. She was born for them and could carry them off. There were myriad women in the world on whom such adornment would be wasted—good and worthy women, too. Fancy Maria Eldridge or Susan Ann Barse, for instance, arrayed in pomp like this! But Marcia would be magnificent, with her rich complexion, her finely poised head, her splendid shoulders, her lovely neck. Marcia dressed in all this wealth would be well worth looking at.

Then a voice interrupted her reverie.

It was Stanley Heath calling.

She heard Marcia reply and come hurrying upstairs.

Guiltily Sylvia took off her sparkling regalia; tumbled it unceremoniously into its case; and slipped it into the drawer underneath a pile of nightdresses. Then she softly unlocked the door and sauntered out.

It was none too soon, for Marcia was speaking to her.

"Sylvia?"

"Yes."

"How would you feel about going over to the village for the mail and to do some errands? The tide is out and you could walk. Prince needs a run."

"I'd love to go."

"That's fine. Here is a list of things we need at the store. Just be sure not to dally too long and get marooned over in town."

"I'll watch out."

"You're sure you don't mind going?"

"No, indeed. I shall enjoy being out."

Then suddenly Sylvia had an inspiration which she instantly acted upon.

"Why don't you go?" she inquired. "You didn't sleep much last night, and a walk might do you good."

"Oh, I couldn't," objected Marcia with haste. "I've a hundred and one things to do."

"Tell me what they are and I'll do them for you."

"I couldn't. They are things I must do myself. Thanks just the same."

"Well, you know your own business best. Is this the list?"

"Yes. There are quite a few items, but they won't be heavy. Here is the basket. Prince will carry it. That is his job and very proud he is of doing it. Goodbye, dear."

"She's dreadfully anxious to get us out of the way, isn't she, Prince?" commented young Sylvia as she and the setter started out over the sand. "Now what do you suppose she has on her mind? She's up to something. Marcia isn't a bit of an actress. She's too genuine."

Marcia, standing at the window watching the girl in her blue sweater and matching beret swing along over the flats mirrored with tiny pools of water, would have been astonished enough had she heard this astute observation.

She did want Sylvia out of the way. The girl had read her correctly.

She must telephone the messages to the station-master at Sawyer Falls, the adjoining town where the railroad ended and the nearest telegraph station was.

She got the line and had no sooner dictated the telegrams than she heard Heath's voice.

During the interval that had elapsed since she had left him, both of them had experienced a reaction and each was eager to make amends.

Marcia regretted her flippancy. It had been childish of her to give way to pique and punish Heath simply because it was proved he had a wife. Why should he not be married? No doubt the absent Mrs. Stanley Heath was a dashing, sophisticated beauty, too, who lived in luxury at the great city hotel to which the first wire had been sent.

Heath had been quite frank about the message and its destination. On thinking

matters over, it occurred to Marcia he might have considered this the easiest way to inform her of things he found it embarrassing to put into words.

She had been made aware in delicate fashion that he was rich, married and moved in a circle far removed from the humble one she herself occupied.

No doubt he felt she should realize this.

It regulated their relationship and prevented any possible misunderstandings.

And she?

Instead of appreciating his honesty, chivalry, gentlemanly conduct as she should have done, and receiving it graciously, surprise had betrayed her into displaying resentment.

She was heartily ashamed of herself. No matter how much it humbled her pride, she must put things right. Fortunately it was not too late to do so.

Therefore, a very different Marcia Howe responded to Stanley Heath's summons.

She was now all gentleness, friendliness, and shyly penitent. If her former coquetry had been bewitching, this new artless self of hers was a hundredfold more alluring.

Stanley, again master of himself, welcomed her with amazement. Could man ever fathom a woman's moods, he asked himself? Why this chastened and distractingly adorable Marcia?

It was he who had been in the wrong and given way to temper, yet instead of demanding the apology which trembled on his tongue, here she was taking the blame and passing over his irritability with the charity of a mother humoring a fretful child.

Well, if he could not fathom her, he at least was grateful for her understanding.

Nevertheless he did mentally observe he had not dreamed her to be so many-sided or credited her with a tithe the fascinations he had so unexpectedly discovered her to possess.

"Here I am, Mr. Heath. What can I do for you?" was her greeting.

This time she did not hesitate, but went directly to the chair beside his bed and sat down. He smiled and, meeting his eyes, she smiled back. This was better. Heath sighed a sigh of relief.

"I've been thinking, since you went down stairs, about Currier. He ought to arrive late tonight or early tomorrow morning. He will start the moment he gets my wire. Although he will not know in which house I am quartered, he will have the wit to inquire, for he has more than the ordinary quota of brains. I don't know

what I should do without him. He has been with me for years and is an Admirable Crichton and a good man Friday rolled into one. I shall have him leave the car in the village and after he has delivered over the clothing he is to bring, he can take the noon train back to New York, carrying the jewels with him."

"I see," nodded Marcia.

She did not see.

She did not understand any of the snarl of events in which so unwittingly she found herself entangled.

Nevertheless she heartily welcomed the intelligence that the jewels with their damning evidence, if evidence it was, were to be removed from the house. The sooner they were out of the way the better. If they were not damning evidence they at least were a great responsibility.

Suppose something were to happen to them? Suppose somebody suspected they were in the house?

The thought had occurred to her more than once.

"So," continued Stanley Heath, "I think sometime today when you have a good opportunity you'd better get the case and bring it up here. I shall then have it here in my room and I can hand it over to Currier without any trouble."

"I'll go and fetch it now. Sylvia has gone to the village and this is a splendid chance," cried Marcia.

"Fine!"

"I'll be right back."

He heard her speed down the stairs and listened to her step in the room below.

Then there was silence.

A few moments later she came racing back, white and breathless.

"They're gone!" she cried. "The place is empty! The jewels are not there!"

Her terror and the fear lest her pallor foreshadowed collapse produced in Heath that artificial calm one sometimes sees when a strong nature reins itself in and calls upon its reserve control.

Marcia had fallen to her knees beside the bed and buried her face, trembling with agitation.

The man thought only of how to quiet her. Reaching out, he touched her hair.

"Hush, Marcia. The jewels will be found. Don't give way like this. I cannot bear to see you. The whole lot of them are not worth your tears."

"But you left them in my care. It was I who suggested where to hide them," she moaned.

"I know. And it was a splendid idea, too. Besides, we had no time to hunt hiding-places. We were forced to act right away. I could not let that sheriff of yours peel off my clothes and find the diamonds on me. He isn't a man of sufficient imagination—or perhaps he is one of far too much. I am not blaming you,—not in the least. We did the best we could in the emergency. If things have gone wrong, it is no fault of yours."

"But you trusted me. I ought to have watched. I should not have left the kitchen day or night," declared Marcia, lifting her tear-stained face to his.

"You have been there most of the time, haven't you?"

"I went to see them get the boat off yesterday."

"Still, someone was here. Sylvia was in the house."

"Yes, but she knew nothing about the jewels and therefore may not have realized the importance of staying on deck. How could she, unless she had been warned? All I asked her to do was to remain within call. She may have gone upstairs, or into another room."

"When she comes back, you can ask her."

It was he who now soothed and cheered, his caressing hand moving from her shoulder down her arm until her fingers lay in his.

Convulsively she caught and clung to them.

"Now we must pull ourselves together, dear," went on Stanley gently. "It is important that we do not give ourselves away. Sylvia may know nothing and if she does not, we must not let her suspect. The fewer people there are mixed up in this dilemma the better."

"Yes."

She rose but he still held her hand, a common misery routing every thought of conventionality.

The firmness and magnetism of his touch brought strength. It was a new experience, for during her life with Jason, Marcia had been the oak—the one who consoled, sustained. For a few delicious moments, she let herself rest, weary and unresisting, within the shelter of Stanley Heath's grasp. Then she drew away and, passing her hand across her forehead as if awaking from a dream murmured:

"I'd better go down. Sylvia will be coming."

"Very well. Now keep a stiff upper lip. Remember, I depend on you to see the

apple-cart does not upset."

"I will—I'll do my best."

Even as she spoke the outer door opened, then closed with a bang.

"There's Sylvia now. I must go."

The girl came in, aglow from her walk.

"I'm awfully sorry I banged the door," she apologized. "A gust of wind took it. I do hope I didn't wake up Mr. Heath. Here's the marketing. I thought I should never get out of that store. Everybody in the whole town was there for mail and I had to stop and tell each one all about Mr. Heath and his shipwreck, his boat and his health. I must have answered a million questions. People are dreadfully curious about him.

"And Marcia, what do you suppose? I had a letter from Hortie Fuller—that fellow back home that I've told you about. He's sent me a five-pound box of candy and he wants to come to Wilton and spend his summer vacation."

The girl's eyes were shining and she breathed quickly.

"Of course I don't care a button for Hortie. Still, it would be rather good fun to see him. He always dropped in every day when I was at home. It seems ages since I've laid eyes on him. You know how it is—you get used to a person who is always under foot. You have to think about him if only to avoid stepping on him. And after all, Hortie isn't so bad. Thinking him over from a distance, he really is rather nice. Come and sample the candy. It's wonderful. He must have blown himself and sent to Chicago for it, poor dear! I suppose Eben Snow read the address, because he called out 'Guess you've got a beau out West, Miss Sylvia.' Everybody heard him and I thought I should go through the floor. He looked the letter all over, too. I'll let you see the letter, all except the part which is too frightfully silly. You wouldn't care about that. I don't myself."

Sylvia shrugged her shoulders.

Alas, this was no moment to talk with her, and artfully draw from her the happenings of the previous day.

Inwardly distraught but outwardly calm, Marcia took the letter and tried valiantly to focus her attention upon it.

To her surprise, it was a manly, intelligent letter, filled with town gossip, to be sure, yet written in delightfully interesting fashion.

"Your Mr. Fuller sounds charming," she said as she gave it back.

"Oh, Hortie is all right—in some ways." Patronizingly slipping the letter into her pocket, Sylvia shifted the subject. Nevertheless, a betraying flush colored her

cheeks. "Now we must start dinner, mustn't we? See, it's noon already. I had no idea it was so late."

She tossed her hat into a chair.

"Don't you want to ask Mr. Heath which way he prefers his eggs—poached or boiled? I suppose with a temperature, he isn't going to be allowed anything but simple food. And Marcia, while you're there, do put a pair of fresh pillow-slips on his pillows. The ones he has are frightfully tumbled. I meant to do it this morning."

As the door closed behind the elder woman, artful young Sylvia smiled.

"There! That will keep her busy for a few moments at least. I know those pillow-cases. They fit like a snake's skin and are terribly hard to get off and on."

She crept into the hall and listened.

Yes, Marcia and Stanley Heath were talking. She could hear her aunt's gentle insistence and the man's protests. That was all she wished to know. The pillow-cases were in process of being taken off.

Up the stairs flew Sylvia, to return a second later, the jewel-case swathed in its loose wrappings.

"If I can only scramble it in there before she comes," whispered she. "I shall draw the first long breath I've taken since last night. I wouldn't own those things if they were given me. They would worry me into my grave."

An anxious interval elapsed before the brick was pried out and the case slipped beneath it. Nevertheless the feat was accomplished and triumphant, relieved, happy Sylvia set about preparing dinner.

She even ventured to hum softly that when Marcia returned she might find her entirely serene.

"Mr. Heath, alas, will never know how becoming his jewelry was to me," she mused. "Had a Hollywood producer seen me, he would have snapped me up for a movie star within ten minutes. I certainly looked the part."

What a long while Marcia was staying upstairs! Why, one could change a dozen pillow-slips in this time.

"I guess they are tighter than I remembered them. I needn't have rushed as I did," pouted Sylvia. "What can she be doing?"

When at last Marcia returned, something evidently was wrong.

"What's the matter?" demanded Sylvia. "Is Mr. Heath worse?"

"Worse? No indeed. What made you think so?"

"You look fussed."

"Do I? You'd be fussed had you wrestled with those pillow-slips as I have," was the reply. "Either the pillows have swelled or the cases have shrunk frightfully. Well, they are on now, anyway."

"Come and get dinner then. I'm starved. My walk has made me hungry as a bear. You must go out this afternoon, Marcia. It is a glorious day and you need to be pepped up. I know what staying in the house means. Didn't I sit in this kitchen all yesterday afternoon until I got so dozey I could scarcely keep my eyes open? Not that I wasn't glad to," she added hastily. "I never mind staying in when there is a reason for doing it, and of course I want to do my bit toward taking care of Mr. Heath. Still, indoors isn't the same as outdoors. We all need exercise. I've had my quota for the day. You must have yours."

To her surprise, Marcia demurred.

"Thank you, dear, but I think I won't go out today."

"Why not?"

"I don't feel like it. I'd rather sit here and read."

"Nonsense, Marcia! You're getting middle-aged and lazy. You'll lose your nice slim, hipless figure if you don't watch out."

"I guess I shan't lose it today. Soon Mr. Heath will be gone and we can both go."

"But I can play nurse for the afternoon."

"I'm too tired to go out."

"The air would rest you."

"Not today, dear," Marcia said with finality. "I have some mending to do and lots of other little things that I have been saving up for a long time. Since I prefer to stay, why don't you tramp up the shore and see *My Unknown Lady*? She is beautiful and you haven't seen her yet."

"I'd love to—if I cannot coax you to go out."

"You can't. I'm adamant on not stirring out of this room."

"Well, if your mind is made up to that extent, I suppose there is no use in my trying to change it. I would like to see the boat."

"I'm sure you would. Stay as long as you like. There will be nothing to do here. Somebody ought to enjoy the sunshine and blue sky. Mr. Heath will probably sleep and in the meantime I shall get my sewing done."

As Marcia spoke the words, her mind was busy.

So Sylvia had not stirred from the kitchen on the previous afternoon! The theft of the jewels must, then, have taken place during the night.

Nevertheless, she was puzzled, for she had no memory of finding anything awry when she came down at sunrise to lay the fire.

Moreover, she now recalled she had been in the kitchen several times during the night, heating soup and getting water for Stanley Heath.

There had been nothing wrong then, at least she had noticed nothing.

When had the gems been taken, and who had taken them? No wonder she craved solitude to ponder the conundrum! This, however, was not the paramount reason she desired to be alone.

Despite the enigma of the jewels; despite the mystery surrounding Stanley Heath, deep in her heart something that would not be stilled was singing—singing!



Chapter X

IN the meantime, the throng of neighbors Sylvia had precipitately left in the village post office had received their mail and reached that anticipated interval for gossip which never failed to be stimulating.

Clustered about the counter loitered the standbys.

Zenas Henry was speaking:

"A mighty fine little girl—that Sylvia," commented he. "A high stepper! We'd oughter tie her down to Wilton so'st she won't go back West. She's too pretty to be spared from the Cape."

"I figger you'd have trouble keepin' her here," rejoined Silas Nickerson, the postmaster, sauntering out from his wicker cage. "She's got a beau in her home town. Had a letter an' a box of candy from him today. Same writin' an' same postmark on both of 'em, I noticed. She blushed red as a peony when I passed 'em out to her."

"Didn't by any chance see the name, did you, Silas?" Eleazer Crocker inquired.

"Wal, come to think of it, it did catch my eye. You know how such things will. Fuller, he's called. Horatio Fuller."

"Horatio Fuller, eh?" Eleazer repeated. "Kinder high soundin'. Wonder who he is? From Alton City, you say."

Silas nodded.

"That was the address."

"Never heard of the place," Captain Benjamin Todd put in.

"That don't in no way prevent its existin', Ben," answered Zenas Henry with his customary drawl.

"If we had a map handy we might look it up," suggested Captain Phineas Taylor. "I'd like to see just where it's located."

"I tried doin' that," the postmaster admitted. "I got out my map, but the place warn't on it."

"No wonder I never heard of it!" blustered Benjamin Todd.

"That don't prove nothin', Benjamin," his friend Phineas Taylor expostulated. "Silas's map was drawn before the flood. Even Wilton ain't on it."

"It ain't?"

A simultaneous gasp rose from the assembly.

"Then all I can say is it's a darn poor map," Enoch Morton sniffed. "A map that ain't got Wilton on it might as well be burned. 'Tain't worth botherin' with."

"It's all the map I've got," Silas apologized.

"You'd oughter ask the government for another. Why don't you write to Washington, explainin' that neither Wilton nor Alton City are on this one an' ask 'em for a better one?"

"Fore you start complainin', you might make sure Belleport's down," suggested Lemuel Gill, a resident of the adjoining village. "Last I knew, that warn't on this map, neither."

"'Twarn't?"

"Who makes these maps, I wonder?" bristled Zenas Henry. "Some numskull who ain't traveled none, I'll bet a hat. Why don't he go round an' see what places there is 'fore he starts map-makin'? Why, any one of us knows more 'bout the job already than he does. We know there's Belleport, an' Wilton, an' Alton City."

"Bet you couldn't tell what state Alton City is in, though, Zenas Henry," Silas challenged.

"Alton City? Let me think! Alton City!" Thoughtfully he stroked his chin. "'Tain't my business to know where 'tis," he presently sputtered. "If everybody knew where all the blasted places in the country were, what use would they have for maps? 'Twould put the map-makin' folks clean out of business."

"If map-makers don't know where Wilton an' Belleport are they'd better be out of business, in my opinion," countered Benjamin Todd. "Say, Ephraim," he exclaimed, inspired by a bright idea, "you're the mail carrier. You'd oughter be primed on the location of places. Where's Alton City?"

"Alton City? Hanged if I know. To hear you talk, anybody'd think 'twas my job to tote round the country deliverin' letters in person at the doors of every house in the United States."

"But you must have some notion 'bout geography. Ain't you got no pocket atlas nor nothin'?"

"I may have a small map somewheres; I carry most everything," Ephraim grinned. With deliberation, he began to disgorge upon the counter the contents of his many pockets.

There was a tangle of pink string; two stumpy pencils without points; a fragment of fish-line; a soiled scrap of court-plaster; a box of matches; a plug of

tobacco; a red bandanna handkerchief; three cough-drops, moist and sticky; several screws; a worn tube of paste; a jack-knife.

"My soul, Eph!" ejaculated Zenas Henry. "You're a reg'lar travelin' junk shop, ain't you?"

"I have to have things by me."

"Was you Robinson Crusoe, you'd never have call for any such mess of truck as this. Where's the map?"

"Must be in my breast pocket," replied the mail-carrier, thrusting his hand inside his pea-coat. "My eye! If I ain't forgot that telegram!" he abruptly exclaimed. "The station-master at Sawyer Falls gave it to me when he handed out the mail. It clean went out of my mind."

"A telegram!" came in chorus from his audience. "Who for?"

"It's for that chap Heath who's stayin' over at The Widder's."

"Hadn't you been wool-gatherin' you might 'a' given it to Sylvia to take back with her. She was here only a little while ago," Silas Nickerson said.

"I know it."

"S'pose I was to take it over," Elisha Winslow suggested eagerly. "I'm willin' to."

"Fur's that goes, I can carry it," Captain Phineas Taylor piped.

"Give it to me, Eph, an' I'll see it's landed there within half an hour," proposed Benjamin Todd, elbowing his way forward.

"Now there's no use in all you fellers volunteerin'," Eleazer Crocker asserted. "I'm goin' straight over to Marcia's, as it happens, soon's I've et my dinner, an' I'll take the telegram."

With an air of authority, he held out his hand.

The crowd fell back.

Yet notwithstanding their acquiescence, Zenas Henry, not to be awed into subjection, had the temerity to add:

"Remember, though, Eleazer, you ain't to go off the mainland without leavin' the key to the engine-house where we can get it. We've no hankerin' to be burnt alive while you're philanderin' at The Widder's."

"Hang it on the peg inside Benjamin Todd's fish shanty as you go by," called another voice.

"I'll do that," Eleazer agreed as he pocketed the telegram.



Early afternoon found Marcia alone in the Homestead sitting-room.

A driftwood fire flickered upon the hearth, for although spring was on the way, the large, high-studded rooms were not yet entirely free of winter's chill and dampness.

Sylvia had gone up the beach. Stanley Heath was asleep; and at last the delicious interval of solitude which the woman coveted was here.

The basket at her elbow overflowed with mending, but she had not yet taken up her needle.

Instead she sat motionless before the blaze, dreamily watching the vivid blues and greens as they flared up into the glow of the flame there to blend with its splendor, and afterwards melt into embers of scarlet and orange.

She could not work.

Try as she would, her mind wandered off into by-ways too fascinating to be resisted—by-ways which no matter how remote their windings, invariably led her back to Stanley Heath.

In retrospect she lived over again every incident, every word, every look that had passed between them until she came to the barrier of the unknown which her fancy bridged with intricate rainbow-hued imaginings.

While the fire crackled and flashes of sapphire and emerald shot up and died away, she twisted possible explanations this way and that and would contentedly have continued the pastime had not Eleazer Crocker knocked at the door.

Eleazer could not have chosen a more inopportune moment to drag her back to earth.

With a frown and a deep sigh, Marcia went reluctantly to let him in.

"Wal, now ain't it nice to find you by yourself!" was his greeting. "The kitchen looks cozy as can be. Spring may be comin' but for all that cool weather still hangs on. Where was you settin'?"

"I was in the front room, but perhaps we better drop down here so I can listen in case Mr. Heath should call."

"Anywhere you say. Wherever you are suits me."

"I'll just run in and put the screen round the fire and get my mending," Marcia replied a trifle uneasily.

"Let me go."

"No, indeed. You wait here. I'll be right back."

Left to himself, Eleazer smiled a smile of satisfaction.

The kitchen was warm, Marcia was alone and apparently not busy. Could

circumstances be more propitious? Fortune certainly was with him. Today, this very afternoon, he would take his future in his hands and put to her the question he had so often determined to put.

Times without number he had mentally rehearsed what he meant to say. In fact he habitually fell into this intriguing dialogue whenever he had nothing else to occupy him. It commenced with a few preliminary observations concerning the weather, the springtime, the birds—the birds who would soon be mating. That was the keynote—mating. The rest followed very naturally. It was, Eleazer felt, a neat, in fact quite a poetic proposal.

He cleared his throat in preparation.

When Marcia came back, he was primed and ready to begin his declaration.

"Weather's been fine, ain't it?" he started out.

Marcia took up her sewing.

"Do you think so?" questioned she, raising her brows. "Seems to me we've had lots of rain and fog."

"Wal, yes, now you mention it I do recall a few thick days. Still, spring is comin'."

"I'd like to shingle the south ell this spring," announced Marcia, giving a disconcertingly practical twist to the conversation. "How many shingles do you suppose it would take?"

Eleazer frowned.

The dialogue was not proceeding along the lines he had mapped out.

Determined to fether it and bring it back into the prescribed channels, he answered:

"I'd have to reckon that out. It's a good notion, though, to make the ell tight. That's what the birds are doin'."

Astonished, Marcia glanced up from her work.

"I mean," floundered on Eleazer, "they're gettin' their nests built an' kinder pickin' out their mates. Pickin' the right mate's quite a job for some folks."

He saw Marcia turn scarlet. Mercy! What a slip! She thought he was twitting her about Jason.

"What I set out to say was that when you get the wrong mate you know it," he countered hastily.

No sooner, however, were the words out of his mouth than he saw they were no better.

Perhaps it would be well to abandon the mating question and start on a new

tack. He had tried the spring. Suppose he took summer as his theme?

"Summer's a nice season, ain't it?" ventured he.

"Yes, although I never enjoy it as much as the other months. I don't like the heat and I detest the summer boarders."

Eleazer swallowed hard. He would better have clung to the spring. He saw that now. He would retrace his steps.

"Spring is nice," he agreed. "With the birds a-buildin' their nests, an'—"

At last he was back on familiar ground.

