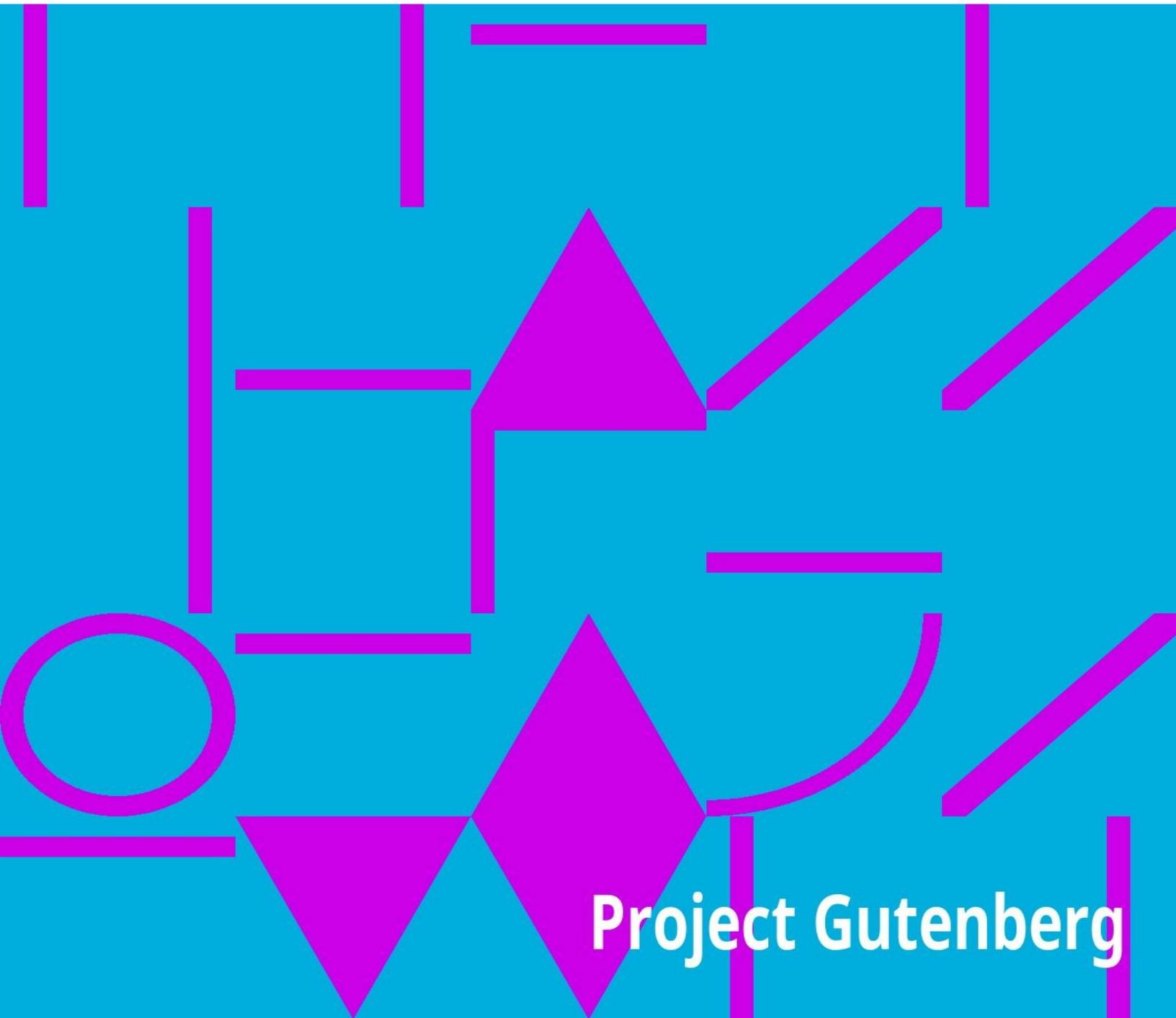
The Tyranny of Weakness

Charles Neville Buck



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THE TYRANNY OF WEAKNESS

BY

CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

AUTHOR OF
"THE CALL OF THE CUMBERLANDS,"
"DESTINY," Etc.