"I did not realize you were so much interested in birds, Eleazer," Marcia exclaimed. "I have a fine bird book I must lend you. It's in the other room. I'll fetch it."

Springing up, she disappeared.

"Drat it!" murmured Eleazer. "Could anything be more exasperatin'? An' me neither knowin' nor carin' a hang whether a bird's a robin or a sparrow. Just when I was gettin' the way paved so nice, too." He wandered to the window. "Oh, heavens, who's this comin'? If it ain't 'Lish Winslow! Now what in thunder does he want, buttin' in? He's walkin' like as if the evil one was at his heels."

Eleazer threw open the door.

Before he could speak, however, Elisha puffing and out of breath bawled:

"Where in the name of goodness did you put the engine-house key, Eleazer? Whipple's hen house is afire an' we've hunted high an' low for it."

Eleazer purpled.

"My soul an' body," he gasped. "I clean forgot to leave it. Must be here in my pocket."

Wildly he began to search.

"You're a fine head of the fire department, you are!" roared Elisha. "If you'd put your mind on town business 'stead of on Marcia Howe, we'd all be better off. Traipsing over here to see her in the middle of the day, palmin' off that telegram as an excuse—"

If Eleazer had been purple before, he was livid now.

"Well, you better go straight back to the village fast as you can leg it an' carry the key with you," went on the accuser. "Don't wait for nothin'. I'll explain matters to Marcia."

"But I've got to see her. I've got to speak to her private," protested the wretched official.

"Private? Ain't you been talkin' to her private an' hour or more? What else have you got to say to her?"

"I want to give her somethin'."

"Give it to me. I'll hand it to her."

Elisha's extended palm was not to be ignored.

"This—this—telegram," quavered Eleazer. "I ain't had a chance to—"

"Do you mean to say you ain't given her that telegram yet?"

"I was intendin' to. I was just about to when—"

"Wal, of all the—" words failed Elisha. "Here, give it to me," he commanded. "I can be depended on to deliver messages if you can't. I'll see she has it. In the meantime, the best thing you can do is to hoof it to town quick's ever you can. If the whole place ain't burned to the ground an' if they don't tar an' feather you when you put in your appearance, you'll be lucky."

"Ain't you comin'?"

"I? No. Fire's ain't in my line. Long's Marcia's here by herself an' ain't busy, I'm goin' to pay her a call," Elisha grinned. "I've got to deliver the telegram."

"Still, you don't need to stay," pleaded Eleazer, facing his triumphant rival.

"Mebbe I do," was Elisha's hectoring retort. "Mebbe this is the very time for me to linger behind. The coast's clear. Why shouldn't I stay?"

"You might be needed at the fire."

"I shan't be," was the calm reply. "Not unless there's somethin' criminal about it."

"It might be arson."

"I'll take a chance on it startin' from Dan Whipple's cigarette. In fact he owned as much. Dan's terrible careless with his cigarettes. Now, hop along, Eleazer, else the whole conflagration will be out 'fore you get there."

The unlucky fire-chief had no choice.

"Drat it!" raged he, as he strode off across the sand. "Drat it! Ain't that just my luck!"



Chapter XI

EITHER the book for which Marcia searched was not to be found or she was in no haste to return to her awaiting suitor.

Whatever the explanation, her absence lengthened from a few moments into a quarter of an hour.

In the meantime Elisha, like his predecessor, was formulating his mode of attack.

Eleazer, apparently, had not been successful.

Might not this be his own golden opportunity?

Before another snatched the prize from him; before Heath with his yacht and his monogrammed silken garments recovered his strength, he would put his fate to the test.

Women were unaccountable creatures.

You never could predict what they might do.

Smoothing a man's pillow and feeding broth to him sometimes brought about surprising results.

Furthermore, thus far no one had been able to find out how well Marcia really knew this Stanley Heath. Perhaps a romance of long standing, of which the village was ignorant, existed between them.

Who could tell?

In any case, it behooved an aspirant for the hand of this matchless creature to put in his claim without delay.

Elisha wandered about the empty kitchen, mentally summing up the situation.

He had a small deposit in the bank which, added to Marcia's larger fortune, would provide sumptuously for his old age. In addition, if she became his wife she would, of course, do the cooking and housework and he could dismiss May Ellen Howard, his housekeeper, thereby saving her salary.

As to a house, he could not quite decide whether it would be wiser to take up residence in the Homestead or continue to live in his own smaller abode in Wilton. The Homestead undoubtedly was finer and more pretentious, but it was large and probably expensive to heat. Furthermore, its location was breezy and draughts always aggravated his rheumatism. If it could be sold, it should net a

neat sum.

Well, he need not decide these questions now. There would be time enough to smooth out all such trivial details after the wedding.

He strolled up to the stove and, standing on the hearth with his back to the fire, rocked back and forth on his heels reflectively.

As he did so, a brick beneath his feet rocked with him.

Elisha looked down.

He saw it was quite loose.

"That thing's goin' to trip up somebody some fine day," commented he. "It oughter be cemented."

He stooped to investigate.

It was then he noticed for the first time an edge of linen projecting above the masonry.

"Marcia must 'a' stuffed a rag in there to keep the thing from wobblin'," he mused. "Ain't that like a woman? She ain't helped matters none, neither. It wobbles just the same. I can fix it better'n that."

Producing his knife, Elisha pried the brick from its place.

As he lifted it out, a handkerchief came with it disgorging at his feet a flat, blue leather case.

If the sheriff's eyes bulged when he caught sight of it, they all but popped from his head when, egged on by curiosity, he pressed the catch on the box.

Quick as a flash the whole situation clarified in his mind.

These were the widely heralded Long Island jewels; and the thief who had stolen them was here beneath this roof!

It was plain as a pikestaff. Hidden by fog he had escaped in his boat and inadvertently run aground at the mouth of Wilton Harbor.

Of course Marcia did not know. Even though a friendship existed between herself and Heath, she was unquestionably ignorant of the nefarious means by which he earned his living.

Far from cherishing anger or resentment toward the person who exposed his villainy and prevented her from sacrificing herself to such an unprincipled adventurer, would she not regard her rescuer with deepest gratitude? Elisha's head whirled.

Nevertheless, confused though he was, it was clear to him he must not make a misstep and neglect to perform his official duty with dignity.

Heath was ill. There would be no danger of his leaving the Homestead at present, especially as he had no suspicion the jewels had been discovered.

The best plan was for him to return to the mainland; get his badge and handcuffs; find out what formalities such a momentous event as an arrest demanded; and return later and round up the criminal.

He did not dally. Carefully putting the gems back where he had found them, he placed the telegram upon the table and went out, softly closing the door behind him.

It flashed into his mind that as the tide was coming in it might be well to borrow Marcia's boat and row back to shore.

This would serve two purposes. He would reach home sooner; and Heath, cut off by the sweep of the channel, would in the meantime be unable to escape.

Elisha rubbed his hands. He was pretty farsighted—pretty cute. In fact, his management of this affair was going to put a big feather in his cap. He could see now his name emblazoned on the front pages of the papers:

Elisha Winslow, Wilton sheriff, makes daring arrest! Cape official rounds up gem thief!

All over the country people would read that it was he who had tracked down this notorious criminal.

And the police—those brass-buttoned city men who rated themselves so high and looked down on village constables and sheriffs as if they were the dirt beneath their feet—they would be given a lesson they would remember!

They would be pretty sore about it, too, when they found the glory of making this capture going to a small-town deputy.

Never had Elisha rowed as he rowed that day! The dory fairly leaped through the water. Reaching shore, he sprang from it and dragged it up on the sand. Then, trembling with excitement, he set out for home.

Everything must be done in ship-shape fashion. There must be no bungling—no slips that would detract from the dignity of the event. He was almost at his gate when to his consternation he saw Eleazer puffing after him.

"You didn't make much of a stop at The Widder's, I see," jeered he.

"No. Had other business," came crisply from Elisha.

"You don't say! I can't imagine your havin' business important enough to cut short a call on Marcia Howe. Mebbe she didn't urge you to loiter."

"I didn't see Marcia. I come away 'fore she got back," snapped the sheriff.

Unbelievably, Eleazer scanned his countenance.

"You 'pear to be kinder stirred up, 'Lish," he commented. "What's the matter?"
Elisha determined upon a sudden and bold move.

"Say, Eleazer," began he cautiously, "was you ever at an arrest?"

"An arrest!"

"Yes. Did you ever see a man arrested?"

"Wal, I dunno as I ever did—not really. I've seen it done, though, in the movies."

"That oughter be up-to-date an' proper. Just how was the proceedin' put through?"

Thoughtfully Eleazer regarded the toes of his boots.

"Wal, near's I can recollect, the policeman went up to the criminal an' grabbin' him by the arm says: 'You villain! I've got you now. Scram!' I ain't exactly positive he says Scram at that precise minute, but in all such scenes, somebody always says Scram to somebody else 'fore the mix-up is through. That, in the main, is what happens."

"I s'pose the policeman wore a badge an' carried handcuffs."

"Oh, law, yes. But what's the game? What do you want to know for?"

Furtively Elisha glanced up and down the empty road and after peering over his shoulder, he dropped his voice to a confidential whisper and hissed:

"'Cause I'm goin' to make an arrest—a big arrest! I've tracked down the thief that committed the Long Island burglary. Moreover, I know this very second where the jewels are."

Eleazer's jaw dropped.

"I'm goin' to 'phone the New York police I've got their man," he concluded, drawing himself to his full height and expanding his chest until the buttons on his coat threatened to burst off.

"You be? My soul an' body!"

"Yes, I'm goin' to call long distance straight away."

Eleazer's cunning mind worked quickly.

"I don't know, 'Lish, as I'd do that," he cautioned.

"Why not?"

"Wal, in the first place, you might be mistook in your calculations an' not only get yourself into hot water but make the town a laughin' stock. Furthermore, was you wrong, you might get sued for defamin' the accused's character."

"I ain't wrong. I'm right."

"Wal, even so, I'd move careful," urged his companion. "Most likely there's a reward out for this criminal. Why split it with a host of others? Why don't you an' me divide it? I'll help you land your man, since you're a bit—" Eleazer, fearing to offend, hesitated, "—a bit out of practice 'bout arrestin'."

The advice was good. Elisha, shrewd in his dealings, instantly saw the advantages of the plan proposed.

"Wal, mebbe 'twould be better if I didn't let too many ignorant city chaps in on a big thing like this," he conceded pompously. "You an' me know what we're about. I figger we could handle it."

"Sure we could. We can put it through in first-class shape. First you must change your ole clothes for your Sunday ones. A black frock coat's what you really oughter wear. I wish we dared borrow the minister's. Still, I reckon your Sunday suit'll do. Then you must pin your sheriff's badge on your chest where it'll show good an' plain. Be sure to bring along your handcuffs, 'cause you're certain to need 'em with an experienced criminal such as this. He won't have no mind to be took up. He'll have a gun an' put up a fight."

"Have a gun?"

"Sure he'll have a gun! In fact he'll prob'ly have several of 'em."

Elisha paled and a tremor twitched his lips.

"That needn't concern you none, though. All you'll have to do will be to steal up behind him, put your pistol 'twixt his shoulder-blades an' shout: 'Stick 'em up!'"

"Stick 'em up?"

"Yes."

"Stick what up?"

"His hands, man—his hands," explained Eleazer impatiently.

"I ain't got no pistol."

"For the land's sake! You ain't got a pistol? You—a sheriff?"

"Somehow I never got round to purchasin' a pistol," Elisha apologized. "I ain't fond of fire-arms. In fact, I don't know's I ever shot off a revolver in my life."

"Wal, I have. I've shot dozens of skunks."

"You might lend me yours."

"I s'pose I might. It ain't, though, workin' very well right now. It's kinder rusty. Furthermore, I'm out of ammunition."

"That wouldn't matter. I ain't calculatin' to fire it."

"But you'll have to."

Elisha's mounting disapproval changed to consternation.

Turning, he faced Eleazer.

"Say, Eleazer," he faltered, "s'pose we was to make a deal on this thing. S'pose, for the time bein' I was to take over your job an' you was to take over mine. S'pose you did the arrestin'? This affair's a big one an' oughter be given all the frills a city policeman would give it. That's due the town. Now you seem to know a sight more 'bout how to manage it than I do."

"You put on the badge; you tell the thief to stick 'em up; you put the pistol 'twixt his shoulders, or wherever you think 'twill do the most good; an' you snap the handcuffs on him. I'll see you get full credit for it. Meanwhile, if there's a fire or an undertakin' job, I'll manage 'em somehow."

Eleazer shook his head.

"That wouldn't do, 'Lish, no way in the world," he objected. "We can't go swappin' offices voted us by the town. Folks wouldn't like it. Was I, a common citizen, to shoot the criminal, I'd likely be hauled up for murder. I'm willin' to stand by you to the extent of goin' along an' keepin' you company; but you must be the one that bears the brunt of the job."

"I could resign my office."

"When?"

"Right now. In fact, I've had a notion to do so, off an' on, for some time. You see, I never did want to be sheriff. The office was foisted on me. I'm findin' it pretty wearin'."

"Man alive! Bein' sheriff in Wilton can't be wearin'."

"U—m. Wal, mebbe it don't 'pear to be to an onlooker. Still, it's an almighty big responsibility for all that," Elisha insisted. "Besides, 'twas kinder understood when I took the office there'd be no arrestin' nor shootin'. Jewel robberies warn't in the contract."

"But man alive, you ain't been burdened with jewel robberies. 'Tain't as if they come every day in the week."

"They're wearin' when they do come," Elisha persisted.

"Everything's wearin' when it comes—fires an' all such things. Did they happen seven days in the week, we'd all be wore to the bone. But they don't."

"N—o."

"Wal, then, what you wailin' about? I should think you'd kinder welcome a break in the monotony instead of groanin' over it. 'Twill give you a chance to

show folks what you can do. The feller can't do more'n shoot you an' should you be shot at the post of duty, why the town would give you a big funeral an' I myself would lay you out in just the style you'd hanker to be laid out in."

"But—but—I don't hanker to be laid out," whimpered Elisha in an aggrieved tone.

"I don't s'pose you do. None of us does. Still, you might display a measure of gratitude for the offer."

"Oh, I appreciate your kindness," amended the wretched sheriff, fearful of losing his solitary prop. "I appreciate it very much indeed."

Eleazer appeared mollified.

"You ain't told me yet none of the details of this business," he suddenly remarked. "If I'm goin' to help you, I'd oughter be told everything about it. Who is the criminal? An' where is he? An' how'd you come to get track of him?"

Alas, the questions were the very ones Elisha had hoped to escape answering.

He had no mind to lay his cards on the table. Nevertheless, he knew of no way to evade his confederate's curiosity. Eleazer was touchy. It would not do to risk offending him a second time.

Reluctantly, cautiously, Elisha poured out his story and was rewarded to see the other town official gape at him, open-mouthed.

"Bless my soul," he reiterated. "Bless my soul! Who would 'a' drempt it?" he burst out when he could contain himself no longer. "Wal, I never did like that feller Heath. I suspected from the first there was somethin' wrong about him. Prob'ly he has queer eyes. You can always spot a criminal by his eye. Kinder shifty an' fishy."

"I didn't notice he had fishy eyes," mildly rejoined Elisha.

"You ain't seen as much of the world as I have, 'Lish," was the patronizing retort.

"I don't know why," bristled the sheriff. "You ain't never been twenty miles beyond Wilton."

"Possibly I ain't. Possibly I ain't," grudgingly confessed Eleazer. "Travelin' ain't all there is to life, though. I'm observin', I am. I understand human nature. This Heath feller, now. I understand him."

"Then p'raps you can foretell what he's likely to do when I arrest him," put in Elisha eagerly.

"I can," Eleazer nodded. "I can prophesy just about what he'll do."

"What?"

"It's better I shouldn't tell you. 'Twouldn't be wise. We must do our duty no matter what comes of it."

Again Elisha's knees weakened beneath him.

"Seems to me," went on Eleazer, "that 'stead of loiterin' here discussin' the calamities of the future you'd better be gettin' on to your house. You've got to put on your other clothes. The press, most likely, will want to photograph you. Then you must hunt up your badge, your handcuffs an' all your paraphernalia. I'd better cut across the field, meantime, an' oil up my pistol. Mebbe I can fix it so'st it'll go off. I'll try an' find you some cartridges, too. I wouldn't want to stand by an' see you struck down without your havin' some slight defense, poor as 'tis."

With this dubious farewell, Eleazer bustled off across the dingle and was lost to sight.



Chapter XII

LEFT alone, Elisha gloomily pursued his way to his own cottage and entering it by the side door passed through the back hall and upstairs.

From the shed he could hear May Ellen, his housekeeper, singing lustily as she mopped the floor to the refrain of *Smile, Smile, Smile*.

The sentiment jarred on him. He could not smile.

Going to the closet, he took out his Sunday suit, shook it, and with the air of one making ready his shroud, spread it upon the bed. It exhaled a pungent, funereal mustiness, particularly disagreeable at the moment.

Next he produced a boiled shirt, a collar, and a black tie.

It took him some time to assemble these infrequently used accessories, and he was dismayed to find no collar-button.

Nervously he searched the drawers, tossing their contents upside down in fruitless quest for this indispensable article.

A collar-button was the corner-stone of his toilet—the object on which everything else depended. Should it fail to be forthcoming, the game was up. He could not administer the law without it.

Perhaps, viewing the matter from every angle, its disappearance was a fortunate, rather than an unfortunate, omen.

Now that he had had time for sober reflection, the enterprise on which he had embarked appeared a foolhardy—almost mad undertaking. To grapple with an experienced criminal was suicidal. It was bad enough to do so if forced into the dilemma by chance. But to seek out such an issue deliberately! He wondered what he had been thinking of. Excitement had swept him off his feet and put to rout both his caution and his common sense.

He wished with all his heart he had never mentioned the matter to Eleazer. But for that, he could pull out of it and no one would be the wiser.

Suppose the criminal did escape? Were not lawbreakers doing so every day?

One more at large could make little difference in the general moral tone of society. Anyway, no criminal—no matter what a rascal he might be, was worth the sacrifice of a man's life—particularly his life, argued Elisha.

But, alas, there was Eleazer to whom he had precipitately confided the entire story!

No, there was no possibility of his backing out of the affair now and washing his hands of it. He must go through with it.

Nevertheless, he would postpone the moment for action as long as he was able.

Therefore, instead of donning his official garb, he went down stairs to hunt up his badge and handcuffs. These he kept in the drawer of the tall secretary in the sitting-room and although he had not seen them for months, he felt certain they would still be there.

In order to make no noise and arouse May Ellen's phenomenal curiosity, he took off his shoes.

To his consternation, the drawer was empty!

And not only was it empty but it had been left open as if a marauder possessed of sticky hands had hastily abandoned it.

Elisha paused, confounded. Who could have taken these symbols of the law? Who would wish to take them? Certainly not May Ellen.

Even if her inquiring mind had prompted her to ransack his property, she was far too honest a person to make off with it. Furthermore, what use could a peaceable woman have for a sheriff's badge and a pair of handcuffs?

Unwilling to believe the articles were gone, Elisha peered feverishly into every corner the piece of furniture contained. He even hauled out the books and ran his hand along the grimy shelves behind them. But beyond a thick coating of dust, nothing rewarded his search.

At length, as a last resort, he reluctantly shouted for May Ellen.

She came, a drab woman—thin-haired, hollow-chested with a wiry, hipless figure and protruding teeth.

"Wal, sir?"

"May Ellen, who's been explorin' this secretary of mine? Some of the things that oughter be in it, ain't," blustered he.

"What things?"

The woman's eye was faded, but it held a quality that warned the sheriff she was not, perhaps, as spiritless as she looked.

"Oh—oh, just some little things I was huntin' for," he amended, adopting a more conciliatory tone.

"If I knew what they was, I could tell you better where they might be lurkin'."

Alas, there was no help for it!

"I'm lookin' for my handcuffs an' sheriff's badge," answered Elisha.

"There ain't been a crime? You ain't goin' to arrest somebody?"

"I ain't at liberty to answer that question just now," replied Elisha with importance.

"Mercy on us! You don't tell me a crime's been committed in Wilton! I guess it's the first time in all the town's history. Won't folks be agog? It'll stir up the whole community."

The sentiment held for Elisha a vaguely familiar ring. As he speculated why, he recalled with dismay that it was he himself who, not a week ago, had brazenly willed the very calamity that had now befallen the village.

To be sure, he spoke in jest. Still it behooved a man to be careful what he wished for. Providence sometimes took folks at their word and answered prayers—even idle ones.

"You mustn't peep about this outside, May Ellen," he cautioned. "Was you to, no end of harm might be done. The criminal, you see, is still at large an' we want to trap him 'fore he suspects we're after him."

"I see," replied the woman with an understanding nod. "I won't breathe a breath of it to a soul. But while we're mentionin' it, I would dearly like to know who the wretch is."

"That's a secret of the law. I ain't free to publish it. You shall be told it, though, soon's the arrest is made. Now 'bout the badge an' handcuffs. You see how important 'tis I should have 'em. They was in the drawer an' they'd oughter be there now. Instead, the whole place is messed up an' sticky as if some person who had no business meddlin' had overhauled it."

He saw May Ellen's faded eyes dilate with sudden terror.

"It's that miserable Tommy Cahoon!" interrupted she. "His mother left him an' Willie here with me a week ago when she went to Sawyer Falls shoppin'. I saw 'em playin' policeman out in the back yard, an' noticed one of 'em was wearin' a badge, but I thought nothin' of it, supposin' they'd brought it with 'em. The little monkeys must 'a' sneaked indoors when I wasn't lookin' an' took that an' the handcuffs. I'm dretful sorry. Still, boys will be boys, I reckon," concluded she with a deprecatory smile and a shrug of her angular shoulders.

"But—but—good Heavens—" sputtered Elisha.

"I'm sure we can find the missin' articles, unless the children took 'em home—which I doubt," went on the woman serenely. "Last I saw of the imps they was out yonder under the apple trees. S'pose we have a look there."

Almost beside himself with an indignation he dared not voice, Elisha followed

May Ellen out of doors.

Yes, trampled into the sodden ground lay the badge—its gleaming metal surface defaced by mud, and its fastening broken. There, too, lay the handcuffs, tightly snapped together and without a trace of a key to unlock them.

Elisha, livid with rage, opened his lips prepared to consign to the lower regions not only Tommy and Willie Cahoon, but their mother and May Ellen as well.

Before he could get the words out of his mouth, however, the suave voice of his housekeeper fell gently on his ear.

"Course you can't lay this mishap up against me, Elisha," she was saying. "I ain't no more responsible for the children's thievin' than you are for the crime of the criminal you're preparin' to arrest. The actions of others are beyond our control. All we can do is to live moral lives ourselves."

"But—but—"

"If you do feel I'm to blame, you'll just have to get somebody else to do your work. I wouldn't stay in no situation an' be regarded as—"

"I ain't blamin' you a mite, May Ellen," Elisha hurriedly broke in, panic-stricken lest his domestic tranquillity trembling so delicately on the brink of cataclysm topple into the void and be swallowed up. "As you say, the doin's of others are somethin' we can't take on our shoulders. Thank you for helpin' me hunt up these things."

As he spoke, he dubiously eyed the muddy objects in his hand. Well, at least, thought he, everything was not lost. He had gained time.

To wear his badge until a new pin was soddered to it was out of the question. In addition, the handcuffs were of no use at all unless a key could be found to unlock them.

He felt like a doomed man who had been granted an unlooked-for reprieve.

Eleazer would be nettled.

When he came steaming back with the revolver he would storm and rage like a bluefish in a net.

Nevertheless, accidents were unavoidable and in the meantime, while the emblems of the law were being repaired, who could tell what might happen?