Frontispiece by
PAUL STAHR

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THE TYRANNY OF WEAKNESS

CHAPTER I

They were types in embryo, but of course they did not know it. No more would a grain of wheat and a poppy seed dropping side-by-side in a fallow place reflect upon their destinies, though one might typify a working world's dependence for bread; the other a dreaming world's reliance for opium.

They were a boy and a girl stepping artlessly into the wide chances of a brand-new and vastly interesting adolescence. Just now her young eyes were provocative with the starry light of mischief. His were smoldering darkly under her badgering because his pride had been touched to the quick. His forefathers had been gentlemen in England before they were gentlemen in the Valley of Virginia and his heritage of knightly blood must not be made a subject of levity. But the girl reflected only that when his dark eyes blazed and his cheeks colored with that dammed-up fury she found him a more diverting vassal than in calmer and duller moods. A zoo is more animated when the beasts are stirred into action.

"What was it that General Breckinridge said, Stuart?" She put the question innocently. "When the Newmarket cadets made their charge?"

"He said—" Suddenly the boy caught the riffled mockery of her eyes and abruptly his inspired recital broke off in exasperation, "May I ask just why you find that such a funny story?" he inquired with ironical dignity. "Most people seem to think it was rather pitiful than comic to send to their slaughter boys almost young enough to be in the nursery."

The eyes of Conscience Williams twinkled. "Maybe it isn't the story itself that's funny," she deigned to admit. "When your father told it, I cried—but when you tell it your face is so furious that—that you seem about to begin the war between the states all over again."

"Of course that makes it perfectly clear." Into the manner of young Mr. Stuart Farquaharson came now the hauteur of dignified rebuke. He enveloped himself in a sudden and sullen silence, brooding as he sat with his eyes fixed on his riding boots.

"What did General Breckinridge say?" She prompted persistently. Such sheer

perversity maddened him. He had been reciting to her a story of exalted heroism—the narrative of how the boy cadets had hurled their young bodies against the Northern cannon and of how General Breckinridge had prayed for forgiveness as he gave the command which sent this flowering youth to its fate. And she found it amusing! He could not see how genuinely comic was his own unreconstructed ardor—how exaggerated was his cocksure manner—how thoroughly he spoke as though he himself had bled on the field of honor.

From her hammock she watched him with serene and inscrutable complacency, from under long, half-closed lashes. In his gaze was inarticulate wrath, but back of that—idolatry. He had from birth breathed an atmosphere of traditions in which the word "chivalry" was defined, not as an obsolete term, but as a thing still kept sacredly aflame in the hearts of gentlemen. To the stilted gallantry of his boyhood, ideals had meant more than ideas until Conscience Williams had come from her home on Cape Cod and turned his life topsy-turvy. Since her advent he had dreamed only of dark eyes and darker hair and crimson lips. He had rehearsed eloquent and irresistible speeches, only to have them die on a tongue which swelled painfully and clove to the roof of his mouth when he essayed their utterance. Then had come an inspiration. The stirring narration of how the Newmarket cadets had charged the Northern guns was to have been his cue, carrying him with the momentum of its intrinsic heroism over the ramparts of tongue-tied shyness. That was what he had essayed this morning, aided and abetted by the tuneful fragrance of June in Virginia. The stage had been set—his courage had mounted—and before he had reached his magnificent peroration, she had laughed at him. Ye Gods! She had affronted the erstwhile Confederate States of America and his spirit was galled.

Suddenly Conscience looked up and met his gaze penitently. It was a change from mockery so swift and complete that he should have suspected it, but he saw only a flash of sun through dark clouds.

"Do you like poetry?" she abruptly demanded.

"Like poetry!" Again the boy's countenance needed a twinkle of merriment to redeem it from a too serious acceptance of self. "Not to like poetry—if it's real poetry—is simply to be a plain clod." He spoke with an oracular and pedantic assurance which challenged the girl's mischief afresh.

"Shall I recite you something?" was her mild and seemingly placating suggestion, "just to see if it is real poetry?"

"Will you? I wish you would." He bent forward in eager anticipation. Verse should pave the way with music for the avowal which he had so far failed to force across the barrier between heart and lips.

She rose from the hammock and stood beside one of the broad verandah pillars, very straight and slender and flower-like, with the June sun on her hair. Stuart's heart was conscious of a sudden glow. A boy new to love, like a man new to drink, can recognize from a sip an elation that the jaded taste has forever forfeited. Then in a rich voice with a slightly exaggerated elocution, Conscience began:

"Up from the meadows, rich with corn, clear in the cool
September morn,
The clustered spires of Frederick stand, green-walled by
the hills of Maryland."

Those schools wherein the last of the Farquaharsons had derived his primary education had not starred or featured the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier. Stuart's eyes dwelt devouringly on the elocutionist—as yet unruffled by suspicion. They were doing their best to say the things at which his lips balked. But as the recitation proceeded their light died from hope to misery and from misery to the anger of hurt pride. He stood very rigid and very attentive, making no effort to interrupt, but holding her gaze defiantly as she went on:

"Up the street came the Rebel tread, Stonewall Jackson
riding ahead.
Under his slouch hat left and right, he glanced and the
old flag caught his sight."

At these lines the boy flinched, but still he said nothing. Like a soldier who stands at attention under the threat of a firing squad he listened to the end—or rather to the stanzas which recite:

"'Shoot, if you must at this old gray head, but spare your
country's flag,' she said.
A flush of manhood, a look of shame, into the face of
their leader came...."

That was too much! The man of whom these impious words were spoken was that gallant knight, without reproach, whose name is hallowed in every Southern

heart. Very slowly Stuart Farquaharson raised his hand.

"I think," he announced with a shake of repressed fury in his voice, "I'll have to go home now. Good afternoon."

"Then you don't like poetry?"

"I don't consider that poetry," he said with a dignity which an archbishop might have envied. "I consider it slander of a dead hero."

"You mean, then," Conscience seemed a little frightened now and her utterance was hurried and fluttering, "that you are mad and are going? You never go until later than this."

It was difficult to be both courteous and honest, and Stuart's code demanded both.

"I expect there wasn't ever the same reason before."

This time it was the girl's eyes that leaped into flame and she stamped a small foot.

"Did you ever have any *fun* in your life?" she demanded. "You know perfectly well that I teased you just because you were such a solemn owl that you're not far from being a plain, every-day prig. All right; go if you like and don't come to see me again until you get over the idea that you're a—a—" she halted for a word, then added scornfully—"a combination high priest and Prince of Wales."

Stuart Farquaharson bowed stiffly.

"All right," he said. "I won't forget. Good-by."

At the dinner table that evening Mrs. Farquaharson noted with concern the trance-like abstraction in which her son sat, as one apart. Later as she mixed for the General the night-cap toddy, which was an institution hallowed by long usage, she commented on it.

"I'm afraid Stuart isn't well," she volunteered. "He's not a moody boy by nature, and he doesn't seem himself to-day. Perhaps we had better send him to Doctor Heathergill. It wouldn't do for him to fall ill just when he's starting to college."

The General studied the toddy as though it held the secrets of a seer's crystal. "Your very good health, my dear." He raised the glass and about his gray eyes came the star-point wrinkles of an amused smile, "I noticed that Stuart didn't ride over to see the little Williams girl to-night. Wasn't that unusual?"

Mrs. Farquaharson nodded her head. "He must have been feeling positively ill," she declared. "Nothing less could have kept him away."

But the father, who had never before shown evidence of a hard heart, permitted his quizzical twinkle to broaden into a frank grin, "With every confidence in Dr. Heathergill, I doubt his ability to aid our declining son."

"Then you think—?"

"Precisely so. The little girl from the North has undertaken a portion of the boy's education which is as painful to him as it is essential."

"He's been perfectly lovely to her," defended the mother indignantly. "It's a shame if she's hurt him."

The General's face grew grave.

"It's a God's blessing, I think." He spoke thoughtfully now. "Stuart is a sentimentalist. He lives largely on dreams and poetry and ideals."