Stanley Heath might escape and take the jewels with him—escape to some other part of the world and pass on to a larger and more competent party of criminal investigators the unenviable task of arresting him.

Elisha was quite willing to forego the honor.

No longer did he desire to see his picture emblazoned on the front pages of the papers or behold his name in print. If he could shrink back into being merely a humble, insignificant citizen of Cape Cod, it was all he asked.

As he turned to reënter the house, Eleazer hailed him.

"I've had the devil of a time with this revolver," announced he, puffing into the yard and jauntily flourishing the weapon.

"Take care, Eleazer! Don't you go pointin' that thing at me!" Elisha yelled.

"I ain't pointin' it at you. Even if I was, there'd be no chance of it hurtin' you. 'Tain't loaded."

"That's the kind that always goes off," the sheriff insisted. "For Heaven's sake, wheel it the other way, can't you? Or else aim it at the ground."

"Wal, since you're so 'fraid of it, I will. But for all that, there ain't an atom of danger." Then regarding his comrade's greenish countenance, he remarked abruptly, "Say, what's the matter with you, 'Lish? You ain't got on your other suit, nor your badge, nor nothin'. What in thunder have you been doin' all this time? I've been gone 'most an hour."

Elisha told his story.

"Wal, if that ain't the ole Harry!" fumed Eleazer. "That's goin' to ball us all up. There's no use doin' this thing if it ain't done in bang-up style. We don't want a lot of city cops jeerin' at us. We got to get that badge soddered an' them handcuffs unlocked 'fore another move can be made. I s'pose mebbe Nate Harlow over to Belleport could help us out."

"An' go blabbin' all over town the predicament the Wilton sheriff was in? No—sir—ee! Not if I know it. I wouldn't turn to a Belleport man for aid was the criminal to rush from hidin' an' go free. The only thing to do is to motor to Sawyer Falls an' hunt up Pete McGrath, the blacksmith. He's a wizard with tools. I never knew no job to stump him yet. He'll know what to do. The notion of goin' over there ain't such a bad one, neither, 'cause Artie Nickerson, the station-master's, got a relation on the Chicago police force an' had oughter be able to give us a few pointers 'bout how folks is arrested."

Accordingly the two men set forth on their errand.

As the shabby Ford rattled over the sandy thoroughfare, Elisha's strained countenance began gradually to relax.

"Nice day for a ride," remarked he glancing toward the sea. "Fine weather's certainly on the way. Air's mild as summer. 'Fore long we'll be havin' days worth noticin'."

"So we will. April's 'bout over an' May'll be on us 'fore we know it. Then June'll come—the month of brides an' roses."

The allusion was an unfortunate one.

Elisha stiffened in his seat.

Amid the whirlwind happenings of the day, he had forgotten that the man at his elbow was his rival.

"You plannin' to wed in June, Eleazer?" asked he disagreeably.

"That's my present intention."

"It's mine, too," said Elisha.

"Humph! Expectin' to live at the Homestead?"

Elisha nodded.

"So'm I," grinned Eleazer.

"Hope you'll invite me over, now and then," Elisha drawled sarcastically.

"Hope you'll do the same," came from Eleazer.

For an interval they rode on in uncomfortable silence.

"Them boats is pretty heavy loaded," Eleazer presently volunteered, gazing off towards the horizon where a string of dull red coal barges trailed along in the wake of a blackened tug.

"Makin' for New York, I reckon," Elisha responded, thawing a little.

"Wouldn't be s'prised if that Heath chap came from New York," ruminated Eleazer.

"Confound Heath! I wish I'd never laid eyes on him!" exploded Elisha.

"Oh, I dunno as I'd go so fur as to say that," came mildly from his companion. "Ain't Heath's comin' goin' to put Wilton on the map? Bad's he is, we've got him to thank for that. With him safely handed over to the authorities, our fortune's made. What you plannin' to do with your half of the reward?"

Here was a delightful topic for conversation!

Elisha's eyes brightened.

"I ain't decided yet," smiled he.

"Wonder how much 'twill be? Oughter come to quite a sum, considerin' the risk one takes to get it."

Elisha's newly captured good-humor vanished. Lapsing into moody silence, he did not speak again until the white spire of the Sawyer Falls church appeared and, rounding the bend of the road, the car rolled into the town.

Compared to the villages of Wilton or Belleport, this railroad terminus was

quite a metropolis. It boasted two dry-goods stores, an A & P, a drug store, a coal office, a hardware shop, and a grain shed. Around its shabby station clustered a group of motor cars, a truck or two, and the usual knot of loitering men and boys.

In spite of his depression, Elisha's spirits took another upward turn.

It was interesting to see something different, something more bustling and novel than his home town.

"S'pose we drop in an' get a moxie," he suggested.

"'Twould go kinder good. I want to buy a roll of lozengers, too, an' some cough drops now I'm here."

"Come ahead."

"Don't you s'pose we'd oughter go to the smithy first an' leave the badge? It may take some little time to get it mended," Eleazer said.

The badge!

Would the man never cease dangling before his vision the wretched memories Elisha was struggling so valiantly to forget?

With an ungracious, wordless grunt, he grudgingly turned the nose of the car toward the railroad.

The small shed where the forge stood was close by the tracks and as he pulled up before it, he espied through its doorway not only Peter McGrath, the blacksmith, but also the rotund figure of Artie Nickerson, the Sawyer Falls station agent.

"Art's inside! Ain't that luck?" he remarked, clambering out of the car. "The station must be closed an' he's come across the road to neighbor with Pete."

They went in and after the usual greetings, Elisha stated his errand.

McGrath took the handcuffs and badge to the light and examined them.

"Humph! Looks as if you'd been in some sort of a scrimmage," he commented.

"I ain't. Things get weared out in time. The pin on that badge warn't never right. 'Twouldn't clasp. As for the handcuffs, I reckon they're O.K. 'cept for the key bein' gone. Think you can make me one?"

"Sure. That ain't no trick at all. I can hammer you out a skeleton key which, though 'twon't take no prize as to beauty, will do what you want it to. I can sodder some sort of a pin an' catch on the badge, too. S'pose you ain't in no 'special hurry for 'em. There don't 'pear to be a cryin' need round here for such articles," he concluded with a chuckle.

"Nevertheless, I would like 'em," Elisha demurred. "You see I'm plannin' to take 'em back with me. I don't often get over here an' you never can tell these days when such things may be wanted."

"Just as you say. I'll start on 'em straight away. I ain't busy on nothin' that can't be put aside."

Elisha strolled over to a box and sat down to wait.

"How are you, Art?" he inquired.

"Tol'able. Havin' some rheumatism, though. Reckon we've all got to expect aches an' pains at our age."

"That's right. Speakin' of handcuffs an' badges, didn't you have a nephew or a cousin 'sociated with a police force somewheres?"

"Bennie, you mean? Oh, yes. He's a policeman out in Chicago."

"How's he gettin' on?"

"Fine! Fine! Just now he's laid up in the hospital, but he 'spects to be out again 'fore long. Got shot through the arm a couple of weeks ago."

"You don't say? Huntin'?" Elisha queried pleasantly.

"Huntin'? Mercy, no! He got winged by a stray bullet while chasin' up a guy that had broke into a store. The shrimp hit him. Luckily he didn't kill him. Ben thought he got off pretty easy."

Elisha's smile faded.

"These fellers that's at large now don't give a hang who they murder," went on the station agent affably. "They're a desperate crew. They'd as soon kill you as not. Bennie landed his man, though, 'spite of bein' hurt. 'Twill, most likely, mean a promotion for him. He'd oughter be promoted, too, for he's done great work on the force. Been shot three or four times while on duty. 'Tain't a callin' I myself would choose, but he seems to get a big kick out of it."

Elisha, pale to the lips, suddenly decided he had heard enough of Bennie and shifted the subject.

"S'pose you're still goin' round in the same ole treadmill over at the station, Art," he observed.

"Yep. Same ole rut. Two trains a day as usual. I've had, though, a bit more telegraphin' to do of late than formerly. It's all come from your part of the world, too. Know a feller over to Wilton named Heath? He's sent off several wires."

Both Elisha, perched on the box, and Eleazer astride a keg straightened up.

"Heath? Yes, indeed. He's stoppin' in town for a while."

"So I gathered. Lives in New York at one of them big hotels."

"Who told you that?" Eleazer demanded.

"He sent a wire to his wife. Leastways, I figger 'twas his wife. He signed himself *Lovingly, Stanley*, an' addressed it to Mrs. Stanley Heath."

"You don't say! That's news to me," Elisha cried. He darted a glance at Eleazer.

Artie, gratified at seeing he had created a sensation, beamed broadly.

"Course I ain't permitted to divulge messages that go through my hands. They're confidential. But for that I could tell you somethin' that would make your eyes pop outer their sockets."

"Somethin' about Heath?"

"Somethin' he said in a telegram."

"You might give us a hint," Eleazer suggested.

"I couldn't. Was I to, I might lose my job."

"Oh, I ain't askin' you to repeat no private wire."

"I couldn't even if you did."

Emphatically Artie shook his head.

Then Elisha had an inspiration.

"S'pose I was to ask you officially?" he suggested. "S'pose it's important for me to know what was in that message? S'pose I demanded you tell me in the name of the law?"

"Shucks, 'Lish. You don't get round me that way," the station agent laughed.

"I ain't attemptin' to get round you. I'm askin' you seriously as sheriff of the town of Wilton."

"Are you in earnest? What do you want to know for?" Artie asked.

"Never you mind. That's my business. I've a right to the information."

"Oh, that's different. Still, I reckon it's as well I shouldn't repeat what Heath said word for word. 'Twouldn't interest you, anyhow. The wire was just sent to a friend. The part that astonished me was its beginnin'. It ran somethin' like this:

"Safe on Cape with my lady. Shall return with her later."

Simultaneously Elisha shot up from the box on which he was sitting and Eleazer sprang from the keg of nails.

"What interested me," droned on Artie, "was who this lady could be. Heath, apparently, is a married man. What business has he taggin' after some Wilton woman an' totin' her back to New York with him when he goes?"

"He ain't got no business doin' it," Eleazer shouted. "He's a blackguard—that's

what he is! But don't you worry, Artie. He ain't goin' to put no such scurvy trick over on any Wilton woman. Me an' 'Lish'll see to that. We're onto him an' his doin's, we are. How much more tinkerin' have you got to do on them trinkets, Pete? The sheriff an' me is in a hurry to get home."

"You'll have to give me a good half hour more."

"The deuce we will!"

"Can't do it in less."

"That'll mean we won't fetch up at Wilton 'til after dark," Eleazer fretted.

"Sorry. I'm workin' at top speed. I can't go no faster. You've set me quite a chore."

"There's no use goin' up in the air an' rilin' Pete all up, Eleazer," Elisha intervened. "We'll just have to be patient an' put off what we was plannin' to do until tomorrow. I reckon mornin'll be a better time, anyway. Certainly 'twill do just as well."

"Mebbe," Eleazer grumbled. "Still, I'm disappointed. Wal, that bein' the case, s'pose you an' me step over to the drug store while we're hangin' round an' do them errands we mentioned."

Elisha agreed.

A faint flush had crept back into his cheeks and his eyes had regained their light of hope.

Chance was on his side.

He had wrested from Fate another twelve hours of life, and life was sweet.



Chapter XIII

DAWN was breaking over Wilton and the first shafts of sunlight transforming its pearly sands into sparkling splendor and its sea into spangled gold, when a trim motor car, bearing a New York number plate, slipped quietly into the village and drew up at the town garage.

From it stepped a man, small and somewhat bent, with rosy cheeks, kindly brown eyes, a countenance schooled to stolidity rather than naturally so, and hair touched with grey.

"May I leave my car here?" he inquired of the lad who was sweeping out the building.

"Sure!"

"Fill her up for me, please. And you might clean her a bit. Some of the roads were pretty soft."

"They always are at this season of the year, sir. You are astir early. I thought I was, but I reckon you've beaten me. Come far?"

"New York."

"Been riding all night?"

The stranger nodded.

"I like traveling at night," he volunteered. "Less traffic. Can you tell me where a Mr. Heath is staying?"

"Heath? The chap who ran aground on the Crocker Cove sand bar?"

"He came in a boat," replied the other cautiously.

"Then he's your party. He's over to The Widder's."

"The Widow's?"

"U—h—aah."

"Where's that?"

"New round here, ain't you? If you warn't, you wouldn't be askin' that question. The Widder lives out yonder at the Homestead."

"How does one get there?"

"Wal, there are several ways. When the tide's low, folks walk. It's even possible to motor round by the shore if you've a light car. The quickest way, though, an' the only way to reach the house when the tide's full, as 'tis now, is to

row."

Although the keen eyes of his listener narrowed, they expressed no surprise. Apparently he was accustomed to obstacles, and the surmounting of them was all in the day's work.

"Where'll I find a boat?"

"That I couldn't say. The Widder keeps hers t'other side of the channel. Mebbe, though, if you was to go down to the beach some fisherman would give you a lift across. 'Most any of 'em would admire to if you're a friend of Marcia Howe's."

The stranger bowed but offered no comment. If curiosity stirred within him concerning the information the lad vouchsafed, at least he gave no sign.

"Thank you," he replied briefly. "You'll see the car is put in good shape?"

"The very best."

"Much obliged. Will this road take me to the beach?"

"Straight as an arrow. Pity you have to tote that suit-case."

"I'm used to carrying luggage. It never bothers me. Good morning."

Without wasting additional words or time, the stranger nodded and started off briskly in the direction indicated. Nevertheless, swiftly as he moved, his eyes missed none of the panorama stretched before him.

The swelling expanse of sea, rising and falling to the rhythm of its own whispered music, caught his ear; he noted the circling gulls that dipped to the crests of the incoming waves or drifted in snowy serenity upon the tide; saw the opalescent flash of the mica-studded sands. Twice he stopped to fill his lungs with the fresh morning air, breathing deeply as if such crystalline draughts were an infrequent and appreciated luxury.

When he reached the beach he halted, glancing up and down its solitary crescent and scanning eagerly the silvered house beyond the channel. Discovering no one in sight, he dragged from the shore a yellow dory, clambered into it, and catching up the oars began to row toward the dwelling silhouetted against the water and the glory of the morning sky.

In the meantime, both Marcia and Sylvia had wakened early and were astir.

The kitchen fire was already snapping merrily in the stove, however, and the table was spread before the latter made her appearance.

She came in, sweater and beret in hand, and carrying a thick envelope with its

dashingly scrawled address still wet.

"Why, Sylvia, how you startled me!" Marcia exclaimed. "I did not hear you come down stairs. Why are you up so early?"

"I'm going to town to catch the morning mail."

"The mail? But, my dear child, why such haste?"

Sylvia colored.

"I have to get off this letter."

"Have to?"

"Yes—to Hortie. You see, if I didn't answer promptly he might think the candy had gone astray," explained the girl stepping to the mirror and arranging a curl that rippled distractingly above her forehead.

"Oh, of course, you must thank him for the candy," Marcia agreed. "Still, is it necessary to do so in such a rush—to walk to the village this morning?"

"I mean to row over."

"I'm afraid you can't, dear. I discovered last night the boat was gone. Eleazer Crocker must have appropriated it when he was here yesterday."

"How horrid of him! What earthly right had he to take it?"

"None at all."

"Didn't he ask if he might?"

"No. To tell the truth, I went to find a book for him and was gone so long he apparently became either peeved or impatient at my delay and like a silly small boy went home mad, taking the boat with him—at least that's my version of the story."

"Perhaps he did it to punish you."

"Perhaps. Anyway, whether he took it as a joke or as a reprisal, I shall give him a good lecture when I see him. It is a serious thing to be left out here with no way of getting to land. We might have needed the dory sorely. In fact, here we are with this tremendously important letter that must be posted immediately—willy-nilly."

With eyes brimming with laughter, Marcia shot a mischievous glance at her companion.

"It isn't just to thank Hortie for the candy that I'm writing," that young lady replied sedately. "You see, he asked if he might come to Wilton for his summer vacation. He has to know so he can make his plans."

"But it is only the last of April, beloved."

"Men need to know such things well in advance. They have to adjust their business," returned Sylvia magnificently.

"I see," smiled Marcia. "Under such conditions, I suppose the sooner the letter is sent the better."

She did not say precisely what conditions were in her mind, but evidently the comment mollified Sylvia who, after wriggling her mop of curls through the neck of her blue sweater, tossed beret and letter into a chair and began, in high spirits, to help with the breakfast.

Yet notwithstanding she did so graciously, it was quite obvious her eyes were on the clock and that she was fidgeting to be off; so as soon as the coffee and toast were ready, Marcia begged her not to delay.

The girl needed no urging.

"The sooner I start, the sooner I shall be back, I suppose," she answered with feigned reluctance. "Men are so unreasonable. It's a perfect nuisance to trot to Wilton with this letter at this hour of the morning, especially if I must go the long way round. Still, there's no other way to get it there. Any errands?"

"Not today, thanks. Just the mail."

"I'll wait for it."

The eagerness betrayed by the reply left not the slightest doubt that Sylvia would wait, and gladly.

As the door closed behind her, Marcia smiled whimsically.

She continued to smile, even to hum softly to herself while she prepared Heath's breakfast tray, and she was just about to take it upstairs when there was a gentle knock at the kitchen door.

A stranger stood upon the threshold.

"Is Mr. Stanley Heath staying here?" inquired he.

"Yes."

"I am Currier. Mr. Heath sent for me."

"Of course! Come in, won't you? Mr. Heath is expecting you. I'll tell him you are here."

"You needn't do that, madam. Mr. Heath is quite accustomed to my coming to his room at all hours. If you will just show me where he is—"

"At the head of the stairs."

"Very good. Thank you, madam. I will go up."

"Tell him I am bringing his breakfast very soon."

"I will, madam."

"Have you breakfasted yourself?"

"I? No, madam. But I beg you will not—"

"I'll bring coffee and toast enough for both of you."

"Please—"

"It is no trouble."

"I will come back and fetch Mr. Heath's breakfast, madam. Afterward, if I may have a snack here in the kitchen, I shall be grateful."

"Any way that you prefer."

Marcia saw rather than heard the stranger mount the staircase.

His step was like velvet. So noiseless was it, it made not a sound either on the broad creaking staircase, or on the floor overhead.

Nevertheless, he must have entered Stanley Heath's room, for soon she detected the invalid's voice, imperative and eager, each sentence ending with an interrogation. The lapses of silence which intervened and which at first she took to be pauses, she presently decided represented the inaudible and subdued replies of Currier.

To judge from the sounds, Heath was pouring out an avalanche of questions.

Sometimes he choked as if words came faster than he could utter them; and once he broke into peals of hearty laughter, followed by a paroxysm of coughing.

Still, Currier failed to return for the waiting tray.

"He has forgotten all about it," murmured Marcia. "The coffee will be stone cold and the toast ruined. I'll carry them up myself."

She mounted the stairs softly that her coming might break in as little as possible upon the conversation of her two guests.

"She was alone in the library when I went in," Heath was saying, "and turned so white I feared she might faint or scream. Luckily she did neither. Steadying herself against the table, she faced me.

"'You know what I'm after,' I said—'the jewels.'"

"She hedged a moment.

"'What makes you think I have them?'"

"'I know. Come, hand them over.'"

"At that, she began to cry.

"'Quickly,' I repeated. 'Someone may come.'"

"With that, she fumbled under her skirt and produced the jewel-case, pouring out a torrent of explanations.

"I stopped no longer than I had to, I assure you. With the jewels in my hand, I slipped through the French window and made for the landing where I had left the boat. In no time I had made my get-away. Every detail of my plan would have gone smoothly but for the fog. I lost my bearings completely. Imagine my amazement at finding myself here."

Marcia waited to hear no more.

Her knees trembled beneath her.

So Heath really had taken the jewels—taken them from the resisting woman who owned them—taken them against her will and made off with them!

He owned it!

Nay, more! Far from regretting what he had done, in his tone rang a note of satisfaction in his accomplishment.

She had never believed him guilty.

Even with the gems spread out before her and every evidence of crime apparent, she had not believed it.

Not until she heard the bitter, irrevocable confession from his own lips did she waver, and even then she battled against the truth, refusing to be convinced. There must be some explanation, she told herself. Nevertheless, the shock of what she had learned was overwhelming.

It seemed as if every ounce of strength left her body. Her head swam. Her heart beat wildly.

"I must not give way!" she reiterated to herself. "I must put on a brave front. He must not suspect I know."

It took a few moments for her to regain her grip on herself, to quiet her throbbing heart, to drag back her ebbing strength.

Then she knocked at the door.

"Here is your coffee, Mr. Heath," she called.

She hoped his friend would open the door and relieve her of the tray that she might immediately withdraw, but instead, Heath himself responded:

"Come in, Mrs. Howe. I'm afraid we've delayed you. I had entirely forgotten about breakfast and so, I'll be bound, had Currier. You met my right-hand man down stairs, I take it. By traveling all night, he made very good time."

"He must be tired after his trip!"

"Oh, Currier is used to traveling at all hours. Night or day are both alike to

him," laughed Heath.

"You found the house without trouble?" Marcia inquired, making an effort to address the newcomer in a natural, off-hand manner.

"Yes, Mrs. Howe. A young man at the garage directed me to the beach and there I discovered a yellow dory which I appropriated. I don't know as I should have taken it, but as I needed a boat, I pressed it into service."

"The boat happens to be mine."

"Indeed. Then perhaps you will pardon my using it."

"Certainly. In fact, I am glad you did. It was left on the mainland by mistake."

As Marcia turned to go, her unfailing courtesy prompted her to add:

"Mr. Currier is welcome to stay if he wishes to, Mr. Heath. We can put him up perfectly well."

"Oh, no. He is returning directly. It seems wiser for him to go back in the boat and leave the car for me to use here. Nevertheless, I greatly appreciate your kindness."

"Mrs. Heath is anxious," put in Currier. "She begged me to come home as soon as possible that she might know how Mr. Heath was. Naturally she has been much worried."

"There, there, Currier—that will do," broke in Stanley Heath, flushing. "And now, since Mrs. Howe is here and is in our secret, I may as well break to you something I have not yet had the chance to tell you. Part of the mission on which you came cannot be accomplished. You cannot take the gems back with you to New York. A calamity has befallen them."

"A calamity, sir?"

The small, grey-haired man looked from Stanley Heath to Marcia, and for the first time, his imperturbable countenance betrayed mingled amazement and distress. Presently, however, he had it under control and as if he had donned a mask, it became as expressionless as the sphinx while he waited for the rest of the story.

"Mrs. Howe helped me conceal the jewels downstairs in a hiding-place under the kitchen floor," continued Stanley Heath. "When she went to get them, they were gone."

"You don't tell me so, sir!"

"It is all very mysterious," broke in Marcia, taking up the tale. "I cannot in any way account for their disappearance and am much distressed."

"Naturally so, madam—naturally so," responded Currier politely. "And you

have searched the place carefully? Sometimes such things get misplaced."

"I've looked everywhere. They are not there."

"Have you any theory as to who could have taken them?" inquired Currier with more animation than he had up to the moment displayed.

"Absolutely none. I cannot even see how anybody had the chance to take them. No one knew they were there."

"Would you be willing to show me where they were hidden and allow me to investigate?"

"Certainly. I fear, however, search will be useless."

"Still I should like to look."

"I'll take you downstairs then, while we have the opportunity. You must have something to eat, too, for you must be hungry after your long ride."

"I could do with a cup of coffee, if convenient."

"You shall have more than that—a hearty breakfast. I am sure you need it. When do you start back?"

"That is for Mr. Heath to decide."

"Right off. As soon as you can get under way," Stanley Heath said decisively. "It is a fine day and you had better make the most of the tide."

"That certainly would be wise, sir."

"Go down now with Mrs. Howe, since she is so gracious, and have your breakfast. Examine, too, the place where we concealed the jewel-case. You may discover a clue she has missed."

"That is extremely unlikely, I fear, sir," was the man's modest answer. "Still, I will look."

"I am sick at heart about all this," Marcia murmured as the two descended the stairs. "You see, it was I who suggested to Mr. Heath where to hide the gems. We were hurried and had no time to think up a place. I had used this hide-out before and as it had always proved safe, I thought it would be so now. I feel responsible—as if this loss was my fault."

"It is a great pity," was Currier's ambiguous reply.

Preceding him into the kitchen, Marcia went straight to the hearth and pointed to the brick at her feet.

"It was here we put the jewel-case," she said.

"I think, with your permission, I will take up the brick," the little man at her elbow quietly announced.

"Certainly," acquiesced Marcia wearily.

"There might be some crevice, some opening—"

"I fear there isn't. Still you can try."

Taking out his knife, Currier knelt and soon had the brick out of its hole.

Beneath it lay the jewel-case, wrapped as before in Stanley Heath's monogrammed handkerchief.

Marcia could not believe her eyes.

"But—but—it wasn't there when I looked. I could swear it wasn't."

"Who could have taken it out? And if someone did why return anything so valuable?" Currier inquired.

"I don't know. I do not understand it at all," the woman replied, passing a hand across her forehead in complete bewilderment. "There is something uncanny about the whole affair."

"Well, at any rate, the gems are here now," said Currier in a matter-of-fact tone. "Mr. Heath will be much relieved. Their loss must, I am sure, have distressed him deeply. Shall I go up and—"

"I'll go," Marcia cried. "It won't take me a minute. I'll be right back."

"As you prefer, madam."

Off flew Marcia.

Her haste, the radiance of her face must have suggested to the stranger a thought that had not occurred to him before, for after she had gone, he stood immovable in the middle of the floor looking after her.

Then a slow, shadowy smile passed across his features.

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he took two or three meditative strides up and down the room.

"So—ho!" he muttered. "So—ho!"

It happened he had quite an opportunity for thought before his hostess returned and he employed it to the utmost.

He was still absorbed in reverie when Marcia, breathless and flushed, rejoined him.

She made no apology for her absence.

Perhaps she did not realize the length of time she had been gone.

"Well," queried she, "what conclusion have you arrived at?"

"A very interesting one," Currier returned promptly.

"Really? What is it?"

The man appeared taken aback.

"I misunderstood your question," he faltered. "I had something else in mind."

"I don't see how you could have. I can think of nothing but the jewels and their recovery. I am so happy I had completely forgotten your breakfast. Forgive me. You shall have it right away."

"If you would allow me, I can prepare it myself. I am accustomed to doing such things."

"No, indeed. Scrambled eggs take only a few moments; and bacon. You might run up to see Mr. Heath while I am getting them ready."

"I will do that. I shall be leaving at once and he may have final orders for me, or perhaps a letter for Mrs. Heath."

"Mrs. Heath!" Marcia repeated, as if the name suddenly brought before her consciousness something hitherto forgotten. "Yes, yes! Of course!"

Then turning her head aside, she inquired with studied carelessness:

"How long, I wonder, does Mr. Heath plan to remain in Wilton?"

"I could not say, madam."

"I think," hurried on the woman, "that as soon as he is able to make the journey he would better go home. This climate is—is—damp and he will, perhaps, pick up faster away from the sea. If you have any influence with him, won't you please advise it?"

The man's small, grey eyes narrowed.

"I have no influence with Mr. Heath," replied he. "Mrs. Heath has, however. Shall I tell her?"

"I wish you would."

An hour later *My Unknown Lady* weighed anchor and on the breast of the high tide, rounded the Point and disappeared out to sea, carrying with her Currier and the jewels.

Marcia watched until the last snowy ripple foaming in her wake had disappeared. When the infinitesimal, bobbing craft was no longer visible, she sank into a chair and brushed her hand across her eyes.

The lips which but a short time before had curled into smiles were now set and determined.

"And that's the end of that foolishness!" she muttered. "The end!"



Chapter XIV

IN spite of Elisha's indignation toward Stanley Heath, and his resolve to go to the Homestead with the break of dawn, it was noon before he and Eleazer got under way.

In the first place, the two men disagreed as to the proper method of arresting the alleged criminal.

"You can't take him on no warrant, 'Lish," Eleazer objected, "'cause you ain't actually got proof he's guilty."

"Proof? Ain't I got a clear case? Ain't I roundin' him up with the loot on him?" blustered Elisha.

"Mebbe. Still, it's my opinion you can't do more'n take him on suspicion."

"Suspicion!" Elisha repeated scornfully. "Suspicion! Would you call a fistful of diamonds suspicion? I wouldn't."

"P'raps—p'raps you didn't really see the jewels," Eleazer quavered. "Sometimes folks get to imaginin' things—seein' what ain't there. Are you plumb certain you saw them things?"

"Certain?"

"Come, come! Don't go up in the air, 'Lish. I ain't doubtin' your word. Nothin' of the sort. I just want to make sure we don't take no missteps an' make jackasses of ourselves," Eleazer explained. "This is a big affair. We've got to move careful."

"Humph! You're shifty as the sands. You didn't talk like this yesterday."

"No, I didn't. But after sleepin' on the matter, I've thought more 'bout it."

"Sleepin' on it! You were lucky if you could sleep on it. I didn't. I never closed my eyes from the time I went to bed 'till mornin'. Heard the clock strike every hour. You can't 'cuse me of not thinkin'. I'll bet I've done full as much thinkin' as you—mebbe more. Had you the prospect of bein' shot ahead of you, you'd think—think pretty hard, I figger," Elisha growled.

"No doubt I would," conceded Eleazer mildly. "Wal, 'long's we've both chewed the matter over, I reckon there's nothin' more to be done now but go ahead."

"Take Heath on suspicion, you mean? Humph! Seems an awful cheap sort of way to do it, in my opinion. Kinder meechin'. There ain't no dignity to it."

"What's the use of standin' here bickerin' half the mornin', 'Lish?" Eleazer said fretfully. "Let's get started. Next we know Heath may get wind of what we're up to an' light out."

"No danger of that with the Homestead dory on this side of the channel," Elisha sniffed.

"For all that, no purpose is served by puttin' off the evil hour. I say we get under way," Eleazer urged. "Have you got everythin'?"

"I—I—guess so," Elisha said weakly.

"Pete fixed up your badge in great shape, didn't he?" was Eleazer's cheerful comment. "It's bright as a new dollar. Anybody could see it a mile away."

Elisha offered no reply.

"An' the handcuffs, too—they look grand. Why don't you kinder dangle 'em so'st they show? Why stuff 'em in your pocket? Was I in your place, I'd stalk into the Homestead with the handcuffs in one hand an' the pistol in the other."

"You ain't in my place!" Elisha snapped. "I wish to heaven you were."

"No, I ain't," his confederate returned promptly. "I'm only playin' second fiddle on this job. The whole responsibility's yours."

"Don't I know it? Why rub it in?"

"I ain't rubbin' it in. I'm just sorter cautionin' myself. You see when I'm mixed up in a job, I get so interested I'm liable to forget an' go ahead as if the whole enterprise was my own."

"You're welcome to shoulder this one if you want to. I give you permission," Elisha said eagerly.

"Oh, I wouldn't think of doin' that, 'Lish. I wouldn't want to steal the glory from you. You're the big shot on this occasion," cajoled Eleazer. "Wal, what do you say to our settin' out?"

Elisha did not move.

"Don't it 'most seem as if we'd oughter eat somethin' 'fore we go? I might turn faint doin' arrestin' on an empty stomach."

"But man alive, you et your breakfast, didn't you?"

"That was some little while ago," argued Elisha. "I'm feelin' a wee mite gone a'ready. I'd oughter have a lunch or somethin'."

"Wal, since you mention it, I could do with a couple of doughnuts an' slab of cheese myself," Eleazer confessed.

This information delighted Elisha.

"We might put off goin' 'til after dinner," he suggested. "Then we'd be primed by a good square meal an' be braced for it."

"Oh, we can't wait that long," his comrade immediately objected.

"N—o, I s'pose we can't. Wal, anyhow, I'll go hunt up a snack of somethin'."

"Don't bring nothin' but doughnuts an' cheese," Eleazer bellowed after him. "We can munch on them while walkin' to the beach."

The stroll to Crocker's Cove was not a hilarious one, even May Ellen's twisted crullers failing to stimulate Elisha's rapidly ebbing strength. With each successive step his spirits dropped lower and lower.

"You walk like as if you was chief mourner at your own funeral, 'Lish," Eleazer fretted. "We'll never make the Cove if you don't brace up."

"My shoes kinder pinch me."

"Walk on your toes."

"It's my toes that hurt."

"Walk on your heels then. Walk anywhere that's most comfortable, only come along."

"I am comin'."

"At a snail's pace," Eleazer retorted. "Soon folks will be comin' from the noon mail an' what we're doin' will get noised abroad."

Reluctantly Elisha quickened his steps.

At last they came within sight of the bay.

"Where'd you leave the boat?" Eleazer questioned.

"I pulled her up opposite the fish-shanty."

"She ain't here."

"Ain't here!"

"No. Look for yourself."

"My soul an' body!"

"I told you you hadn't oughter dally. What's to be done now?"

"I reckon we'll just have to give it all up," the sheriff responded with a sickly grin. "Call it off."

"Call it off? But you can't call it off. Officers of the law have got to do their duty no matter what."

"Yes—yes! Of course. I only meant we'd call it off for the present—for today, p'raps."

"An' let the thief escape? No sir—ee! We've got to go through with this thing now we've started if it takes a leg. We'll walk round by the shore."

"It's too far. My feet would never carry me that distance."

"They've got to. Come along."

"I can't walk in all these clothes. This collar is murderin' me."

"Oh, shut up, 'Lish. Quit whinin'."

"I ain't whinin'. Can't a man make a remark without your snappin' him up, I'd like to know? Who's sheriff anyhow—me or you?"

Eleazer vouchsafed no reply.

In high dudgeon the two men plodded through the sand, its grit seeping into their shoes with every step.

It was not until they came within sight of the Homestead that the silence between them was broken.

"Wal, here we are!" Eleazer announced more genially.

"Yes—here—here we are!" his comrade panted. "S'pose we set down a minute an' ketch our breath. My soul an' body—what a tramp! There's blisters on both my heels. I can hardly rest 'em on the ground."

"You do look sorter winded."

"I'm worse'n winded. I'm near dead! It's this infernal collar. It's most sawed the head off me," groaned Elisha.

"I don't see how it could. Every mite of starch is out of it. It's limp as a pocket handkerchief."

"Mebbe. Still, for all that, it's sand-papered my skin down to the raw. Collars are the devil's own invention. Nobody oughter wear 'em. Nobody oughter be made to wear 'em," raged Elisha. "Had I known when I was made sheriff I'd got to wear a collar, I'd never have took the job—never. 'Twarn't fair play not to tell me. In fact, there was nothin' fair 'bout any of it. This arrestin', now! I warn't justly warned 'bout that."

"Mebbe not," Eleazer agreed. "Still, I don't see's there's anything to be done 'bout all that now. You're sheriff an' your duty lies straight ahead of you. You've got to do it. Come along."

"Wait a minute, Eleazer. Just hold on a second. Let's take 'count of stock an' decide how we're goin' to proceed. We've got to make a plan," pleaded Elisha.

"But we've made a plan a'ready."

"No, we ain't—not a real plan. We've got to decide 'xactly how we'll go 'bout the affair," contradicted his companion. "After you've knocked at the door an'

gone in—"

"I knocked an' gone in?"

"Yes, yes," Elisha repeated. "After that, you'll sorter state the case to Marcia, 'xplainin' why we've come an' everythin'—"

"An' what'll you be doin' meantime?" Eleazer inquired, wheeling sharply.

"Me? Why, I'll be waitin' outside, kinder loiterin' 'til it's time for me to go in— don't you see?"

"I don't. The time for you to go in is straight after the door is opened. It's you that'll enter first an' you who'll do the explainin'."

"But—but—s'pose Heath was to put up a fight an' rush past me?"

"Then I'll be outside to stop him," Eleazer cut in. "That's where I'm goin' to be—outside."

"You promised you'd stand by me," reproached Elisha with an injured air.

"Wal, ain't I? If I stay outside ready to trip up the criminal should he make a dash for freedom, ain't that standin' by you? What more do you want?"

"I think 'twould be better was you to go ahead an' pave the way for me. That's how it's done in plays. Some kinder unimportant person goes first an' afterward the hero comes in."

"So you consider yourself the hero of this show, do you?" commented Eleazer sarcastically.

"Ain't I?"

"Wal, you don't 'pear to me to be. Where'd you 'a' got that pistol but for me? Who egged you on an' marched you here—answer me that? You'd 'a' given up beat hadn't I took you by the scruff of the neck an' hauled you here," Eleazer burst out indignantly. "If you ain't the most ungrateful cuss alive! I've a big half mind to go back home an' leave you to do your arrestin' alone."

"There, there, Eleazer, don't misunderstand me," Elisha implored. "I was only jokin'. 'Course it's you an' not me that's the hero of the day. Don't I know it? That's why I was sayin' 'twas you should go into the house first. In that way you'll get all the attention an'—"

"An' all the bullets!" supplemented Eleazer grimly. "No—sir—ee! You don't pull the wool over my eyes that way, 'Lish Winslow. You're goin' to be the first one inside that door an' the last one out. See? You're to do the arrestin'. If there's undertakin' to be done afterwards, I 'tend to do it. You get that clear in your head. Otherwise, I go home."

"Don't do that, Eleazer, don't do that!" Elisha begged. "Don't go home an'

leave me—now—at the last minute."

"You'll do the knockin' at the door? The announcin' of our errand?"

"Yes. Yes. I swear I will."

"Very well," Eleazer agreed magnificently. "Then I'll remain an' give you my moral support."

"I hope you'll do more'n that," urged Elisha timidly.

"I may. I'll see how matters work out," Eleazer returned pompously.

With lagging feet, the sheriff approached the door of the big grey house.

"There's the dory," observed Eleazer, pointing in the direction of the float. "Somebody's rowed it over."

"I wonder who?"

"P'raps an accomplice has arrived to aid Heath. What's the matter? You ain't sick, are you?"

"I dunno. I feel kinder—kinder queer."

"Indigestion! Them doughnuts most likely. You et 'em in a hurry," was Eleazer's tranquil reply. "Want a soda mint? I most generally carry some in my pocket."

"No. I—I—I think it's my heart."

"Heart—nothin'. It's just plain indigestion—that's what it is. I often have it. Don't think 'bout it an' 'twill go away. Put your mind on somethin' pleasanter—the arrestin' of Heath."

"That ain't pleasanter."

"Wal, think of somethin' that is then. Anything. An' while you're thinkin', be walkin' towards the house. You can think as well walkin' as settin' still, I reckon."

"I don't believe I can."

"Wal, try it, anyhow."

Eleazer had a compelling personality. Under the force of his will, Elisha found his own weaker one yielding.

He got up and, dragging one foot after the other, moved toward the house.

"Now knock," commanded the dictator.

Twice the sheriff reached forth his hand, wavered and withdrew it.

"Why don't you knock, man?" Eleazer demanded.

"I'm goin' to."

Tremulously he tapped on the door.

No answer came.

"Knock, I tell you! That ain't knockin'. Give the door a good smart thump so'st folks'll hear it an' be made aware somethin' important's goin' on. I'll show you."

Eleazer gave the door a spirited bang.

"Law, Eleazer! A rap like that would wake the dead," Elisha protested.

"I want it should—or at any rate wake the livin'," Eleazer frowned.

"I hear somebody. Stand by me, Eleazer. Where are you goin'? Come back here, can't you? You promised—"

"I didn't promise to go in first, remember. We had that out an' settled it for good an' all. You was to do that," Eleazer called from his vantage ground round the corner.

"But—but—" Elisha whimpered.

There was no more time for argument.

The door swung open and Marcia stood upon the sill.



Chapter XV

"WHY, Elisha!" exclaimed Marcia. "How you startled me. Come in. You're all dressed up, aren't you? Have you been to a funeral?"

"No. I—we—"

The sheriff cleared his throat.

"Me an' Eleazer—" he began.

"Eleazer? Did he come with you?"

Elisha nodded.

"Where is he?"

"Outside."

"Isn't he coming in?"

"Yes—yes. He's comin' presently."

"Perhaps he doesn't dare," Marcia remarked with spirit. "I don't wonder he hesitates. He ran off with my dory yesterday."

"That warn't Eleazer. That was me."

"You? But I didn't know you were here."

"I was. I took the boat on official business," Elisha explained.

Marcia's laughter, crystalline as a mountain stream, musical as its melody, rippled through the room.

"Official business!" she repeated derisively. "Official business indeed! When, I'd like to know, did Wilton ever have any official business? Don't joke, Elisha. This taking my boat is no joking matter. It is a serious thing to leave me here with no way of getting ashore quickly. I didn't like it at all."

"I'm sorry," apologized the sheriff uncomfortably. "You see, an emergency arose—"

"No emergency is important enough for you to take my boat without asking. Please remember that."

"I will," squeaked the offender, coloring under the reprimand like a chastened schoolboy. "I won't do it again, I promise you."

"All right. You're forgiven this time. Now sit down and tell me the news."

His dignity, his pomposity put to rout Elisha, feeling very small indeed,

backed into the nearest chair.

Instead of making the rafters of the Homestead quake at his presence; instead of humbling Heath, reducing Marcia to trembling admiration, here he sat cowed and apologetic.

It was not at all the sort of entrance he had mapped out. It would not do. He had got a wrong start.

Before Eleazer put in an appearance, he must right himself.

With a preliminary ahem, he hitched forward in the rocking chair.

"You won't mind if I go on with my baking, will you?" Marcia said, bustling toward the stove. "I'm makin' dried apple turnovers. They'll be done in a second and you shall have one."

"I thought I smelled pie crust," Elisha murmured vaguely.

"You thought right."

Kneeling, Marcia opened the door of the oven.

"Isn't that a sight for sore eyes?" inquired she as she drew out a pan of spicy brown pastries and placed them, hot and fragrant, on the table. "Now, I'll get you a plate, fork and some cheese."

"I don't need no fork," Elisha protested. "I can take it in my fingers."

"Oh, you better not do that. It's sticky and you might get a spot on your Sunday clothes."

His Sunday clothes!

Elisha came to himself.

He rose up.

"I oughtn't to be eatin', anyhow," he called after Marcia as she retreated into the pantry. "You see, I come here this mornin' to—"

"I guess a nice hot apple turnover won't go amiss no matter what you came for," interrupted the woman, returning with the plate, fork and cheese.

With deftness she whisked the triangle of flaky pastry onto the plate and extended it toward her guest.

Its warm, insidious perfume was too much for Elisha.

He sat down with the plate in his lap.

He had taken only an introductory mouthful, however, when the door parted a crack and Eleazer crept cautiously through the opening.

For a moment he stood transfixed, viewing the scene with amazement; then he burst out in a torrent of reproach.

"'Lish Winslow, what on earth are you doin'? Here I've been waitin' outside in the wind, ketchin' my death of cold an' worryin' lest you was dead—hearin' neither word nor sign of you—an' you settin' here by the stove rockin' an' eatin' pie! What do you think you come for, anyhow?"

"I know, Eleazer, I know," Elisha stammered, ducking his head before the accusing finger of his colleague. "It may, mebbe, seem queer to you. I just hadn't got round to the business in hand, that's all. I'm comin' to it."

"Comin' to it? You don't look as if you was."

"I am," protested the sheriff, cramming the turnover into his mouth and drawing his hand hurriedly across his lips. "I'm comin' to it in time. Be patient, Eleazer! Be patient, can't you?"

"I've been patient half an hour a'ready an' you ain't, apparently, even made a beginnin'."

"Yes I have, Eleazer. I've made a start. The pie's et. That's done an' over."

"But you had no right to stop an' eat. You had no business eatin' pie, anyhow. Ain't you got indigestion?"

"I—wal, yes. I do recall havin' a qualm or two of dyspepsia," Elisha owned in a conciliatory tone. "That's gone, though. I reckon the fresh air kinder scat it off. I'd clean forgot about it."

"Mebbe you'd clean forgot what you come here to do, too," derided Eleazer.

"No. Oh, no. I didn't forget that. I was just leadin' up to it in a sorter tactful way."

"There ain't no way of bein' tactful when you're arrestin' folks. You've got the thing to do an' you have to go straight to it."

A fork clattered from Marcia's shaking hand to the floor.

"Arresting folks?" she repeated, looking from one man to the other.

"Yes. Since 'Lish is so spineless at his job, I may's well tell you what we come for. He don't 'pear to have no notion of doin' so," Eleazer sneered. "Pretty kind of a sheriff he is! You'd think to see him he was at an afternoon tea."

"You better look out, Eleazer Crocker, how you insult an officer of the law," Elisha bawled angrily. "Say a word more an' I'll hail you into court."

"If you don't land me there faster'n you do Heath I shan't worry," jeered Eleazer.

"Heath? Mr. Heath?" Marcia repeated.

"Yes. We come over here this mornin' to place Mr. Stanley Heath under arrest," Eleazer announced.

The woman caught at the edge of the table.

"Place him under arrest? What for?"

So they knew the truth! In some way they had found it out and the net of the law was closing in.

Her mind worked rapidly. She must gain time—worm out of them how much they know.

"Of what are you accusing Mr. Heath?" she demanded, drawing herself to her full height and unconsciously moving until her back was against the door leading to the stairway.

"Of the Long Island robbery," Eleazer answered.

"You mean to say you think him a thief?"

"We know he's one—leastways Elisha does."

"Don't go foistin' it all on me," snarled Elisha.

"But you do know, don't you? You said you did."

"I—yes! I'm tol'able sure. I have evidence," Elisha replied. "At least I figger I have."

"Shucks, 'Lish!" Eleazer cried. "Where's your backbone? You figger you have! Don't you know it? Ain't you beheld the loot with your own eyes?"

Elisha nodded.

"Then why on earth don't you stand up in your boots an' say so?"

The door opened and Sylvia entered then stopped, arrested on the threshold by the sound of angry voices.

Inquiringly she looked from Marcia to the men, and back again.

No one, however, heeded her presence.

Marcia, with whitened lips but with face grave and determined, remained with her back to the stairway door, her arms stretched across its broad panels, her eyes never leaving Elisha Winslow's. There was something in her face Sylvia had never seen there—a light of battle; a fierceness as of a mother fighting for her child; a puzzling quality to which no name could be given.

Suddenly, as the girl studied her, recognition of this new characteristic flashed upon her understanding.

It was love!

Anger, perhaps terror, had forced Marcia into betraying a secret no other power could have dragged from her.

Sylvia marveled that the men whose gaze was riveted upon her did not also

read her involuntary confession.

Apparently they failed to do so.

"Ain't I said a'ready I had proof? What more do you want me to do, Eleazer?" Elisha fumed.

"What proof have you?" Marcia interposed.

Elisha shifted from one foot to the other.

"I've seen the jewels," he whispered. "They're here—in this room. Don't think I'm blamin' you, Marcia. 'Course Heath bein' what he is, is nothin' against you," he hurried on breathlessly. "We're all aware you wouldn't shelter no criminal did you know he was a criminal; nor would you furnish a hidin' place for his stolen goods. What I'm sayin' is news to you an' a shock. I can see that. Naturally it's hard to find our friends ain't what we thought 'em. When faced with the evidence, though, you'll see the truth same's Eleazer an' me see it.

"Heath, the feller overhead, is the Long Island jewel robber.