"Surely, General—" Sometimes in the moment of serious connubial debate Mrs. Farquaharson gave her husband his title. "Surely you wouldn't have him otherwise. The traditions of his father and grandfathers were the milk on which he fed at my breast."

"By which I set great store, but a child must be weaned. Stuart is living in an age of shifting boundaries in ideas and life.

"I should hate to see him lower his youthful standards, but I should like to see him less in the clouds. I should like to see him leaven the lump with a sense of humor. To be self-consciously dedicated to noble things and yet unable to smile at one's ego is to be censorious, and to be censorious is to be offensive."

"But he's just a child yet," argued Stuart's mother. "For all his height and strength he's hardly more than a boy after all."

"Quite true, yet to-night he's tossing in his bed and breathing like a furnace because his heart is broken for all time. It's all very well to swear:

"To love one maiden only, cleave to her
And worship her by years of noble deeds,

but for him that day is still far off. Meanwhile he's got to have his baptism of fire. It's a mighty good thing for a boy like Stuart to begin taking a little punishment while he's young. Young hearts, not less than young bones, mend quicker and better. He's over intense and if he got the *real* before he's had his puppy loves it would go hard with him."

CHAPTER II

When Stuart presented himself at breakfast the next morning his eyes were black-ringed with sleeplessness, but his riding boots were freshly polished and his scarf tied with extra precision. It was in the mind of the youngest Farquaharson to attain so personable an appearance that the lady who had cast aside his love should be made to realize what she had lost as they passed on the highway.

Then he went to the stables to have Johnny Reb saddled and started away, riding slowly. When he came in view of the house which she sanctified with her presence, a gray saddle mare stood fighting flies and stamping by the stone hitching post in front of the verandah, and each swish of the beast's tail was a flagellation to the boy's soul. The mare belonged to Jimmy Hancock and logically proclaimed Jimmy's presence within. Heretofore between Stuart and Jimmy had existed a cordial amity, but now the aggrieved one remembered many things which tainted Jimmy with villainy and crassness. Stuart turned away, his hand heavy on the bit, so that Johnny Reb, unaccustomed to this style of taking pleasure sadly, tossed his head fretfully and widened his scarlet nostrils in disgust.

Ten minutes later the single and grim-visaged horseman riding north came upon a pair riding south. Johnny Reb's silk coat shone now with sweat, but his pace was sedate. The love-sick Stuart had no wish to travel so fast as would deny the lady opportunity to halt him for conversation. Conscience and Jimmy were also riding slowly and Stuart schooled his features into the grave dignity of nobly sustained suffering. No Marshal of France passing the Emperor's reviewing stand ever rode with a deeper sense of the portentous moment. With his chin high and his face calm in its stricken dignity he felt that no lady with a heart in her soft bosom could fail to extend proffers of conciliation. In a moment more they would meet in the narrow road. His face paled a shade or two under the tension—then they were abreast and his heart broke and the apple of life was dead sea fruit to his palate. She had spoken. She had even smiled and waved her riding crop, but she had done both with so superlative an indifference that it seemed she had not really seen him at all. She was chatting vivaciously with Jimmy and Jimmy had been laughing as raucously as a jackal—and so they had passed him by. The event which had spelled tragedy for him; robbed him of

sleep and withered his robust appetite had not even lingered overnight in her memory. The dirk was in Stuart Farquaharson's breast, but it was yet to be twisted. Pride forbade his shaking Johnny Reb into a wild pace until he was out of sight. The funereal grandeur of his measured tread must not be broken, and so he heard with painful distinctness the next remark of Jimmy Hancock.

"What in thunder's eatin' on Stuty—" (sometimes, though not encouraged to do so, young Mr. Farquaharson's intimates called him by that shameful diminutive.) "He looks like a kid that's just been taken back to the barn and spanked."

"Did he?" asked the young lady casually, "I really didn't notice."

Ye Gods! He, wearing his misery like a Cæsar's toga, compared by this young buffoon to a kid who had been spanked! *She* had not noticed it. Ye Gods! Ye Gods!