"The jewels he stole are under that brick. I've seen 'em."

With finger pointing dramatically toward the hearth, Elisha strode forward.

Sylvia, however, sprang before him, standing 'twixt him and his goal.

"What a ridiculous story, Mr. Winslow!" she cried. "What a fantastic yarn! Do you imagine for one moment there could be anything hidden under those bricks and Marcia and I not know it? Why, one or the other of us has been in this room every instant since Mr. Heath arrived. When could he get the chance to hide anything? Didn't you and Doctor Stetson get here almost as soon as he did? Wasn't it you who undressed him? Had he brought jewels with him you would have found them inside his clothing. You took off every rag he wore. Did you discover any such thing?"

"N—o."

"Well, then, don't you see how absurd such an accusation is? How could the gems get here?"

"I don't know how they got here. All I know is they're here," Elisha repeated stubbornly.

Sylvia's brain was busy.

That Elisha by some means or other had stumbled upon the truth there could be no doubt.

How was she to prevent it if he insisted upon searching as it was obvious he intended to do?

Not only was Marcia ignorant of Heath's true character but also that the jewels

lay concealed close at hand. She would receive an overwhelming shock if the proof of his guilt came upon her in this brutal fashion.

Did she not believe in him? Love him?

It was for Marcia Sylvia was fighting, not Heath—Marcia whom she adored and whom she was determined to save from Elisha's power at any cost.

If after the two meddling officials had gone she could be convinced that the hero on whom her heart was set was unworthy, that was matter for later discussion.

All that was of import now was to defend him; shield him from discovery; give him the chance for escape.

It was at the moment she reached this decision that Marcia's voice, calm and unwavering, broke upon the stillness:

"If you are so certain about the jewels, Elisha, why don't you produce them?" she was saying.

"No—no, Marcia!" Sylvia protested. "There is nothing here, Mr. Winslow, truly there is nothing. I swear it."

"Nevertheless, let him look, Sylvia."

"But Marcia—" begged the girl.

"Step aside, dear, and let him look. Let them both look."

"Please—please, Marcia—!"

Sylvia was upon her knees now on the hearth, and the men, hesitating to remove her by force, halted awkwardly.

Her face, drawn with terror, was upturned to Marcia and was pitiful in its pleading.

Marcia regarded her first with startled incredulity—then with coldness.

So Sylvia loved Heath, too!

She was fighting for him—fighting with all her feeble strength.

A pang wrenched the older woman's heart.

What if Heath had played a double game—made love to Sylvia as he had made love to her? Convinced her of the depths of his affection with an ardor so compelling that against all odds she, too, believed in it?

If so—if the man were a mountebank the sooner they both found it out—the sooner all the world knew it, the better.

If, on the other hand, he was innocent, he should have his chance.

The older woman went to the side of the pleading figure.

The surprise of her discovery crisped her voice so that it was short and commanding.

"Get up, Sylvia," she said. "The sheriff must search. He must do his duty. We have no right to prevent it."

Obedient to the authoritative tone, the girl arose.

"Now, gentlemen, you may search," Marcia said.

Neither Elisha Winslow nor his companion had cause now to complain of any lack of dignity in the law's fulfillment.

As if she were a magistrate seeing justice done, Marcia, magnificent in silence, towered above them while they stooped to perform their task. Her face was pale, her lips tightly set.

The brick was lifted out.

A smothered cry escaped Sylvia and was echoed by Elisha.

"Why—land alive—there's nothin' here!" gasped the sheriff.

"I told you there was nothing!" Sylvia taunted, beginning to laugh hysterically. "I told you so—but you would not believe me."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks and she wiped them away, strangling a convulsive sob.

"Wal, 'Lish, all I can say is you must either 'a' been wool gatherin' or dreamin' when you conceived this yarn," Eleazer jeered.

"I warn't," hissed Elisha, stung to the quick. "I warn't dreamin'. Them jewels was there. I saw 'em with my own eyes. I swear to heaven I did." Then as if a new idea flashed into his mind, he confronted Sylvia. "They was there, young lady, warn't they? You know they was. That's why you was so scairt for me to look. You've seen 'em, too."

"I?"

"Yes, you. Deny it if you dare."

"Of course I deny it."

"Humph! But Marcia won't. You can lie if you want to to save the skin of that good-for-nothin' critter upstairs—though what purpose is served by your doin' it I can't see. But Marcia won't. She'll speak the truth same's she always has an' always will. No lie will cross her lips. If she says them jewels warn't here I'll believe it. Come now, Marcia. Mebbe you've evidence that'll hist me out of the idiot class. Was there ever diamonds an' things under this brick or warn't there?"

"Yes."

"You saw 'em?"

As if the admission was dragged from her, Marcia formed, but did not utter, the word:

"Yes."

"They was under this brick, warn't they?"

"Yes."

"There! Then I ain't gone daffy! What I said was true," Elisha acclaimed, rising in triumph and snapping his finger at Eleazer.

"The jewels were Mr. Heath's. He hid them for safe keeping."

"He told you that?"

"Yes."

"A likely story! He stole 'em—that's what he did."

"I don't believe it."

"I do," leered the sheriff.

"Prove it then," challenged Marcia, with sudden spirit, a spot of crimson burning on either cheek.

"Prove it?" Elisha was taken aback. "Wal, I can't at the moment do that. I can't prove it. But even if I can't, I can make out a good enough case against him to arrest him on suspicion. That's what I mean to do—that's what I come for an' what I'll do 'fore I leave this house."

Marcia swept across the floor.

Once again she was poised, back against the door leading to the stairs.

"Mr. Heath is sick."

"I guess he ain't so sick but what I can go up an' cross-examine him."

"I ask you not go to. I forbid it."

"Law, Marcia!"

"I forbid it," repeated the woman. "Drop this matter for a day or two, Elisha. Mr. Heath shall not leave the house. I promise you that. I will give you my bond. Leave him here in peace until he is well again. When he is able to—to—go with you I will telephone. You can trust me. When have I ever been false to my word?"

"Never, Marcia! Never in all the years I've known you."

"Then go and leave the affair in my hands."

"I don't know—mebbe—I wonder if I'd oughter," ruminated Elisha. "'Tain't legal."

"No matter."

"I don't see why the mischief you're so crazy to stand 'twixt this Heath chap an' justice, Marcia. The feller's a scoundrel. That's what he is—an out an' out scoundrel. Not only is he a thief but he's a married man who's plottin' behind your back to betray you—boastin' openly in telegrams he is."

"What do you mean?"

"I wouldn't like to tell you. In fact I couldn't. 'Twould be repeatin' what was told me in confidence," hedged Elisha, frightened by the expression of the woman's face.

"You must tell me."

"Mebbe—mebbe—there warn't no truth in what I heard."

"I must judge of that."

"I ain't got no right to tell you. Things are often told me in confidence, 'cause of my bein' sheriff, that it ain't expected I'll pass on."

"I have a right to know about the telegram you mention. Will you tell me or shall I call up the Sawyer Falls operator?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake don't do that," Elisha pleaded. "Artie Nickerson would be ragin' mad did he find I'd told you. If you must know what the message was, I can repeat it near 'nough, I reckon. It ran somethin' like this:

"Safe on Cape with my lady. Shall return with her later."

"And that was all?" inquired Marcia calmly.

"All! Ain't that enough?" Elisha demanded. "There was a word or two more 'bout clothes bein' sent here, but nothin' of any note. The first of the message was the important part," concluded the sheriff.

As she vouchsafed no reply and the ticking of the clock beat out an embarrassing silence, he presently continued:

"I don't want you should think I told you this, Marcia, with any unfriendly motive. It's only that those of us who've seen you marry one worthless villain don't want you should marry another. Jason was a low down cuss. You know that well's I."

The woman raised her hand to check him.

"I'm aware 'tain't pleasant to hear me say so out loud, but it's God's truth. Every man an' woman in Wilton knows 'tis. Folks is fond of you, Marcia. We don't want you made miserable a second time."

"Marcia!" Sylvia burst out. "Marcia!"

"Hush, dear. We'll talk of this later. Elisha, I think I must ask you and Eleazer

to go now. I will let you know when Mr. Heath is able to take up this affair with you."

"You ain't goin' to tell me where the jewels are?"

"I don't know where they are."

"Nor nothin' 'bout—'bout the telegram."

"Nothing except to thank you for your kind intentions and say you quoted it quite correctly. I sent it for Mr. Heath myself."

"But—but—"

"*My Lady*, as you have apparently forgotten, is the name of Mr. Heath's boat—the boat you yourself helped pull off the shoals."

"My land! So 'tis," faltered Elisha. "I'm almighty sorry, Marcia—I ask your pardon."

"Me, too! We come with the best of intentions—" rejoined Eleazer, fumbling for his cap. "Honest we did."

"It's all right. Just leave us now, please."

As the two men shuffled across the kitchen, a heavy object dropped to the floor, interrupting their jumbled apologies.

"Pick up them handcuffs, 'Lish, an' come along double-quick," Eleazer muttered beneath his breath. "You've made a big enough fool of yourself as 'tis. Don't put your foot in any deeper."

"And here's your hat," added Sylvia, handing the bewildered sheriff his property with an impish bow. "Take it and scam—both of you."

As the door banged behind the discomfited officials, clear as a bell on the quiet air came the twitting voice of Eleazer:

"Wal, Scram got said, didn't it, 'Lish, even if 'twarn't you said it? That gal is an up-to-date little piece. She knows what's what. I told you no shindy of this sort was complete unless somebody said: Scram!"



Chapter XVI

LEFT alone, Marcia, weary and spent, collapsed into a chair and closed her eyes, appearing to forget the presence of the girl who, with parted lips, hovered impatiently at her elbow.

Something in the woman's aloofness not only discouraged speech but rendered any interruption an intrusion.

At length, however, she roused herself and sighing deeply looked about, and taking the gesture as permission to break the silence, the torrent of words Sylvia had until now held in check, broke from her:

"Was it true, Marcia—what they said about Uncle Jason I mean? Was it true?"

"I'm afraid so, dear."

"But you never told me; and you never told Mother, either. Of course I see why. You didn't want her to know because it would have broken her heart. So you kept it all to yourself. You did not mean I should find it out, did you?"

"Not if I could help it."

Sylvia knelt, taking the cold hands in hers.

"I hate him!" cried she fiercely. "I hate him for making you unhappy and spoiling your life!"

"Hush, child. Jason has not spoiled my life," contradicted Marcia with a grave, sad smile.

"But he has scarred it—dashed to pieces all the dreams you started out with—those beautiful dreams a girl has when she is young. I know what they are, for I dream them myself sometimes. They are lovely, delicate things. We never quite expect they will come true; yet for all that we believe in them. I know you had such fancies once, for you are the sort who would. And Jason came and trampled on them—"

"He made me see life as it was. Perhaps it was better I should."

"We all have to see life as it is sooner or later. But there are plenty of years ahead in which to do it. The man who destroys the world of illusion in which a girl lives destroys something no one can ever give back to her."

"I don't know that I should say that," returned Marcia with a faint, shadowy smile as if pursuing some secret, intriguing fancy.

"But it's never the same again, I mean—never the same."

"No, it's never the same," agreed the woman soberly.

"Was Jason as bad as they said, Marcia? Ah, you don't have to answer. There is no need for you to try to reconcile your desire to spare me—spare him—with the truth. He was as bad—probably much worse. Dear, dear Marcia." Impulsively Sylvia bent her lips to the hands so tightly clasped in hers. "I cannot imagine," she rushed on, "why, when one of my family had made you as wretched as he did, you should have wanted another in the house. Had I suffered so I should never have wished to lay eyes on any more Howes as long as I lived."

"But Jason had nothing to do with you, Sylvia."

"The same blood ran in our veins."

"Perhaps that was the reason."

"Because you could forgive, you mean?" whispered Sylvia. "You are a better Christian than I, my dear. I could never have forgiven."

"I have tried not only to forgive but to forget. I have closed the door on the past and begun a new life."

"And now into it has come this Stanley Heath," the girl said.

For the fraction of a second Marcia did not reply; then almost inaudibly she murmured:

"Yes."

Sylvia slipped one of her strong young arms about the bowed shoulders.

"It just seems as if I could not bear it," she burst out passionately.

"Sylvia, look at me. Tell me the truth. Do you, too, love Stanley Heath?"

"I?"

"Was that the reason you fought against Elisha's finding the jewels? Tell me. I must know."

"No," she answered without hesitation. "At first he did fascinate me. He is a fascinating person. An older man always fascinates a younger girl if he has charm. I changed my mind, though, later on. Not because on acquaintance he became less charming. It wasn't that. If anything, he became more so. I just—just—changed my mind," she repeated, avoiding Marcia's eyes. "As for the jewels, I could not bear to let that little runt of a sheriff win out. You see, I thought the gems were there under the brick and that when you urged him to search, you did not know it.

"I had known all along they were in the house, for I stumbled upon them by

accident one day when I was here alone; but I had no idea you had. I truly believed Mr. Heath had hidden them beneath the hearth, and I was determined Elisha should not find them."

"I knew they weren't there."

"You'd moved them? Put them somewhere else?"

"No, indeed. Didn't you hear me tell Elisha I did not know where they were?"

"Oh, of course. But you'd have said that anyway," smiled Sylvia, dimpling.

"Why—why, Sylvia!"

"You certainly wouldn't have let those men find them," she added comfortably.

"On the contrary, if the jewels had been in the house and I had been compelled to tell what I knew, I should have told the truth."

"You would? You would have showed those two miserable blood-hounds where they were?" asked the girl incredulously.

"Certainly."

"I wouldn't," flashed Sylvia, clinching her small hands. "I would have fought that sheriff tooth and nail. I'd have lied—stooped to any means to prevent him from unearthing the evidence he was after."

"But the law, Sylvia—the law."

"I wouldn't give a rap for the law. You love Stanley Heath. That's enough for me. Besides, he is being tracked down—trapped. I want him to go free."

"You think he took the jewels?" asked Marcia, slowly.

"Certainly I do. Don't you?"

"No."

"But, Marcia, can't you see how plain it all is? I know it is terrible for you, dear. It almost breaks my heart. It is an awful thing to believe of anybody—harder still of a person one loves. Nevertheless, we must face the facts. People do not carry such things about with them—especially men. He came by them in no honest way, you may be sure of that. Hasn't he told you anything?—haven't you asked him?"

"I wouldn't think of asking him," Marcia replied with a lift of her chin.

"And he has not volunteered any information?"

"No."

"Most men, if honest and caught in such an odd situation, would explain," continued Sylvia. "The very fact that Mr. Heath has not is suspicious in itself. He

is guilty, Marcia—guilty."

"I do not believe it," was the stubborn protest.

"I realize, dear, it is hard for you to own it," soothed Sylvia. "We hate to admit the faults of those we—we—care for. Still, nothing is to be gained by remaining blind to them."

"You speak as if such a sin were a mere trivial flaw of character, Sylvia. Why, it is fundamental—a crime."

"How can we measure sins and decide which ones are big and which little? Perhaps Mr. Heath was horribly tempted to commit this one. We do not know. We are not his judges. The thing for us to do is to help him out of the mess he is in."

"Help him?"

"Get him off. Aid him to escape."

"Believing him guilty—you would do that?"

"Surely I would."

"You mean you would help him to evade the law? The punishment such wrongdoing merits?"

Emphatically, Sylvia nodded her curls.

"I'd help him to get away from those who are tracking him down just as I'd help a fox to escape from the hunters."

"Regardless of right or wrong?"

"Yes. To give him a sporting chance, the start of those who are after him. You love Stanley Heath. Don't you want to see him go free?"

"Not if he is guilty."

"Marcia! You mean you would deliver him over to the law?"

"I would have him deliver himself over."

"As if he would! As if any criminal would."

"A criminal who thought of his soul might."

"But criminals don't think of their souls, dear. They think only of their bodies—that's probably why they are criminals."

Marcia made no answer.

"Well, anyway, nobody is going to round up Mr. Heath if I can prevent it," asserted Sylvia, throwing back her head. "If you won't help him get away, I will. He must go in the boat—now—today."

"The boat has gone."

"Gone!"

"Mr. Currier arrived this morning after you had gone and took the boat back to New York with him."

"And the jewels?"

"Yes, the jewels, too."

"Humph! So that's where they are!"

"Yes."

"Pretty cute of him to make so neat a get-away!" commented the girl with admiration. "Currier is, of course, the understudy—the accomplice."

Marcia started.

"What sort of man was he? A gentleman, like Mr. Heath?"

The older woman colored.

"Well, no. At least he—he—. Oh, he was polite and had a nice manner—a quiet voice—"

"But he was different from Mr. Heath—an inferior—one who took orders," interrupted Sylvia.

"I hardly know. I saw very little of him," Marcia replied guardedly.

"But Mr. Heath did tell him what to do. Currier did as he said."

"I suppose so—yes."

"In other words, he is the hands and Mr. Heath the brains of the team."

"How can you, Sylvia?"

Quivering, Marcia shrunk into her chair as if she had been struck.

"Because I must, Marcia—because we must both look this affair in the face. Confess the circumstances are suspicious."

"They seem to be," she owned with reluctance.

"They are suspicious."

"That proves nothing."

"Perhaps not. Nevertheless it is all we have to go by and we should be fools not to take them at their face value, shouldn't we? We should at least consider them."

"Of course we should do that," evaded the woman.

"Have you considered them?" Sylvia suddenly inquired.

Marcia drew her hand across her forehead.

"I—I—yes. I have thought them over."

"And what conclusion have you arrived at?"

"I don't understand them at all. Nevertheless, I do not believe Stanley Heath is guilty," was the proud retort.

"That is because you don't want to—because you won't."

"Leave it at that, then, and say I won't," cried Marcia, leaping defiantly to her feet.

"You are making a great mistake, if you will pardon me for saying so," Sylvia responded gently. "You are deliberately closing your eyes and mind to facts that later are bound to cause you bitter unhappiness. Let alone the man's guilt. He has a wife. You seem to forget that. As Elisha Winslow remarked, you have already been miserable once. Why be so a second time? Help Stanley Heath to get out of Wilton and forget him."

"I cannot do either of those things. In the first place, I have given my word to hand Mr. Heath over to the authorities. As for forgetting him—why ask the impossible?"

Sylvia's patience gave way.

"Go your own way then," she snapped. "Go your own way and if by and by you regret it—as you surely will—do not blame me. Don't blame me, either, if I do not agree with you. Stanley Heath shall never remain here and be betrayed to the law. I've enough mercy in me to prevent that if you haven't. Stick to your grim old puritanism if you must. I'll beat it by a more charitable creed. I'll help him get away."

She started toward the stairway.

"Sylvia, come back here!" Marcia cried.

"I shall not come back."

"I beg you! Insist!"

The command fell on deaf ears.

Marcia rushed after her, but it was too late.

Sylvia was gone.

Chapter XVII

STANLEY Heath was lying with expectant face turned toward the door when Sylvia entered.

"What's the rumpus?" he demanded.

"You heard?"

"Heard? Certainly I heard," he laughed. "I could not hear what was said, of course, but anyone within five miles could have heard those men roaring at one another. What's the trouble?"

"The trouble is you," answered the girl.

"Me?"

"Yes. Didn't you expect trouble sometime?"

"We all must expect trouble sooner or later, I suppose," was the enigmatic answer. "To just what particular variety of trouble did you refer?"

"I guess you know. There is no use mincing matters or beating about the bush. We haven't the time to waste. The jewels have gone and you must go, too."

The man looked dumbfounded.

"Don't misunderstand me, please," Sylvia rushed on. "I'm not blaming you—nor judging you. I don't know why you took them. You may have been tempted beyond your strength. You may have needed money sorely. All that is none of my business."

"You believe I stole them?"

"Certainly I do."

"Suppose I didn't?"

"I expected you'd say that," was the calm retort. "Let it go that way if you prefer. I don't mind. What I want to do is to help you to get away."

"Even if I am guilty."

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Because you're sick and in a trap; because I—I—well—" she faltered, her lips trembling, "I just can't bear to have that mean little sheriff who's after you catch you."

"What's that?"

Startled, Heath sat up.

"That wretched Elisha Winslow who came here this morning with Eleazer Crocker tagging at his heels. In some way they had found out about the jewels and where you had hidden them. Prying into other people's affairs, no doubt, when they would have much better minded their own business. Well, it doesn't matter how they found out. They know the truth, which is the important thing. They even attempted to come upstairs and arrest you post haste; but Marcia wouldn't allow it."

"Marcia!" he spoke the name softly. "She heard the story, too?"

"Of course."

"Poor Marcia!"

"You may well say poor Marcia," Sylvia echoed sarcastically. "You have made her most unhappy. Oh, Mr. Heath, Marcia has not had the sort of life that I told you she had. She has been wretched—miserable. Go away before you heap more suffering upon her. She is fighting to make something of her wrecked life. Leave her and let her make it. I'll help you get out of town. I am sure we can devise a plan. I'll row you across to the mainland and contrive somehow to get you safely aboard a train. If we only had a car—"

"My car is at the Wilton garage."

"Oh, then it will be easy," exclaimed she with evident relief.

"Not so easy as it seems."

Heath held up his bandaged hand.

"I doubt if I could drive any distance with this wrist," he said. "Of course it is on the mend. Nevertheless, it is still stiff from disuse, and pretty clumsy."

"Couldn't I drive? I've driven quite a lot. What make is your car?"

"A Buick."

"I've never driven one of those. I wonder if I'd dare try? How I wish Hortie were here! He could drive it. He can drive anything."

"Hortie?"

"Horatio Fuller—a man I know out west. If only he wasn't so far away! He'd help us in a minute. He'd do it and ask no questions. That's what we need—someone who'll ask no questions."

She frowned, thoughtfully.

"Well, no matter. We can find somebody, I am sure—especially if we pay them liberally. I'll see what I can do."

"Wait just a moment. What does Marcia say?"

"Marcia? Oh, you must not listen to Marcia. She is too much upset to be depended on. She cannot see the case at all as it is. Her advice wouldn't be worth twopence. Trust me in this, please. Trust me, Mr. Heath. I promise you I'll stand by you to the last ditch. I'm not afraid."

"I think I'd better talk with Marcia first."

"Don't! It will only be a waste of time."

"Still, I must hear what she has to say."

"You won't like it. Marcia is hard, merciless. Her conscience drives her to extremes. Even should you get her opinion, you would not follow it."

"What makes you so sure I wouldn't?"

"Because it would be madness, sheer madness. You'll realize that, as I do," insisted Sylvia with an impatient tapping of her foot. "Marcia stubbornly shuts her mind to the truth and will only look on one side. She just repeats the same words over and over again."

"What words?"

"I shall not tell you."

"Then she must tell me herself. Will you ask her to come up, please?"

"I'd rather not."

"You prefer I should call her?"

Baffled, the girl turned away.

"No. I'll send her to you—if I must. But remember, I warned you."

"I shall not soon forget that, Sylvia, nor the splendid loyalty you've shown today. I shall always remember it. Whatever happens, please realize that I am grateful," Heath said earnestly. Then in less serious vein he added: "I never dreamed you were such a valiant little fighter."

His smile, irresistible in brightness, brought a faint, involuntary reflection into Sylvia's clouded countenance.

"Oh. I can fight for people—when I care," cried she, impulsively.

Did the artless confession, the blush that accompanied it, soften the voice of the man so observantly watching until it unconsciously took on the fond, caressing tone one uses toward a child?

"So I see. Run along now, little girl, and fetch Marcia."

"I wish I could make you promise not to listen to her," coaxed Sylvia, making one last wistful appeal.

"I cannot promise that."

"I'm sorry. You'd be wiser if you did."

It was some moments before Marcia answered the summons and when at last she came, it was with downcast eyes and evident reluctance.