Ten days passed and the visit of Conscience Williams was drawing to an end. Soon she would go back to those rock-bound shores of New England where in earlier days her ancestors had edified themselves with burning witches. She would pass out of his life but never out of his memory. His heart would go with her, but though it killed him he would never modify the rigors of his self-appointed exile from her presence until an advance came from her.

Each night he secretly stole over to a point of ambuscade from which he could see the shimmery flash of her dress as she moved about the porch, cavaliered by the odious Jimmy and his fellows. On these nocturnal vigils he heard the note of her heedless laughter while he crouched embittered and hidden at a distance. There was in those merry peals no more symptom of a canker at her heart than in the carol of a bird greeting a bright day. She did not care and when the one maiden whom he wished to worship by years of noble deeds did not care—again the only answer was "Ye Gods!"

These were not matters to be alleviated by the comforting support of a confidant and he had no confidant except Cardinal Richelieu. The cardinal was more frequently addressed as Ritchy and his nature was as independent of hampering standards as his origin warranted. The Cardinal's face—a composite portrait of various types of middle-class dog-life—made pretense useless and early in his

puppy career he seemed to realize it and to abandon himself to a philosophy of irresponsible pleasure. But Ritchy's eye had taken on a saddened cast since the blight had fallen on his master. He no longer frisked and devised, out of his comedian's soul, mirth-provoking antics. It was as though he understood and his spirit walked in sorrow.

A night of full-mooned radiance came steeping the souls of the young Knight and the young Cardinal in bitter yet sweet melancholy. Two days more and Conscience would be gone from the Valley of Virginia—returning to Cape Cod. Then Stuart would write over the door of his life "Ichabod, the glory is departed." To-night he would stalk again to his lonely tryst beneath the mock-orange hedge, which gave command of the yard and porch, and when she had gone to her room, he could still gaze upon the lighted window which marked a sacred spot. At a sedate distance in the rear proceeded the Cardinal, who had judiciously made no announcement of his coming. He knew that there was an edict against his participation in these vigils, based on a theory that he might give voice and advertise his master's presence, but it was a theory for which he had contempt and which he resented as a slur upon his discretion.

When Stuart Farquaharson crouched in the lee of heavily shadowed shrubbery the Cardinal sat on his haunches and wrinkled his unlovely brow in contemplative thought. Not far away masses of honeysuckle climbed over a rail fence festooned with blossom. Into the night stole its pervasive sweetness and the old house was like a temple built of blue gray shadows with columns touched into ivory whiteness by the lights of door and window. A low line of hills loomed beyond, painted of silver gray against the backdrop of starry sky and the pallor of moon mists. From the porch came the desultory tinkle of a banjo and the voices of young people singing and in a pause between songs more than once the boy heard a laugh—a laugh which he recognized. He could even make out a scrap of light color which must be her dress. Such were the rewards of his night watch, a melancholy and external gaze upon a Paradise barred to him by a stubbornness which his youth mistook for honorable pride.

At last two buggies rattled down the drive with much shouting of farewells and ten minutes later Jimmy's saddle horse clattered off at a gallop. The visitors were gone silence was left behind them. But Conscience did not at once turn into the house and close the door behind her. She stood by one of the tall pillars and the boy strained his gaze to make out more than the vague outline of a shadow-shape. Then slowly she came down the stairs and out onto the moonlit lawn, walking meditatively in the direction of Stuart Farquaharson's hiding place. The

boy's heart leaped into a heightened tattoo and he bent eagerly forward with his lips parted. She moved lightly through the luminance of a world which the moon had burnished into tints of platinum and silver, and she was very lovely, he thought, in her child-beauty and slenderness, the budding and virginal freshness that was only beginning to stir into a realization of something meant by womanhood. He bent, half kneeling, in his ambuscade with that dream of love which was all new and wonderful: a thing of such untarnished romance as only life's morning can give to the young.

Then into the dream welled a futile wave of resentment and poisoned it with bitterness. She had played with him and mocked him and cast him aside and to her he was less than nothing. A few moments ago her voice had drifted to him in an abandonment of merriment though she was going away without seeing him. Night after night he had come here, merely for the sad pleasure of watching her move through the shadows and the distance.

Now, unconscious of his nearness, the girl came on until she halted beyond the fence, not more than ten yards away. Cardinal Richelieu fidgeted on his haunches and silenced, with a difficult self-repression, the puzzled whine which came into his throat. The tempered spot-light of the moon was on Conscience's lashes and lips, and the boy stiffened into a petrified astonishment, for quite abruptly and without warning she carried both slim hands to her face and her body shook with something like a paroxysm of sobs.

In a moment she took her hands away and her eyes were shining with a tearful moisture. A lock of hair fell over her face. She tossed it back, then she moved a few steps nearer and rested both arms on the top rail of the fence. In them she buried her cheeks and began to cry softly. Stuart Farquaharson could almost have touched her but he was quite invisible. He felt himself an eavesdropper, but he could not escape without being seen.

The case was different with Cardinal Richelieu. Repressed emotions have been said to kill strong men. They did not kill the Cardinal, but they conquered him. From his raggedly whiskered lips burst a growl and a yawp which, too late, he regretted.

The girl gave a little scream and started back and Stuart realized it was time to reassure her. He rose up, materializing into a tall shape in the shadows like a jinn conjured from empty blackness.

"It's only me—Stuart Farquaharson," he said, and Conscience gave a little outcry

of delight in the first moment of surprise. But that she swiftly stifled into a less self-revealing demeanor as she demanded with recovered dignity, "What are you doing here?"

The boy vaulted the fence and stood at her side while the mollified Cardinal waved a stubby tail, as one who would say—"Now you see it took my dog sense to bring you two together. Without me you were quite helpless."

"Why were you crying, Conscience?" Stuart asked, ignoring alike her question and the rebuke in her voice, but she reiterated, "What are you doing here?"

The moon showed a face set with the stamp of tragedy which he imagined to have settled on his life, but his eyes held hers gravely and he was no longer hampered with bashfulness. The sight of her tear-stained faced had freed him of that.

"I come here every night," he acknowledged simply, "to watch you over there on the porch—because—" He balked a moment there, but only a moment, before declaring baldly what he had so often failed to announce gallantly—"Because I'm crazy about you—because I love you."

For a moment she gazed up at him and her breath came fast, then she suggested, a little shaken, "It isn't much farther on to the house. You used to come the whole way."

"You told me not to."

"If you had—had cared very much you would have come any way."

"I've cared enough," he reminded her, "to sit out here every night until you put out your light and went to sleep. If you had wanted me you'd have said so."

Impulsively she laid a trembling hand on his arm and spoke in rushing syllables. "I thought you'd come without being sent for—then when I knew you wouldn't, I couldn't hear it. I wrote you a note to-night.... I was going to send it to-morrow.... I'm going home the next day."

A whippoorwill called plaintively from the hillside. He had spoken and in effect she had answered. All the night's fragrance and cadence merged into a single witchery which was a part of themselves. For the first and most miraculous time, the flood tide of love had lifted them and their feet were no longer on the earth.

"But—but—" stammered the boy, moistening his lips, "you were singing and laughing with Jimmy Hancock and the rest ten minutes ago, and now—"

The girl's delicately rounded chin came up in the tilt of pride.

"Do you think I'd show them how I felt?" she demanded. "Do you think I'd tell anybody—except you."

Stuart Farquaharson had a sensation of hills and woods whirling in glorified riot through an infinity of moon mists and star dust. He felt suddenly mature and strong and catching her in his arms he pressed her close, kissing her hair and temples until she, fluttering with the wildness of her first embrace of love, turned her lips up to his kisses.

But soon Conscience drew away and at once her cheeks grew hot with blushes and maidenly remorse. She had been reared in an uncompromising school of puritanism. Her father would have regarded her behavior as profoundly shocking. She herself, now that it was over, regarded it so, though she wildly and rebelliously told herself that she would not undo it, if she could.

"Oh," she exclaimed in a low voice, "oh, Stuart, what were we thinking about!"

"We were thinking that we belong to each other," he fervently assured her. "As long as I live I belong to you—and to no one else, and you—"

"But we're only children," she demurred, with a sudden outcropping of the practical in the midst of romanticism. "How do we know we won't change our minds?"