"You sent for me?" she said, halting stiffly at the foot of the bed.

"Won't you please sit down?" Heath replied.

"I've only a few moments. I'd rather stand."

"But I cannot say what I wish to say while you flutter there as if poised for flight," urged the man, annoyance discernible in his husky voice.

Unwillingly Marcia slipped into the chair beside him.

"That's better," he said, smiling. "Now tell me exactly what happened down stairs."

"Didn't Sylvia tell you?"

"She told me something. I want your version of the story."

As if realizing the futility, both of protest and evasion, the woman let her gaze travel to the dim purple line where sea met sky and began to speak.

She related the incident tersely; without comment; and in a dull, impersonal manner.

Stanley Heath, scrutinizing her with keen, appraising eyes, could not but note the pallor of her cheeks, the unsteadiness of her lips, the nervous clasping and unclasping of her hands.

The narrative concluded, her glance dropped to the floor and silence fell between them.

"And that is all?" he inquired when convinced she had no intention of speaking further.

"That is all."

"Thank you. Now what had I better do?"

She made no answer.

"What do you think it best for me to do?" he repeated.

"Best? How do you mean—best? Best for your body or best for your soul?"

"For both."

"But suppose the two should not coincide?"

"Then I must reconcile them or choose between them."

"You cannot reconcile them."

"Choose between them then—compromise."

At the word, he saw her shiver.

"Well, you are not advising me," he persisted when she offered no reply.

"How can I? You know your own affairs—know the truth and yourself far better than I."

"Granting all that, nevertheless, I should like your opinion."

"You will not thank me for it," cautioned she, bitterly. "Sylvia says I am quixotic, impractical."

"Never mind Sylvia. Tell me what you think."

"But how can I give a just opinion? I cannot judge," she burst out as if goaded beyond her patience. "I know none of the facts. To judge the conduct of another, one must know every influence that contributed to the final catastrophe. No person but God Himself can know that."

A radiance, swift as the passage of a meteor, flashed across Stanley Heath's face and was gone.

"Suppose you yourself had taken these jewels and were placed in this dilemma?" pressed he.

"That would be entirely different."

"Why?"

"The case would not be similar at all."

"Why not?" Heath reiterated.

"Because—because I should be guilty."

"You mean—you think—"

"I do not believe you took the jewels," was the quiet answer.

"Marcia! Marcia!" He reached for her hand, then sharply checked the gesture. "Why don't you believe I took them?"

"It isn't like you."

"The evidence is against me—every whit of it."

"I cannot help that."

"Have I ever told you I did not take them? Ever led you to suppose me innocent?"

"You have never told me anything about it."

"You have never asked."

"As if I should put to you a question like that," she said proudly.

"You had the right to inquire."

"I did not need to."

Once again the man restrained an impulse to imprison her hands in his.

"Suppose I did take them?" he went on in an even, coolly modulated voice. "Suppose the case stands exactly as this shrewd-eyed Wilton sheriff suspects it does? What am I to do?"

He saw the color drain from her face.

"I only know what I should do, were I in your place."

"Tell me that."

"I should go through with it—clear my soul of guilt."

"And afterward?"

"Start over again."

"That would be very difficult. The stigma of crime clings to a man. Its stamp remains on him, try as he will to shake it off. My life would be ruined were I to pursue such a course."

"Not your real life. You would, of course, lose standing among your supposed friends; but you would not lose it among those whose regard went deeper. Even if you did—what would it matter?"

"But to be alone, friendless! Who would help me piece together the mangled fragments of such a past—for I should need help; I could not do it alone? Do you imagine that in all the world there would be even one person whose loyalty and affection would survive so acid a test?"

"There might be," she murmured, turning away her head.

"Even so, would I have the presumption to accept such a service? The right to impose on a devotion so self-effacing?"

"The person might be glad, proud to help you—consider it a privilege."

"Who would, Marcia? Do you know of anyone?"

She leaped to her feet.

"Why do you ask me?" she demanded, the gentleness of her voice chilling to curtness. "You have such a helpmate near you—or should have."

"I don't understand," pleaded the man, puzzled by her change of mood.

"Perhaps we'd better not go into that now," was her response. "It is beside the point."

"On the contrary it is the point."

"I don't see how. What happens after the penalty has been paid has nothing to

do with the paying of it."

"In this case it has everything."

"I cannot stay," she whispered, frightened by his insistence. "I must go."

"Wait just a moment."

"I cannot. I must get dinner."

"Never mind the dinner!"

She looked at him then for the first time.

"We have to eat," she declared making an attempt at lightness.

"Not always. Sometimes there are things more important."

"To think of a man saying that!"

The ring of the telephone chimed in with her silvery laughter.

"I'll go, Sylvia," she called with a promptness that indicated the interruption was a welcome one.

"Yes. Yes, this is Mrs. Howe at Wilton.

"It's long distance," she called to Heath. "New York is on the line.

"Yes, he is here. He can speak with you himself.

"Mrs. Heath wishes to speak with you," she announced formally. "Slip on your bathrobe and come."

Heath took the receiver from her hand.

"Joan? This certainly is good of you, dear. Yes, I am much better, thank you. Bless your precious heart, you needn't have worried. Currier will be back late tonight or early tomorrow morning and he will tell you how well I am progressing. Yes, he has the jewels. Put them in the safe right away, won't you?

"I can't say when I shall be home. Something has come up that may keep me here some time. I cannot explain just now. It is the thing you have always predicted would happen to me sometime. Well, it has happened. Do you get that? Yes, I am caught—hard and fast. It is a bit ironic to have traveled all over the world and then be taken captive in a small Cape Cod village. I guess I believe in Fate, destiny—whatever you call it.

"I'm in something of a tangle just at present. I may even have to call on you to help me straighten it out. That's sweet of you, dear. You've never failed me. Oh, I can talk—it doesn't hurt me. You mustn't mind my croak. I'm not so badly off as I sound. I'll let you know the first minute I have anything definite to tell.

"Goodbye, dear. Take care of yourself. It's done me a world of good to hear your voice."

Heath returned the receiver to its hook and in high spirits strode back into his room.

If, however, he hoped there to take up the threads of the conversation so unexpectedly broken off, he was disappointed.

Marcia's chair was empty.

She was nowhere to be seen.



Chapter XVIII

THE days immediately following were like an armed truce.

Marcia watched Sylvia.

Sylvia watched Marcia.

Heath watched them both.

When, however, no further reference to the events of the past week was made, the tension slowly began to lessen, and life at the Howe Homestead took on again its customary aspect.

One agency in this return to normal was the physical improvement of the invalid, who as a result of rest, fresh air, sleep, and good nursing now became well enough to come down stairs and join the family group.

An additional, and by no means unimportant contributory factor, was the sudden onrush of fine weather.

Never had there been such a spring—at least never within the memory of the owner of the house on the Point. The soft breath of the south wind; the radiance of the sunshine; the gentle lapping of the waves on the spangled shore; the stillness; the vivid beauty of the ocean's changing colors—all these blended to make a world that caught the breath and subordinated every mood save one of exuberant joy.

Against a heaven gentian blue, snowy gulls wheeled and dipped, and far beyond them, miniature white sails cut the penciled indigo of the horizon.

The old grey house with its fan-light and beaded doorway stood out in colonial simplicity from the background of sea and sky like a dim, silvered picture, every angle of it soft in relief against the splendors that flanked it.

Marcia sang at her work—sang not so much because there was peace in her heart as because the gladness about her forced her to forget her pain.

Sylvia sang, too, or rather whistled in a gay, boyish fashion and in company with Prince Hal raced like a young colt up the beach.

Only a day or two more passed before it was possible to get Stanley Heath, warmly wrapped in rugs, out on the sheltered veranda where, like the others, he reveled in the sunshine.

His cheeks bronzed, his eyes became clear and bright, laughter curled his lips. If just around the corner the spectre of trouble loitered, its presence was not,

apparently, able to put to flight his lightheartedness. Over and over again he declared that every hour spent in this lotus-eaters' country was worth a miser's fortune.

Sometimes when he lay motionless in the steamer-chair looking seaward beneath the rim of his soft felt hat, or following the circling gulls with preoccupied gaze Marcia, peeping at him from the window wondered of what he was thinking.

That the fancies which intrigued him were pleasant and that he enjoyed his own company there could be no question.

No attitude he might have assumed could have been better calculated to dispel awkwardness and force into the background the seriousness of the two women, whose interests were so inextricably entangled with his own, than the merry, bantering one he adopted when with them.

Even Marcia, who at first had avoided all tête-à-têtes, quivering with dread whenever she found herself alone with him, gradually, beneath the spell of his new self, gained sufficient confidence to perch hatless on the piazza rail beside him in an unoccupied moment and spar with him, verbally.

For he was a brilliant talker—one who gave unexpected, original twists to the conversation—twists that taxed one's power of repartee. The challenge to keep pace with his wit was to her like scouring a long disused rapier and seeing it clash against the deft blade of a master fencer.

Here indeed was a hitherto undreamed-of Stanley Heath, a man whose dangerous charms had multiplied a hundredfold and who, if he had captivated her before now riveted her fetters with every word he spoke, every glance he gave her.

She struggled to escape from the snare closing in on her, then finding combat useless, ceased to struggle and let herself drift with the tide.

After all, why not enjoy the present?

Soon, all too soon, its glamorous delights would be gone and she would be back once more in the uneventful past which had satisfied her and kept her happy until Heath had crossed her path, bringing with him the bewildering adventures that had destroyed her tranquillity.

Would she ever find that former peace, she frequently asked herself. Would her world ever be the same after this magician who had touched it with the spell of his enchantment had left it? For he would leave it. A time must come, and soon now—when like a scene from a fairy play the mystic lights would fade, the haunting music cease, the glitter of the whole dreamlike pageant give place to

reality.

It was too beautiful, too ephemeral an idyll to last.

In loving this stranger of whom she knew so little, she had set her heart upon a phantom that she knew must vanish. The future, grim with foreboding, was constantly drawing nearer.

In her path stood a presence that said: Thou shalt not!

There were, alas, but two ways of life—the way of right and the way of wrong, and between them lay no neutral zone. This she acknowledged with her mind. But her rebel heart would play her false, flouting her puritan codes and defying the creeds that conscience dictated.

Meantime while she thus wrestled with the angel of her best self, Sylvia accepted the situation with characteristic lightness. Her life in this vast world and wide had been of short duration, but during its brief span she had learned a surprising amount about the earth and the human beings that peopled it.

She knew more already about men than did Marcia—much more. Long ago they had ceased to be gods to her. She was accustomed to them and their ways, and was never at a loss to give back to each as good as he sent—frequently better.

Her sophistication in the present instance greatly relieved the strain.

She jested fearlessly with Heath, speaking a language with which he was familiar and one that amused him no end.

Often he would sit watching her furtively, his glance moving from the gold of her hair to the blue of her eyes, the fine poise of her fair white throat, the slender lines of her girlish figure. Often, too, in such moments he would think of the possibilities that lay in the prodigal beauty she so heedlessly ignored.

That he took pleasure in being with her and treating her with half playful, half affectionate admiration was incontestable. Yet notwithstanding this, his fondness was nicely restrained and never slipped into familiarity or license.

It was the sort of delicately poised relation in which the girl was thoroughly at home and with which she knew well how to cope.

Today Heath was taking his first walk and the two had strolled down to the water's edge where deep in a conversation more serious than usual they sat in the sun on the over-turned yellow dory.

To Marcia, watching from the porch, they appeared to be arguing—Sylvia pleadingly, Heath with stern resistance.

The woman could not but speculate as to the subject that engrossed them.

Not that she was spying. She would have scorned to do that.

She had merely stepped outside to shake a duster and they had caught her eye. It seemed, too, that she had chosen an inopportune moment for observation, for just at that instant Sylvia placed her hand entreatingly on Heath's arm and though he continued to talk, he caught and held it.

The fact that Sylvia neither evinced surprise, nor withdrew it forced her to the disconcerting conclusion that the thing was no unusual happening.

Marcia turned aside, jealousy clutching at her heart.

When, later in the day, the pair reëntered the house Heath, with a few pleasant words, caught up his overcoat and went out onto the steps to smoke, while Sylvia hurried to her room.

Marcia, passing through the hall, could see her golden head bent over the table as intent with pen and paper she dashed off page after page of a closely written letter.

It was a pity the elder woman could not have read that letter, for had she been able to, it would not only have astonished but also have enlightened her and perhaps quieted the beating of her troubled heart.

It was a letter that astonished Sylvia herself. Nevertheless, much as it surprised her, her amazement in no way approached that of young Horatio Fuller when he read it.

So completely did it scatter to the winds of heaven every other thought his youthful head contained that he posted two important business documents—one without a stamp, and the other without an address. After that he decided he was unfit to cope with commercial duties and pleading a headache hastened home to his mother.

Now Horatio's mother, far from possessing the appearance of a tower of strength to which one might flee in time of trouble, was a woman of colorless, vaguely defined personality indicative of little guile and still less determination. She listened well and gave the impression she could listen, with her hands passively folded in her lap, forever if necessary. She never interrupted; never offered comment or advice; never promised anything; and yet when she said, as she invariably did, "I'll talk with your father, dear," there was always infinite comfort in the observation.

That was what she said today to Horatio Junior.

Accordingly that evening after Horatio Senior had dined, and dined well; after he had smoked a good cigar and with no small measure of pride in his own skill put into place all the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle that had defied his prowess the

night before—his wife artfully slipping them beneath his nose where he could not fail to find them—then and not until then did Mrs. Horatio take out the pink afghan she had been making and while she knit two and purled two, she gently imparted to Alton City's leading citizen the intelligence that his son, Horatio Junior, wished to go East; that he was in love; that, in short, he wished to marry.

Up into the air like a whizzing rocket soared Horatio Senior!

He raged; he tramped the floor; he heaped on the head of the absent Horatio Junior every epithet of reproach his wrath could devise, the phrases driveling idiot and audacious puppy appearing to afford him the greatest measure of relief. Continuing his harangue, he threatened to disinherit his son; he smoked four cigarettes in succession; he tipped over the Boston fern. The rest of the things Horatio Senior said and what he did would not only be too gross to write down in the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah, but also would be improper to record here.

In the meantime, Mrs. Horatio knitted on.

At last when breathless and panting Horatio Senior, like an alarm clock ran down and sank exhausted into his chair, Mrs. Horatio began the second row of knit two, purl two and ventured the irrefutable observation that after all Horatio Junior was their only child.

As this could not be denied, it passed without challenge and gaining confidence to venture farther, she presently added, quite casually that a wife was a steadying influence in a young man's career.

Horatio Senior vouchsafed no reply. Perhaps he had no breath left to demur.

At any rate his wife, considering silence a favorable symptom, followed up her previous comments with the declaration that Sylvia Hayden was a nice little thing. This drew fire.

Horatio Senior sputtered something about "nothing but a penniless school-teacher—a nobody."

Very deliberately then Mrs. Horatio began the fourth row of her knitting and as her needles clicked off the stitches, she murmured pleasantly that if she remembered rightly this had been the very objection Horatio Senior's father had made to their own marriage.

At this Horatio Senior flushed scarlet and said promptly that fathers did not know anything about choosing wives for their sons; that his marriage had been ideal; that his Jennie had been the one wife in the world for him; that time had proved it—even to his parents; that she was the only person on earth who really understood him—which latter statement unquestionably demonstrated that all that proceeded out of the mouth of Horatio Senior was not vanity and vexation of spirit.

After this nothing was simpler than to complete the pink stripe and discuss just when Horatio Junior had better start East.

Had Sylvia dreamed when she licked the envelope's flap with her small red tongue and smoothed it down with her pretty white finger she was thus loosing Alton City's thunderbolts, she might, perhaps, have hesitated to send the letter she had penned and perhaps would not have started off so jauntily late that afternoon to post it.

As it was, she was ignorant of the future consequences of her act and went skipping across the wee azure pools the tide had left behind as gaily as if she were not making history.

And not only did she go swinging off in this carefree fashion, but toward six o'clock she telephoned she was at the Doanes and Henry and his mother—the little old lady she had met on the train the day she arrived—wanted her to stay to supper. He would bring her home early in the evening. There would be a moon—Marcia need not worry.

Marcia had not thought of worrying until that minute, but now, in spite of knowing Sylvia was safe and in good hands she began, paradoxically enough, to worry madly.

Her heart would palpitate, her hand tremble while she spread the cloth and prepared the supper; and when she could not put off the dreaded and yet anticipated moment any longer, timidly as a girl she summoned Stanley Heath to the small, round table.

"Sylvia isn't coming," she explained, all blushes. "She telephoned she was going to stay over in town."

They seated themselves.

It was the first time they had ever been alone at a meal and the novelty of finding themselves opposite one another awed them into silence.

"Would you—do you care for cheese soufflé?" stammered Marcia.

"Thank you."

"Perhaps you don't like cheese."

"I do—very much."

"I hope it is done."

"It is perfect."

"It's hard to get it out of the oven at the right moment. Sometimes it falls."

"This one hasn't," beamed Stanley.

"I don't know. Perhaps I might have left it in a second or two longer."

"It's wonderful!"

"I'm glad you like it. Rolls?"

"Rather! My, but you are a marvelous cook."

"Oh, not really. You're hungry—that's all. Things taste good when you are."

"It isn't that. Everything you put your hand to is well done."

"Nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense and you know it. You're a marvelous person, Marcia."

"There is nothing marvelous about me."

"There is—your eyes, for one thing. Don't drop them, dear. I want to look at them."

"You are talking foolishness."

"Every man talks foolishness once in his life, I suppose. Perhaps I am talking it tonight because our time together is so short. I am leaving here tomorrow morning."

"Stanley!"

Across the table he caught her hand.

"I am well now and have no further excuse for imposing on your hospitality."

"As if it were imposing!"

"It is. I have accepted every manner of kindness from you—"

"Don't call it that," she interrupted.

"What else can I call it? I was a stranger and you took me in. It was sweet of you—especially when you knew nothing about me. Now the time has come for me to go. Tomorrow morning I am giving myself up to the Wilton sheriff."

"Oh, no—no!"

"But you said you wanted me to. It is the only square thing to do, isn't it?"

She made no answer.

He rose and came to her side, slipping an arm about her.

"Marcia. Dearest! I am doing what you wish, am I not?"

"I cannot bear it." The words were sharp with pain.

"You wanted me to go through with it."

She covered her face and he felt a shudder pass over her.

"Yes. But that was then," she whispered.

At the words, he drew her to her feet and into his arms.

"Marcia, beloved! Oh, my dear one, do I need to tell you I love you—love you with all my heart—my soul—all that is in me? You know it—know that every moment we have been together has been heaven. Tell me you love me, dear—for you do love me. Don't deny it—not tonight—our last night together. Say that you love me."

"You—know," she faltered, her arms creeping about his neck.

He kissed her then—her hair, her eyes, her neck, her lips—long, burning kisses that left her quivering beneath the rush of them.

Their passion brought her to herself and she drew away.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

"We can't. We must not. I had forgotten."

"Forgotten?"

"Something stands between us—we have no right. Forgive me."

"But my dear—"

"We have no right," she repeated.

"You are thinking of the past," he challenged. "Marcia, the past is dead. It is the present only in which we live—the present—just us two—who love."

"We must not love."

"But we do, sweetheart," was his triumphant cry. "We do!"

"We must forget."

"Can you forget?" he reproached.

"I—I—can try."

"Ah, your tongue is too honest, Marcia. You cannot forget. Neither can I. Our pledge is given. We belong to one another. I shall not surrender what is mine—never."

"Tomorrow—"

"Let us not talk of tomorrow."

"We must. We shall be parted then."

"Only for a little while. I shall come back to you. Our love will hold. Absence, distance, nothing can part us—not really."

"No."

"Then tell me you love me so I may leave knowing the truth from your own sweet lips."

"I love you, Stanley—God help me!"

"Ah, now I can go! It will not be for long."

"It must be for forever, dear heart. You must not come back. Tonight must be—the end."

"Marcia!"

"Tonight must be the end," she repeated, turning away.

"You mean you cannot face tomorrow—the disgrace—"

"I mean tonight must be the end," she reiterated.

Through narrowed lids, he looked at her, scanning her averted face.

Then she heard him laugh bitterly, discordantly.

"So we have come to the Great Divide, have we?" he said. "I have, apparently, expected too much of you. I might have known it would be so. All women are alike. They desert a man when he needs them most. Their affection has no toughness of fibre. It snaps under the first severe strain. The prospect of sharing my shame is more than you can bear." Again he laughed. "Well, tonight shall be the end—tonight—now. Don't think I blame you. It is not your fault. I merely rated you too high, Marcia—believed you a bigger woman than you are, that's all. I have asked more than you were capable of giving. The mistake was mine—not yours."

He left her then.

Stunned by the torrent of his reproach, she stood motionless, watching while, without a backward glance, he passed into the hall and up the stairs. His receding footsteps grew fainter.

Even after he was out of sight, she remained immovable, her frightened eyes riveted on the doorway through which he had disappeared.

Prince Hal raised his head and sensing all was not well came uneasily to her side and, thrusting his nose into her inert hand, whined.

At his touch, something within her gave way. She swayed, caught at a chair and shrank into it, her body shaking and her breath coming in gasping, hysterical sobs.

The clock ticked on, the surf broke in muffled undertone, the light faded; the candles burned lower, flickered and overflowed the old pewter candle sticks; and still she sat there, her tearless, dilated eyes fixed straight before her and the setter crouching unnoticed at her feet.



Chapter XIX

SYLVIA, bubbling over with sociability after her evening at the Doanes', was surprised, on reaching the Homestead, to find a lamp set in the window and the living-room empty. Ten o'clock was not late and yet both occupants of the house had gone upstairs.

This was unusual.

She wondered at it.

Certainly Marcia could not be asleep at so early an hour; nor Heath, either. In fact, beneath the latter's door she could see a streak of light, and could hear him moving about inside.

Marcia's room, on the other hand, was still. Once, as she paused listening, wondering whether she dared knock and go in for a bedtime chat, she thought she detected a stifled sound and thus encouraged whispered the woman's name. No response came, however, and deciding she must have been mistaken she tiptoed away.

Having, therefore, no inkling of a change in the delightful relations that had for the past week prevailed, the atmosphere that greeted her when she came down the next morning was a shock.

Stanley Heath stood at the telephone talking to Elisha Winslow and on the porch outside were grouped his suit-case, overcoat and traveling rug. He himself was civil—nay, courteous—but was plainly ill at ease and had little except the most commonplace remarks to offer in way of conversation.

Marcia had not slept, as her pallor and the violet shadows beneath her eyes attested.

Sylvia could see that her duties as hostess of the breakfast table taxed her self-control almost to the breaking point and that only her pride and strong will-power prevented her from going to pieces.

Although the girl did not understand, she sensed Marcia's need of her and rushed valiantly into the breach—filling every awkward pause with her customary sparkling chatter.

Her impulse was to cry out:

"What under the sun is the matter with you two?"

She might have done so had not a dynamic quality vibrant in the air warned

her not to meddle.

When at length the meal was cut short by the arrival of Elisha Winslow, all three of the group rose with unconcealed relief.

Even Elisha's presence, hateful as it would ordinarily have been, came now as a welcome interruption.

"Wal, Mr. Heath, I see you're expectin' me," grinned the sheriff, pointing toward the luggage beside the door.

"I am, Mr. Winslow."

"I've got my boat. Are you ready to come right along?"

"Quite ready."

Heath went to Sylvia and took her hand.

"Thank you very much," murmured he formally, "for all you've done for me. I appreciate it more than I can say. And you, too, Mrs. Howe. Your kindness has placed me deeply in your debt."

"I wish you luck, Mr. Heath," called Sylvia.

"Thanks."

"And I, too," Marcia rejoined in a voice scarcely audible.

To this the man offered no reply.

Perhaps he did not hear the words.

They followed him to the door.

It was then that Marcia sprang forward and caught Elisha's arm.

"Where are you taking him, Elisha?" she demanded, a catch in her voice. "Where are you taking him? Remember, Mr. Heath has been ill. You must not risk his getting cold or suffering any discomfort. Promise me you will not."

"You need have no worries on that score, Marcia," replied the sheriff kindly, noticing the distress in her face. "You don't, naturally, want all you've done for Mr. Heath thrown away. No more do I. I'll look out for him."

"Where is he going?"

"To my house for the present," Elisha answered. "You see, the town ain't ever needed to make provision for a criminal. I can't lock him up in the church 'cause he could get out had he the mind; an' out of the school-house, too. Besides, them buildin's are kinder chilly. So after weighin' the matter, I decided to take him 'long home with me. I've a comfortable spare room an' I figger to put him in it 'til I've questioned him an' verified his story.

"Meantime, nobody in town will be the wiser. I ain't even tellin' May Ellen

why Mr. Heath's at the house. If I choose to harbor comp'ny, that's my business. Not a soul 'cept Eleazer's in on this affair an' he's keepin' mum. When him an' me decide we've got the truth, we'll act—not before."

"That relieves my mind very much. Mr. Heath is—you see he—"

"He's a friend of yours—I ain't forgettin' that. I shall treat him 'cordin'ly, Marcia."

"Thank you, Elisha—thank you a hundred times."

There was nothing more to be said.

Heath bowed once again and the two men walked down to the float where they clambered with the luggage into Elisha's dory and put out into the channel.

Sylvia loitered to wave her hand and watch them row away, but Marcia, as if unable to bear the sight, waited for no further farewell.

Even after the girl had followed her indoors and during the interval they washed the breakfast dishes together, Sylvia did not venture to ask any explanations. If Marcia preferred to exclude her from her confidence, she resolved not to intrude.

Instead, she began to talk of her evening with the Doanes and although well aware Marcia scarcely listened, her gossip bridged the gulf of silence and gave the elder woman opportunity to recover her poise.

By noon Marcia was, to outward appearances, entirely herself. She had not been able, to be sure, to banish her pallor or the traces of sleeplessness; but she had her emotions sufficiently under control to talk pleasantly, if not gaily so that only an understanding, lynx-eyed observer like Sylvia would have suspected she was still keyed to too high a pitch to put heart in what she mechanically said and did.

That day and the next passed in much the same strained fashion.

That the woman was grateful for her niece's forbearance was evident in a score of trivial ways. That she also sensed Sylvia's solicitude and appreciated her loyalty and impulsive outbursts of affection was also obvious.

It was not until the third morning, however, that the barriers between the two collapsed.

Marcia had gone into the living-room to write a letter—a duty she especially detested and one which it was her habit to shunt into the future whenever possible.

Today, alas, there was no escape. A business communication had come that must be answered.

She sat down before the infrequently used desk and started to take up her pen when Sylvia heard her utter a cry.

"What's the matter, dear?" called the girl, hurrying into the other room.

No answer came.

Marcia was sitting fingering a slip of green paper she had taken from a long envelope.

With wild, despairing eyes she regarded it.

Then, as Sylvia came nearer, she bowed her head upon the desk and began to sob as if her heart would break.

"Marcia, dear—Marcia—what is it?" cried Sylvia, rushing to her and clasping the shaking figure in her arms. "Tell me what it is, dear."

"Oh, how could he!" moaned the woman. "How could he be so cruel!"

"What has happened. Marcia?"

"Stanley—he has left a check—money—thrown it in my face! And I did it so gladly—because I loved him. He knew that. Yet he could leave this—pay me—as if I were a common servant. I had rather he struck me—a hundred times rather."

The girl took the check.

It was filled out in Stanley Heath's clear, strong hand and was for the sum of a hundred dollars.

"How detestable of him!" she exclaimed. "Tell me, Marcia—what happened between you and Mr. Heath? You quarreled—of course I know that. But why—why? I have not wanted to ask, but now—"

"I'll tell you everything, Sylvia. I'd rather you knew. I thought at first I could keep it to myself, but I cannot. I need you to help me, dear."

"If I only could!" murmured Sylvia, drawing her closer.

As if quieted by the warmth of her embrace, Marcia wiped her eyes and began to speak, tremulously.

She unfolded the story of her blind faith in Stanley Heath; her love for him—a love she could neither resist nor control—a love she had known from the first to be hopeless. She confessed how she had fought against his magnetic power; how she had struggled to conceal her feelings; how he himself had resisted a similar attraction in her; how at last he had discovered her secret and forced her to betray it.

Slowly, reluctantly she went on to tell of the final scene between them—his insistence on coming back to her.

"Of course I realized we could not go on," she explained bravely. "That we loved one another was calamity enough. All that remained was for him to go away and forget me—return to his wife, his home, and the interests and obligations of his former life. Soon, if he honestly tries, this infatuation will pass and everything will be as before. Men forget more easily than women. Absence, too, will help."

"And you, Marcia?"

"I am free. There is no law forbidding me to remember. I can go on caring, so long as he does not know. It will do no harm if here, far away, where he will never suspect it, I continue to love him."

"Oh, my dear, my dear!"

"I cannot give up my love. It is all I have now. Oh, I do not mean to mourn over it, pity myself, make life unhappy. Instead, I shall be glad, thankful. You will see. This experience will make every day of living richer. You need have no fears for me, Sylvia. You warned me, you know," concluded she with a pathetic little smile.

"I was a brute! I ought to have shielded you more," the girl cried. "I could have, had I realized. Well, I can yet do something, thank heaven. Give me that check."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Return it, of course—return it before Stanley Heath leaves town. Isn't that what you want done? Surely you do not wish to keep it."

"No! No!"

"I'll take it over to Elisha Winslow's now, this minute."

"I wonder—yes, probably that will be best. You won't, I suppose, be allowed to see Stanley," speculated she timidly.

"I don't suppose so."

"If you should—"

"Well?"

"Don't say anything harsh, Sylvia. Please do not blame him, or—"

"I'll wring his neck!" was the emphatic retort.

"Oh, please—please dear—for my sake! I can't let you go if you go in that spirit," pleaded Marcia in alarm.

"There, there—you need not worry for fear I shall maltreat your Romeo, richly as he deserves it," was the response. "I could kill him—but I won't—because of you. Nevertheless, I warn you that if I get the chance I shall tell him

what I think of him. No power on earth can keep me from doing that. He is terribly to blame and ought to realize it. No married man has any business playing round with another woman. He may get by with it in New York, but on Cape Cod or in Alton City," she drew herself up, "it just isn't done and the sooner Stanley Heath understands that, the better. That's that! Now I'll get my hat and go."

"I am half afraid to let you, Sylvia."

"You don't trust me? Don't you believe I love you?"

"I am afraid you love me too much, dear."

"I do love you, Marcia. I never dreamed I could care so intensely for anyone I have known for so short a time. What you did for my mother alone would make me love you. But aside from gratitude there are other reasons. I love you for your own splendid self, dear. Please do not fear to trust me. I promise you I will neither be unjust nor bitter. The fact that you care for Stanley Heath shall protect him and make me merciful."

"Take the check then and go. I wish I were to see him."

"Well, you're not! Rowing across that channel and hurrying to his side after the way he's treated you! Not a bit of it! I'd tie you to your own bedpost first," snapped Sylvia. "Let him do the explaining and apologizing. Let him cross the channel and grovel at your feet. That's what he ought to do!"

"You won't tell him that."

"I don't know what I shall tell him."

"Please, Sylvia! You promised, remember."

"Don't fret. Some of the mad will be taken out of me before I see Mr. Heath. The tide is running strong and it will be a pull to get the boat across to the mainland. Kiss me and wish me luck, Marcia. You do believe I will try to be wise, don't you?"

"Yes, dear. Yes!"

"That's right. You really can trust me, you know. I'm not so bad as I sound."

Tucking the check into the wee pocket of her sweater, Sylvia caught up her pert beret and perched it upon her curls.

"So long!" she called, looking back over her shoulder as she opened the door. "So long, Marcia! I'll be back as soon as ever I can."

The haste with which she disappeared, suddenly precipitated her into the arms of a young man who stood upon the steps preparing to knock.

"Hortie Fuller," cried Sylvia breathlessly. "Hortie! Where on earth did you

come from?"

Her arms closed about his neck and he had kissed her twice before she swiftly withdrew, rearranging her curls and saying coldly:

"I cannot imagine what brought you here, Horatio."



Chapter XX

"I CAN'T imagine," repeated Sylvia, still very rosy and flustered, but with her most magnificent air, "what brought you to Wilton—I really cannot."

"Can't you?" grinned Horatio cheerfully.

"No, I cannot."

From his superior height of six-feet-two, he looked down at her meager five feet, amusement twinkling in his eyes.

Sylvia, however, was too intent on patting her curls into place to heed his glance.

"You wrote me to come, didn't you?" he presently inquired.

"I wrote you to come!"

"Well, at least you led me to suppose you'd like it if I were here," persisted Horatio. "Toward the bottom of page two you said: 'I am positively homesick'; and in the middle of the back of page three you wrote: 'It seems years since I've seen you.'"

"What if I did?" answered the girl with a disdainful shrug.

Nevertheless the dimples showed in her cheeks.

"And that isn't all," Horatio went on. "At the end of page five you wrote: 'Would that you were here!'"

Sylvia bit her lip.

"That was only a figure of speech—what is called poetic license. Writers are always would-ing things: Would I were a bird; would I were a ring upon that hand; would I were—were—well, almost anything. But it doesn't mean at all that they would really like to be those things."

"Then you didn't mean it when you said you wished I was here."

Horatio was obviously disappointed.

"Why, of course I am pleased to see you, Hortie. It is very nice of you to come to the Cape to meet my aunt and—"

"Darn your aunt!" he scowled. "I didn't come to see her."

"Hush! She's just inside."

"I don't care."

"But you will when you know her. She's darling."

"I am not interested in aunts."

"Take care! I happen to be very keen on this aunt of mine. If she didn't like you, you might get sent home. Don't be horrid, Hortie. I truly am glad you've come. You must make allowance for my being surprised. I haven't got over it yet. How in the world did you contrive to get away at this season? And what sort of a trip did you have?"

"Swell! I stopped overnight in New York at the Gardeners. Mother wanted me to deliver a birthday cake to Estelle who, you may remember, is the mater's god-daughter. She's a pippin, too. I hadn't seen her since she graduated from Vassar."

Sylvia listened.

She did not need to be told about the Gardeners.

They had visited Horatio's family more than once and rumor had it the elders of both families would be delighted were the young people to make a match of it.

"I'm surprised you did not stay longer in New York," Sylvia observed, gazing reflectively at her white shoe.

"New York wasn't my objective. I came on business, you see."

"Oh!"

This was not so flattering.

"Yes," continued Horatio, "Dad gave me two months off so I could get married."

This time he got the reaction for which he had been waiting.

Sylvia jumped.

"I was not aware you were engaged," murmured she in a formal, far-away tone.

"I'm not," came frankly from Horatio Junior. "But I'm going to be. In fact I chance to have the ring with me this minute. Want to see it?"

"I always enjoy looking at jewels," was her cautious retort.

Horatio felt of his many pockets.

"Where on earth did I put that thing?" he muttered. "Hope I haven't lost it. Oh, here it is."

He took out a tiny velvet case and sprang the catch.

"Oh, Hortie! Isn't it beautiful!" Sylvia cried. "It fairly takes away my breath."

"Like it?"

"It is perfectly lovely!"

"Try it on."

She shook her head.

"It wouldn't fit me. My hands are too small."

"It's a small ring. Here. Put it on," he urged, holding it toward her.

"Well, I suppose I might try it to please you. But I know it will be too large."

She slipped it on her finger.

"Why, it does fit. How odd!"

"Very odd indeed," he answered drily, as she reached her hand out into the sun and turned the diamonds so that they caught the light.

"Looks rather well on, doesn't it?" was his comment.

"It is a beautiful ring."

Horatio, standing behind her, twice extended his arms as if to gather her into them and twice withdrew them, deciding the action to be premature.

At length with a determined squaring of his shoulders, he locked his hands behind him and stood looking on while she continued to twist the ring this way and that.

"Well," yawned he after an interval, "I suppose I may as well put it back in the box."

"Don't you think it would be wiser if I took care of it for you, Hortie?" suggested she demurely. "You are dreadfully careless. Only a moment ago you had no idea where the ring was. If it is on my finger you'll know exactly."

"Bully idea! So I shall! Now tell me where you're off to. You were in a frightful hurry when you burst through that door."

"So I was," agreed Sylvia. "And here I am loitering and almost forgetting my errand. Come! We must hurry. I've got to go to town. Want to row me over?"

"You bet your life!"

"It may be quite a pull. The tide is running out and that means you will have to row against it."

"Show me the boat."

Still she hesitated.

"I don't know how nautical you are."

She thought she heard him chuckle.

Leading the way to the yellow dory, she took her place opposite him and he pushed off.

As they sat facing one another, her eyes roamed over his brown suit; his

matching tie, handkerchief and socks; his immaculate linen; his general air of careful grooming, and she could not but admit he wore his clothes well. She was so accustomed to seeing him that she never before had stopped to analyze his appearance. Now after weeks of separation she regarded him from a fresh viewpoint and realized with something of a shock how very good-looking he was.

He had the appearance of being scrubbed inside and out—of being not only clean but wholesome and upstanding; of knowing what he wanted and going after it.

He was not a small town product.

Three years in an eastern preparatory school, followed by four years of college life had knocked all that might have been provincial out of Horatio Junior.

Nevertheless these reflections, interesting though they were, proved nothing about his knowledge of the water.

Then she suddenly became aware that the boat was being guided by a master hand.

"Why, Hortie Fuller, I had no idea you could row like this!" exclaimed she with admiration.

Horatio deigned no response.

"Wherever did you learn to pull such an oar?"

"Varsity Crew."

"Of course. I had forgotten," she apologized, her eyes following as with each splendid stroke the craft shot forward.

Although the oarsman ignored her approbation he was not unmindful of it.

"Where do we land?" he asked.

"Anywhere."

He bent forward and with one final magnificent sweep sent the nose of the dory out of the channel.

"Come on," he called, leaping to the beach.

"But—but, Hortie—I can't get ashore here. I'll wet my white shoes."

"Jump."

"It's too far. Pull the boat higher on the sand."

"Not on your life. Jump, darling! I'll catch you."

She stood up in the bow.

"I can't. It's too far."

"Nonsense! Where's your sporting blood? Don't be afraid. I'm right here."

"Suppose you shouldn't catch me?"

"But I shall."

He would. She was certain of it.

Still she wavered.

"I don't want to jump," she pouted.

"You'll have to. Come on, Beautiful. You're wasting time."

"I think you are perfectly horrid," she flung out as she sprang forward.

An instant later she was in his arms and tight in a grip she knew herself powerless to loosen.

"Let me go, Hortie! Let me go!" she pleaded.

"I shall, sweetheart. All in good time. Before I set you free, though, we must settle one trivial point. Are we engaged or are we not?"

She made no answer.

"If we're not," he went on, "I intend to duck you in the water. If we are, you shall tell me you love me and go free."

"Don't be idiotic, Hortie. Please, please let me go. Somebody may come along and see us."

"I don't mind if they do. There are other considerations more important."

A swift, shy smile illuminated her face.

"I—I—don't want to be ducked, Hortie," she murmured, raising her arms to his neck.

"You precious thing! You shan't be. Now the rest of it. Say you love me."

"I guess you know that."

"But I wish to hear you say it."

"I—I—think I do."

"That's a half-hearted statement."

"I—I—know I do, Hortie."

"Ah, that is better. And I love you, Sylvia. Loving you is an old, old story with me—a sort of habit. I shall never change. You are too much a part of me, Sylvia. Now pay the boatman and you shall go. One is too cheap. Two is miserly. The fare is three. I won't take less."

"I consider your methods despicable," announced the girl when at last he

reluctantly put her down on her feet.

"A warrior must study his adversary and plan his attack accordingly."

"You blackmailed me."

"I know my Sylvia," he countered.

"Just the same you had no right to take advantage."

"Perhaps you'd rather I trundled back to New York tomorrow and offered the ring to Estelle."

"Silly! I was only fooling," she protested quickly, linking her arm in his. "This ring would never fit Estelle, dearest. Her hands are tremendous. Didn't you ever notice them? They are almost as large as a man's. I never saw such hands."

"She's an awful nice girl just the same."

"I don't doubt that. Come. We must quit fooling now and hurry or we shall never get home. Marcia will be frantic."

"Marcia?"

"My aunt. I have so much to tell you I hardly know where to begin," sighed Sylvia. "Do listen carefully, for I need your advice."

"What about?"

"A lot of things. It is a long story. You see Marcia has fallen in love with a robber."

"A robber? Your aunt?"

"Uh-huh. I know it sounds odd, but you will understand it better after you have heard the details," nodded Sylvia. "This man, a jewel thief, came to our house one day shipwrecked and hurt, so we took him in."

"A thief?"

Again she nodded.

"Yes. We didn't know then, of course, that he was a thief. Afterward, when we did, he was sick and we hadn't the heart to turn him out. In fact we couldn't have done it anyway. He was too fascinating. He was one of the most fascinating men you ever saw."

"He must have been," Horatio growled.

"Oh, he was. I myself almost lost my heart to him," confessed Sylvia earnestly. "Don't jeer. I am speaking the truth. I did not quite fall in love with him, but I came near it. Marcia did."

"Your aunt?"

"Yes. Don't look so horrified, Hortie. I realize it seems queer, unconventional;

but you'll understand better when you see Marcia. She is no ordinary person."

"I shouldn't think she was."

Sylvia ignored the comment.

"Well, anyway, the robber hid the loot and of course Marcia and I did all we could to protect him."

"Why of course?"

"I just told you—because he was so fascinating—because Marcia did not or would not believe he had stolen it. I knew better. Still I helped shield him just the same. Then one day the Wilton sheriff heard over the radio there had been a jewel robbery on Long Island, and stumbling upon the hidden gems, arrested Mr. Heath."

"Mr. Heath?"

"The thief, Hortie! The thief! How can you be so stupid?" ejaculated Sylvia sharply, squeezing his arm.

"I get you now. You must admit, though, this is some story to understand."

"I know it sounds confused, but in reality it is perfectly simple if you'll just pay attention. Well," the girl hurried on, "I cannot stop to explain all the twists and turns but anyway, the sheriff brought the burglar to Wilton and Marcia is broken-hearted."

"Broken-hearted! I should think she'd be thankful to be rid of him."

"But you keep forgetting she's in love with him."

"Well, do you wonder I do? What kind of a woman is your aunt? What sort of a gang have you got in with anyhow?"

"Hush, Hortie! You mustn't talk like that," Sylvia declared. "This affair is too serious. Marcia and the—the—she and Mr. Heath love one another. It is terrible because, you see, he has a wife."

"I should call that a stroke of Providence, myself."

"Horatio, I think you are being very nasty. You are joking about something that is no joking matter."

"I beg your pardon, dear. I wasn't really joking. Don't be angry. But this yarn is unbelievable—preposterous," explained the man, taking her hand and gently caressing it.

"I realize it sounds—unusual."

"Unusual is mild."

"Well—perhaps a little theatrical. Yet, for all that, it isn't. Now do stop

interrupting and let me finish. When Mr. Heath went away from the Homestead, he left behind him a hundred dollars in payment for what Marcia had done for him. It almost killed her."

"She—she—thought she ought to have had more, you mean?"

"Horatio!"

"But—a hundred dollars is quite a sum in these days. She would better have grabbed it tight and been thankful. My respect for this bandit chap is rising. I should call him an honest gentleman."

"It is useless to talk with you, Horatio—I can see that," Sylvia said, stiffening. "A delicate affair like this is evidently beyond your comprehension. You can't seem to understand it. All you do is to make light of every word I say."

"I'm not making light. On the contrary I guess I am taking the situation far more seriously than you are. I don't like the moral tone of this place at all. It looks to me as if you had got into most undesirable surroundings. It is high time I came and took you out of them. Thieves, and jewel-robberies, and sheriffs, and bandits with wives—Heavens! Alton City is a Garden of Eden compared with this town. The sooner you are married to me, young woman, and out of here the better. As for this remarkable aunt of yours—"

"Stop, Horatio! Stop right where you are," bridled Sylvia. "One more word against Marcia and back home you go so fast you won't be able to see for dust. I'm in earnest, so watch your step."

"The woman has bewitched you," frowned Horatio.

"She has. She bewitches everybody. She'll bewitch you."

"Not on your life!"

"Wait and see. Mr. Heath will bewitch you, too."

"The—the—?"

"Yes, the burglar, bandit, thief—whatever you choose to call him. You'll admit it when you meet him. We are going there now."

"To—to—call?"

"To return the check I just told you about. You're the stupidest man I was ever engaged to, Horatio. Why can't you listen?"

"I am listening with all my ears."

"Then the trouble is with your imagination," Sylvia said in her loftiest tone.

They walked on in silence until presently the girl stopped before the gate of a small, weather-beaten cottage.

"Well, here we are at Elisha's," she remarked, turning in at the gate.

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Mercy, Hortie. You'll wear me to a shred. Elisha is the sheriff. I'm going to coax him to let us see the prisoner."

"You don't mean the chap is jailed here! My—!" he clapped his hand over his mouth. "Why, any red-blooded man could knock the whole house flat to the ground with a single blow of his fist. I'll bet I could."

"There wasn't any other place to put him."

"Well, if he stays incarcerated in a detention pen like this, he's a noble-minded convict—that's all I have to say."

They walked up the narrow clam-shell path, bordered by iris and thrifty perennials.

As they did so, the sound of a radio drifted through the open window.

Sylvia peeped in.

Elisha, too intent on the music to hear her step, was sitting before the loud speaker, smoking.

"I've come to see Mr. Heath," she shouted above the wails of a crooning orchestra.

"You can't. 'Tain't allowed."

"Nonsense! Prisoners are always permitted to see visitors. Where is he?"

"I ain't sure as I'd oughter let you see him," hesitated Elisha.

"I'll take the responsibility."

"Wal—mebbe on second thought, 'twill do no harm," he drawled. "He's round on the back porch. I'd come with you warn't I waitin' for the news flashes."

"That's all right. I can find him."

"Say, who you got with you?" called the sheriff over his shoulder.

"A friend from my home town."

"Don't know 'bout his goin'."

"Oh, he won't do any harm. He's nobody—just my fiancé."

"Your what?"

"The man I am going to marry."

"You don't tell me! So you're gettin' married, are you? Good lookin' feller! I heard at the post office you had some chap in the offen'. But to let him see Mr. Heath—I dunno as 'twould be just—"

"Where I go Horatio goes," Sylvia retorted.

Elisha weakened.

"Wal, in that case—" he began.

She waited to hear no more.

"Come on, Hortie," she called.

Leaving Elisha absorbed in a saxophone solo, the two rounded the corner of the cottage and found themselves in the presence of Stanley Heath.



Chapter XXI

HE was looking very fit and comfortable, lying at full length in a Gloucester hammock with cushions beneath his head, a book in his hand, and a package of cigarettes within reach.

"Sylvia!" he cried, springing up and advancing toward her with outstretched hand. "Sylvia! What a brick you are to come!"

Angry as she was, when face to face with him she could not resist the contagion of his smile.

"I'm glad to see you so well," she said. "This is Mr. Horatio Fuller of Alton City."

Horatio looked Heath up and down and then stepped forward and gripped his hand with unmistakable cordiality.