"I won't change mine," he said staunchly. "And I won't let you change yours. You will write to me, won't you?" he eagerly demanded, but she shook her head.

"Father doesn't let me write to boys," she told him.

"At least you'll be back—next summer?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't know."

Stuart Farquaharson drew a long breath. His face set itself in rigid resolve.

"If they send you to the North Pole and stop all my letters and put a regiment of soldiers around you, and keep them there, it won't alter matters in the long run," he asseverated, with boyhood assurance, "You belong to me and you are going to

marry me."

A voice from the house began calling and the girl answered quickly, "I'm just in the garden. I'll be right in." But before she went she turned to the boy again and her eyes were dancing incorrigibly.

"You won't go out and join any Newmarket cadets or anything and get killed meanwhile, will you?"

"I will not," he promptly replied. "And when we have a house of our own we'll have framed copies of Barbara Freitchie hanging all over the place if you want them."

To Stuart Farquaharson just then the future seemed very sure. He had no way of knowing that after to-morrow years lay between the present and their next meeting—and that after that—but of course he could not read the stars.

CHAPTER III

The sand bar rose like a white island beyond the mild surf of the shore, distant enough to make it a reservation for those hardier swimmers who failed to find contentment between beach and float. Outside the bar the surf boiled in spume-crowned, and went out again sullenly howling an in-sucking of sands and an insidious tug of undertow.

One head only bobbed far out as a single swimmer shaped his course in unhurried strokes toward the bar. This swimmer had come alone from the hotel bath-houses and had strolled down into the streaming bubbles of an outgoing wave without halting to inspect the other bathers. There was a businesslike directness in the way he kept onward and outward until a comber lifted him and his swimming had begun.

The young man might have been between twenty and twenty-five and a Greek feeling for line and form and rhythmic strength would have called his body beautiful. Its flesh was smooth and brown, flowing in frictionless ease over muscles that escaped bulkiness; its shoulders swung with a sort of gladiatorial freedom. But the Hellenic sculptor would have found the head suited to his use as well as the torso and limbs, for it was a head well shaped and well carried, dominated by eyes alert with intelligence, and enlivened with humor.

As he rocked between crest and trough, the swimmer's glance caught the shattered form of a breaker at the end of the bar. He liked things to be the biggest of their sort. If there was to be surf, he wanted it to be like that beyond, with a fierce song in its breaking and the foam of the sea's endless sweat in its lashings.

When at last he let himself down and his feet touched bottom, he wiped the brine out of his eyes and hurried up the shallow rise—then halted suddenly. The bar had appeared empty of human life, but now he caught a glimpse of a head and a pair of shoulders and they were feminine. A normal curiosity as to further particulars asserted itself. He had a distinct feeling of apprehension lest the face, when seen, should prove a disappointment, because unless it was singularly attractive—more attractive than wits warranted by any law of probability—it would be distressingly out of keeping with the charm and grace of the figure which came into full view as he waded ashore in spite of the masses of dark and

lustrous hair which fell free. The unknown lady was sitting on the sand with her back half turned and, in the soaked and clinging silk of her bathing dress, she had an alluring lissomness of line and curve. If her face *did* match her beauty of body she would have rather more than one woman's share of Life's gifts, he philosophized, and by Nature's law of compensation she would probably be vapid and insipid of mind.

But while he was engaging himself in these personal speculations the lady herself was obviously quite serene in her ignorance of his presence or existence. She conceived herself to be in sole possession of her island kingdom of an hour and was complacently using it as an exclusive terrain.

She had removed her blue bathing cap and tossed it near by on the sand. She had let her hair out free to the sun, in whose light it glowed between the rich darkness of polished mahogany and the luster of jet.

After all perhaps he had better announce himself in some audible fashion since, secure in her supposed isolation, the other occupant of the bar proceeded to remove a silk stocking, which matched the cap in color, and to examine with absorbed interest what he supposed to be a stone-bruise on an absurdly small and pink heel. Discreetly he coughed.