"Mighty glad to know you, sir," was his greeting. "You seem to have got yourself into a jam. If there is anything I can do—any way I can be of service—"

"Horatio, you forget we are not here to make a social call," interrupted Sylvia, who had by this time regained her routed chilliness and indignation. "On the contrary, Mr. Heath, we have come on a very painful errand. We are returning this check to you."

She extended it toward him, gingerly holding its corner in the tips of her fingers as if it were too foul a thing to touch. "It was outrageous of you, insulting to leave a thing of this sort for Marcia—to attempt to pay in cash—kindness such as hers."

"I'm—sorry," Heath stammered.

"Sorry! You couldn't have been very sorry, or you would have sensed such an act would hurt her terribly."

Horatio Fuller fumbled nervously with his tie.

"You deserve," swept on young Sylvia with rising spirit, "to be thrashed. Hortie and I both think so—don't we, Hortie?"

Horatio Junior turned crimson.

"Oh, I say, Sylvia, go easy!" he protested. "Don't drag me into this. I don't know one darn thing about it."

"But I've explained everything to you."

"You've tried to. Nevertheless, the whole affair is beyond me. I can't make head or tail out of it," shrugged Horatio. "Suppose I just step inside and listen to the news flashes while you and Mr. Heath transact your business. It will be less awkward all round. If you want me you can speak."

Nodding courteously in Heath's direction, Horatio Junior disappeared.

"Your Mr. Fuller is a man of nice feeling," Stanley Heath declared looking after him. "I congratulate you."

"Thank you."

"Everything is settled then?"

She nodded.

"I hope you will be very happy."

She did not reply at once. When she did, it was to say with a humility new and appealing:

"I shall be. I never appreciated Hortie until now. I was too silly."

"Perhaps you were merely young."

"It wasn't that. I was vain—feather-headed. I have realized it since knowing Marcia."

"We all want to be different after we have seen Marcia," Stanley Heath said gently.

"We don't just want to be—we set about it," was the girl's grave reply.

"Sit down, Sylvia, and let us talk of Marcia," ventured Heath after a pause. "I am deeply sorry if I have wounded her—indeed I am."

The girl searched his face.

"I cannot understand you, Mr. Heath," she said. "What has Marcia done that you should have left her as you did? Hasn't she believed in you through thick and thin? Stood up for you against everybody—going it blind at that? Few women would have had such faith in a stranger."

"I realize that. You do not need to tell me," he answered. "It is precisely because she has gone so far I believed her capable of going farther yet—the whole way."

"What do you mean by the whole way?"

"To the end."

"Well, hasn't she?"

He shook his head.

"No. She has fallen short—disappointed me cruelly. When it came to the final

test, her affection collapsed. Oh, she has been wonderful," he added quickly. "Do not think I fail to appreciate that. She has far out-distanced every other woman I ever have known. I simply expected too much of her, doubtless the impossible. Human nature is frail—a woman's heart the frailest thing of all. I have always said so."

"You wrong Marcia," cried Sylvia hotly. "Her heart is not frail. Neither is she the weak sort of person you have pictured. In all the world you could not match her loyalty or the depth of her affection. I owe Marcia a great debt. I could tell you things she has done that would make you thoroughly ashamed of your superficial rating of her. But why go into that? If after the experience we three have lived through together you have not discovered what she is, it is futile for me to attempt to show you.

"You came into our lives like a meteor—entirely detached from everything. We knew nothing about you and in the face of damaging evidence you offered neither Marcia nor me one word of explanation. Marcia asked none. Without rhyme or reason she believed in you. I had not her faith. I freely confess I thought you guilty. Oh, I liked you sufficiently well to be ready to help you save your skin. But Marcia cared enough for you to want you to save your soul.

"There is a difference in that sort of caring, Mr. Heath—a big difference. When you were taken ill, we both nursed you—I willingly, she devotedly. Here lay another difference had you been able to detect it. What happened as a result of this enforced intimacy? You know—know far better than I."

"I fell in love with Marcia," replied the man without an instant's hesitation.

"You fell in love!" Sylvia repeated, her lip curling. "You call it love—the poor thing you offered her! Why, Marcia would have gone to the world's end with you, Stanley Heath, had she the right. She would have faced any humiliation for your sake. If prison doors closed upon you, she would have remained faithful until they swung open and afterward followed you to any corner of the earth in which you chose to begin a new life."

"That's where you're wrong, Sylvia," contradicted Heath. "Marcia was not ready to do that. I tried her out and she refused. When I told her I should return to her, and asked her in so many words whether she was willing to face shame and public scorn for my sake she turned her back on me. She could not go to that length."

"Are you sure she understood?" asked Sylvia, stepping nearer and looking fearlessly into his eyes. "There is a shame Marcia never in this world would face for any man; but it is not the shame you have just described.

"It is the shame of wronging another woman; destroying a home. I know that sounds old-fashioned in days like these. Perhaps Marcia is old-fashioned. Perhaps I am. In the villages where we have been brought up, we do not go in for the new standards sponsored by more up-to-date communities. We believe in marriage as a sacred, enduring sacrament—not a bond to be lightly broken. When you offered Marcia less than that—"

"I never offered Marcia any such shameful position, Sylvia," cried Stanley Heath. "I would not so far insult her."

"But you are married."

"That is a lie. Who told you so?"

"The—the wire to Mrs. Stanley Heath—the telephone message. I heard you call her Joan."

"But, Sylvia, Mrs. Stanley Heath is not my wife. She is my young step-mother, my father's widow. I always have called her Joan."

"Oh! I beg your pardon."

"I see it all now," the man exclaimed. "You have entirely misunderstood the situation. I'm a Junior. Since my father's death, however, people have got out of the way of using the term. Sometimes I myself am careless about it. So Marcia thought—"

"Of course she did. We both did. So did Elisha Winslow and Eleazer Crocker. So did lots of other people in Wilton."

"Heavens!"

"Well, how were we to know?" Sylvia demanded.

"How, indeed? If an innocent citizen cannot visit a town without being arrested as a criminal within a week of his arrival, why shouldn't he be married without his knowledge? Circumstantial evidence can, apparently, work wonders."

Then suddenly he threw back his head and laughed.

"Bless you, little Sylvia—bless you for setting me right. I told you you were a brick and you've proved it. Thanks to you, everything is now straightened out."

"Not quite everything, I am afraid," the girl protested.

"Everything that is of importance," he amended. "The rest will untangle itself in time. I am not worrying about it. Here, give me your hand. How am I to thank you for what you have done? I only hope that young Horatio Fuller of yours realizes what a treasure he is getting."

"He does, Mr. Heath—he does," observed that gentleman, strolling at the same

instant through the door and encircling his tiny bride-to-be with his arm. "Haven't I traveled half way across this big country of ours to marry her?"

"Oh, we're not going to be married yet, Hortie," demurred the girl trying to wrench herself free of the big fellow's hold.

"Certainly we are, my dear. Didn't you know that? I'm surprised how many things there are that you don't know," he went on teasingly. "I thought I explained exactly what brought me East. Didn't I tell you this morning I came to get married? I was perfectly serious. Dad gave me two months vacation with that understanding. I must either produce a wife when I get home or lose my job. He'll never give me another furlough if I don't."

"Looks to me as if you had Mr. Fuller's future prosperity in your hands, Sylvia," Heath said.

"She has. She can make or break me. A big responsibility, eh, little Sylvia?"

"I know it, Hortie," retorted the girl seriously.

"She is equal to it, Fuller—never fear," Stanley Heath asserted.

"I'm not doing any worrying," smiled Horatio. "I—"

The sentence was cut short by the radio's loudspeaker:

The much sought Long Island gem thief was captured this morning at his lodgings in Jersey City. Harris Chalmers, alias Jimmie O'Hara, a paroled prisoner, was taken by the police at his room on K— Street. A quantity of loot, together with firearms and the missing jewels were found concealed in the apartment. The man readily admitted the theft. He has a long prison record.

For a second nobody spoke.

Then as if prompted by common impulse, the three on the piazza rushed indoors.

Elisha was sitting limply before the radio.

"Did you hear that?" he gasped.

"Well, rather!" Horatio Fuller shouted with a triumphant wave of his hand.

"Ain't it the beateree?" exploded the astonished sheriff. "That sends the whole case up in the air. All that's needed now to make me out the darndest fool on God's earth is for Eleazer's young nephew-lawyer in New York, who's checking up Heath's story, to wire everything there is O.K. If he does, I'll go bury my head. There goes the telephone! That's him! That's Eleazer—I'll bet a hat."

"Hello!—Yes, I heard it.—You ain't surprised? Wal, I am. I'm took off my feet.—Oh, your nephew wired, did he, an' everything's O.K.? That bein' the case, I reckon there's no more to be said. I feel like a shrimp. How do you feel?—"

Elisha hung up the receiver.

"Wal, Mr. Heath, the story you told Eleazer an' me is straight as a string in every particular," he announced. "You're free! There ain't nothin' I can say. To tell you I'm sorry ain't in no way adequate. I shan't offer you my hand neither, 'cause I know you wouldn't take it—leastways I wouldn't, was I in your place. There's some insults nothin' can wipe out an' this blunder of mine is one of 'em. You'll just have to set me down as one of them puddin'-headed idiots that was over-ambitious to do his duty. I ain't got no other explanation or excuse to make."

"I shall not let it go at that, Mr. Winslow," Stanley Heath acclaimed, stepping to the old man's side and seizing his palm in a strong grip. "We all make errors. Forget it. I'm going to. Besides, you have treated me like a prince since I've been your guest."

"You are the prince, sir. Livin' with you has shown me that. Had I knowed you 'fore I arrested you as well as I do now the thing wouldn't 'a' happened. Wal, anyhow, all ain't been lost. At least I've met a thoroughbred an' that ain't none too frequent an occurrence in these days."

"What I can't understand, Mr. Winslow, is why you didn't recognize he was a thoroughbred from the beginning," Horatio Fuller remarked.

"You've a right to berate me, young man—a perfect right. I ain't goin' to put up no defense. 'Twas the circumstances that blinded me. Besides, I had only a single glimpse of Mr. Heath. Remember that. After he was took sick I never saw him again. Had we got acquainted, as we have now, everything would 'a' been different. Findin' them jewels—"

"Great hat, man! I had a diamond ring in my pocket when I came to Wilton, but that didn't prove I'd stolen it."

"I know! I know!" acquiesced the sheriff. "Eleazer an' me lost our bearin's entirely. We got completely turned round."

"A thief with a Phi Beta Kappa key!" jeered Horatio. "Godfrey!" Then turning to Sylvia, he added in an undertone: "Well, so far as I can see the only person who has kept her head through this affair is our Aunt Marcia."

Elisha overheard the final clause.

"That's right!" he agreed with cordiality. "You're 'xactly right, Mr. Fuller. The Widder's head-piece can always be relied upon to stay steady."

"Whose head-piece?" inquired Stanley Heath, puzzled by the term.

"Marcia's. Here in town we call her The Widder."

"Well, you'll not have the opportunity to call her that much longer," Heath laughed.

"You don't tell me!" Elisha regarded him, open-mouthed. "Humph! So that's how the wind blows, is it? Wal, I can see this mix-up would 'a' ended my chances anyway. Marcia'd never have had me after this. Disappointed as I am, though, there's a sight of comfort in knowin' she won't have Eleazer neither. He don't come out of the shindy a whit better'n me. That's somethin'. In fact it's a heap!"



Chapter XXII

INTENSE as was the joy of the three persons, who a little later set out toward the Homestead in the old yellow dory, they were a silent trio.

Too much of seriousness had happened during the morning for them to dispel its aftermath lightly.

Horatio, pulling at the oars, was unusually earnest, Sylvia turned the ring on her finger reflectively and Stanley Heath looked far out over the water, too deep in thought to be conscious of either of them.

When, however, the boat swung into the channel, Sylvia spoke.

"Hortie and I are not coming with you, Mr. Heath," she said. "We will stay behind. Only do, please, promise me one thing. Do not tell Marcia the whole story before we have a chance to hear it. There are ever so many connecting links I am curious beyond words to have you supply."

"Such as—?"

"The jewels in the first place. I can hardly wait to have that mystery solved."

Stanley laughed.

"The jewels are no mystery at all. I can satisfy your mind about those here and now. They were Joan's—Mrs. Heath's. Her maid, Corinne, took them and disappeared. Soon afterward, purely by accident, I met Paul Latimer, a friend who lives on Long Island, and played squash with him at the club and during the course of our conversation, he asked if I knew of a good man servant, saying that Julien, their butler, had just given notice that he was to be married shortly to Corinne, the new parlor-maid, and return with her to France.

"The woman's name instantly caught my attention.

"Why shouldn't I do a bit of sleuthing on my own account?"

"Thus far the detectives Joan and I had hired had made no headway at locating the jewels.

"Why shouldn't I have a try at it myself? It chanced I had ordered a power-boat built in Rhode Island and had for some time been awaiting an opportunity to test her out. Why not combine the two errands?"

"I got the boat and used her a couple of days, and finding her satisfactory cruised along to the Latimers' at whose house I had frequently stayed, and with the habits of whose household I was familiar. My plan was to arrive early in the

morning before the family was astir and catch the parlor-maid alone at her work.

"Should she prove to be our Corinne, I would boldly confront her with the theft and demand the jewels; if, on the other hand, she turned out to be another person altogether, it would be perfectly easy to explain my presence by falling back on my acquaintance with Paul.

"It seemed, on thinking the matter over, that this would be a far more considerate course anyway than to drag in the detectives, not only because I had no real evidence to present to them, but also because of my friendship for the Latimers and for Julien, who had been in their employ many years. I knew they esteemed him very highly and would be dreadfully cut up should they find him involved in an affair as unpleasant as this one. Beside, I felt practically certain he had had nothing to do with the crime. He was too fine—one of the old-fashioned, devoted type of servant.

"To shame such a man and throw suspicion on him if he were blameless would be a pity, especially just on the eve of his resigning from service. It might mean that instead of leaving with the gratitude and good-will of his employers, he might be sent away under a cloud. I did not wish that to happen.

"Well, my scheme worked to a dot.

"I reached the Latimers' unobserved; found Corinne alone straightening up the library; faced her and demanded the jewels.

"The instant she saw me she knew the game was up. Nevertheless, she made a pretense of denying the crime until I threatened to send for Julien, at which suggestion she broke down and, without more ado, produced the gems from her pocket, shouldering all the blame.

"Julien, she protested, knew nothing of the theft. He was a self-respecting, honest man. Should he be told of what she had done it would end everything between them. She loved him. Indeed it was because of him she had committed the crime.

"It proved they had been engaged some time and long before had agreed to save their money and sometime pool it so they might be married and buy a little home in France.

"Julien had saved conscientiously; but Corinne had been extravagant and let the major part of her earnings slip through her fingers. He was now asking how much she had laid aside and to her consternation she found she had almost nothing.

"She was ashamed to face him.

"What could she say?

"She did not know what impulse prompted her to take the jewels. She had never stolen before in all her life. The diamonds had been constantly in her care and it had never occurred to her to appropriate them. It had been a sudden, mad temptation created by the need of money and she had yielded to it without thought. Scarcely were the gems in her possession before she regretted her action and longed to undo it. She would have taken them back had she not feared the consequences. She begged Julien should not be told what she had done. If her crime could be concealed from him she was willing to make any restitution I demanded.

"Perhaps I was a sentimental fool. Anyway I simply could not see it my duty to hand the unhappy creature over to the authorities; destroy Julien's faith in her; wipe out the future she had set her heart upon. She was young, with life before her. I felt sure if given a chance she would make good.

"Promising I would remain silent, I pocketed the gems and came away.

"Whether I acted rightly or wrongly I do not know.

"I suppose by this time the two are married and on their way to France. I believe Corinne told the truth and that under other influences she will become an excellent wife and mother. At least she has the opportunity.

"The other half of my tale—the half I neither foresaw nor planned—is familiar to you.

"The fog that drove me out of my course; my subsequent shipwreck and illness; the coming of Currier, our old family servant; the chain of circumstances that brought upon me the calamities from which I have just extricated myself—these are an old story. The only thing that now remains to clear my sky is for me to right myself with Marcia."

"That will be easy," smiled Sylvia.

"I wish I thought so," was Heath's moody answer.

"Marcia is no ordinary woman. Her understanding and love are measureless. Love, Mr. Heath, forgives a great deal."

"I know it does. In that lies my only hope."

She was not in the house when at last Stanley Heath overtook her, but far up the beach tossing driftwood into the surf for Prince Hal to retrieve.

The man paused, watching them.

Hatless, her splendid body aglow with exercise, Marcia had the freedom and wholesomeness of a young athlete. She threw the sticks with the overhand swing

of a boy pitching a ball. Yet with all her strength and muscular ease, there was a grace unmistakably feminine in her every movement. Feminine, too, and very beautiful was her finely poised head, her blowing hair, her glorious color, and her sparkling eyes.

When she turned and saw him, she uttered a faint cry, but she did not advance to meet him. Prince Hal did that, racing up the beach, uttering shrill yelps of welcome as he came.

A second and the dog was again at Marcia's side, and in this ecstasy of delight he continued to run back and forth until Stanley Heath had covered the sandy curve that intervened and himself stood beside her.

"Marcia—dearest—I have come back—come to ask your forgiveness. I misjudged you cruelly the night we parted and in anger spoke words I had no right to speak. Forgive me, dear! Forgive me! Can you?"

"I forgave you long ago—before you asked," she whispered.

"Forgave without understanding—how like you! But you must not do that. You have more to forgive in me than you know, Marcia. I have been proud, unbelieving, unworthy of a love like yours. I have made you suffer—suffer needlessly. Listen to what I have to tell and then see if you can still forgive."

Turning, they walked slowly along the shore.

"I could have told you about the jewels and how I came by them at the outset had I not suddenly conceived the idea of teasing you. The plan to conceal my story came to me as a form of sport—a subtle, psychological game. Here I was pitched without ceremony into a strange environment among persons who knew nothing of my background. What would they make of me? How rate me when cut off from my real setting? I resolved to try out the experiment. Women are said to be inquisitive, particularly those living in isolation. My advent could not but stimulate questions. I thought it would be an amusing adventure to circumvent not only your curiosity but also that of the village.

"I placed scant dependence on feminine discernment and constancy.

"When I went to the war, I left behind a girl who pledged herself to love and wait for me. When I came back it was to find her married to my best friend. The discovery shook my confidence in human nature, and especially in women, to its foundations. I derided love, vowing I never would marry and be made a puppet of a second time.

"The remainder of the story you know.

"I stumbled, a stranger, into your home and instantly you set at naught all my preconceived theories of womanhood by believing in me with an unreasoning

faith. You asked no questions. You did not even exhibit a legitimate curiosity in the peculiar network of circumstances that entangled me. You were a new type of being and I regarded you with wonder.

"Still, I was not satisfied. I felt sure that if pressed too far your trust in me would crumble and, therefore, I tried deliberately to break it down by throwing obstacles in its pathway. When suspicion closed in upon me I put you to further tests by withholding the explanations I could easily have made. It was a contemptible piece of egoism—selfish and cruel—and dearly have I paid for it. But at least remember that if I caused you suffering I have suffered also.

"For, Marcia, through it all I loved you. I recognized from the moment I first looked into your eyes that a force mightier than ourselves drew us together—a force not to be denied. Nevertheless, so bitter had been my experience I dared not yield to this strange new power. Instead I opposed it with all my strength, giving my love reluctantly, fighting inch by inch the surrender I sensed to be inevitable.

"You, on the other hand, had like myself known betrayal, but you had taken the larger view and not allowed it to warp or mar your outlook on life. When love came knocking a second time, you were neither too proud nor too cowardly to answer it, but freely gave your affection with the gladness and sincerity so characteristic of you.

"I do not deserve such a love.

"Beside the largeness of your nature my own shows itself childish—a small, poor thing for which I blush.

"Help me to erase the past.

"I love you with my whole soul, dear. Everything in me loves you. My life is worth nothing unless you share it.

"Will you?

"Ah, you need not fear, Marcia. Sylvia has told me everything. Beloved, there is not and never has been a barrier to our marriage. We have misunderstood one another. Let us do so no longer.

"I am a free man—acquitted.

"I also am free of any claim that would hinder our wedding. Come to me and let us begin life afresh."

She came then, swiftly.

As he held her in his arms, the last shadow that separated them melted away.



Under the glow of the noonday sun, they walked back toward the Homestead, hand in hand.

Sylvia came running to meet them and, throwing her arms about Marcia, kissed her.

"Everything is all right—I can see that," she cried. "Oh, I am so glad—so glad for both of you! I believe I just could not stand it if you were not happy, because I am so happy myself. Hortie is here, you know. Didn't Stanley tell you? Why, Stanley Heath, aren't you ashamed to forget all about Hortie and me? Yes, Hortie came this morning. We're engaged. See my ring!"

"Ring!" repeated Heath. "Mercy on us, Marcia, you must have a ring. I cannot allow this young sprite of a niece to outdo you. I am afraid I was not as foresighted as Mr. Fuller, however. Still, I can produce a ring, such as it is. Here, dear, you shall wear this until I can get something better."

He slipped from his little finger the wrought-gold ring with its beautifully cut diamond.

"I picked this up in India," he said. "I am sure it will fit. Try it, Marcia."

"I—I—do not need a ring," murmured she, drawing back and putting her hands nervously behind her.

"Of course you do," interposed Sylvia. "How absurd! A ring is part of being engaged."

"A very, very small part," Marcia answered.

"Nevertheless, it is a part," the girl insisted. "Come, don't be silly. Let Stanley put it on."

Playfully she caught Marcia's hands and imprisoning them, drew them forward.

On the left one glistened a narrow gold band.

"Jason's!" cried Sylvia. "Jason's! Take it off and give it to me. You owe nothing to Jason. Even I, a Howe, would not have you preserve longer that worn out allegiance, neither would my mother. The past is dead. You have closed the door upon it. You said so yourself. Never think of it again. You belong to Stanley now—to Stanley and to no one else."

As she spoke, Sylvia took the ring from the older woman's hand and held it high in the air.

"The past is dead," she repeated, "and the last reminder of it—is—gone."

There was a gleam as the golden band spun aloft and catching an instant the sunlight's glory, disappeared beneath the foam that marked the line of incoming

breakers.

"Now, Stanley, put your ring upon her finger. It is a symbol of a new life, of hope, of happier things. Isn't it so, Marcia?"

"Yes! Yes!"

Sylvia drew a long breath.

"There! Now we'll not be serious a minute longer. This is the greatest day of our four lives. There must not be even a shadow in our heaven. Kiss me, Marcia, and come and meet Hortie. Poor dear! He is paralyzed with fright at the thought of appearing into your presence. I left him hiding behind the door. I could not coax him out of the house."

"How ridiculous! You must have made me out an ogre."

"On the contrary, I made you out an enchantress. I told him you would bewitch him. That's why he became panic-stricken. Do be nice to him—for my sake. He really is a lamb."

Sylvia stepped to the piazza.

"Horatio," called she imperiously. "Come out here right away and meet your Aunt Marcia. And please, Stanley, forgive me for mistaking you for a bandit. I'm dreadfully mortified. Still, you must admit circumstantial evidence was strong against you. All of which proves on what shifting sands rest our moral characters!"

"Say rather our reputations, dear child," Heath corrected.

Transcriber's Notes:

Every effort has been made to replicate this text as faithfully as possible. Inconsistent hyphenation is as in the original.

The following is a list of changes made to the original:

[Page 19](#): ensconsed changed to ensconced

[Page 70](#): s-pose changed to s'pose

[Page 72](#): villian changed to villain

[Page 84](#): villian changed to villain

[Page 153](#): housekeper changed to housekeeper

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