The young woman looked quickly over her shoulder and their eyes met. A perfunctory apology for invasion shaped itself in his mind, but remained unuttered. He stood instead, his lips parted and his eyes brimming with astonishment. The face not only met the high requirements set for it by his idea of appropriateness, but abundantly surpassed the standard. Moreover, it was a face he recognized. He was not at first quite certain that her recognition of him had been as swift. A half dozen years, involving the transition from boyhood to manhood might have dimmed his image in her memory, so he hastened to introduce himself, striding across as she came a little confusedly to her feet—one silk shod and one bare.

"Heaven be praised, Conscience," he shouted with an access of boyish elation in his voice. "This is too lucky to believe. Don't say you've absolutely forgotten me—Stuart Farquaharson."

She stood there before him, dangling a stocking in her left hand as she extended her right. Dark hair falling below her waist framed a face whose curves and feature-modelings were all separate delights uniting to make a total of somewhat gorgeous loveliness. Her lips were crimson petals in a face as creamy white as a

magnolia bloom, and her dark eyes twinkled with inward mischief. It was a face which in repose held that serenely grave quality which a painter might have selected for his study of a saint—and which, when her little teeth flashed and her eyes kindled in a smile, broke into a dazzling and infectious gayety. She was smiling now.

"'Up from the meadows rich with corn'?" she inquired, as though they had parted yesterday.

Stuart Farquaharson broke into a peal of laughter as he caught the extended hand in both his own and finished the quotation.

"Clear in the cool September morn, the clustered spires
of Frederick stand,
Green-walled by the hills of Maryland ...

By the way," his voice took on a note of sudden trepidation—"you aren't married, are you?"

It was a point upon which she did not at the moment resolve his doubts. She was standing at gaze herself, critically taking him in. She let her appraisal begin at the dark hair which the water had twisted into a curling lawlessness and end at his feet which were somewhat small for his stature. The general impression of that scrutiny was one which she secretly acknowledged to be startlingly, almost thrillingly, favorable. Then she realized that while one of her hands continued to dangle a wet stocking, the other was still tightly clasped in his own and that he was repeating his question.

"Why do you ask?" she naïvely inquired, as she quietly sought to disengage her imprisoned fingers.

"Why!" he echoed, in a shocked voice, pretending unconsciousness of her efforts at self-liberation. "Why does one ever ask a vital question? The last time I saw you I told you candidly that I meant to marry you. If you're already married—why, it might complicate matters, don't you think?"

"It *might*," the young woman conceded. "It might even alter matters altogether—but don't you think that even for a reunion we seem to have shaken hands almost long enough?"

With reluctance he released the captive fingers and reminded her that he was still

unanswered.

"No," she told him, "I'm not married so far—of course I've tried hard, but the honest gander hasn't volunteered."

"Thank God!" was his instant and fervent comment.

Beyond her were the sands of the bar and the Atlantic Ocean stretching unbroken to the Madeiras and a flawless sky against which the gulls dipped and screamed.

She was straight and vivid, and his pulses quickened, taking fire. Sun, air and water; sparkle, radiance and color—these things were about him filling his senses with delight and she seemed to epitomize them all in a personal incarnation.

"Don't let me keep you standing," he begged her, belatedly remembering his manners. "You were taking your case when I came. Besides, Old Neptune in person will be along soon to claim this sandbar for himself. Meanwhile, 'The time has come,' the walrus said, 'to talk of many things.'"

"As for instance?"

"As for instance that there's less of the fortuitous in this meeting than appears upon the surface."

"Then you knew I was on the sandbar?"

Stuart Farquaharson shook his head. "I didn't even know that you were at Chatham. I just got here this morning driving through to Provincetown. But I did know that you were on Cape Cod, and that is why I'm on Cape Cod."

She dropped lightly to the sand and sat nursing her knees between interlocked fingers. Stuart Farquaharson spread himself luxuriantly at length, propped on one elbow. He could not help noting that the bare knee was dimpled and that the curved flesh below it was satin-smooth and the hue of apple blossoms. The warm breeze kept stirring her hair caressingly and, against the glare, she lowered her long lashes, half veiling her eyes. But at his avowal of the cause of his coming her lips curved with humorous scepticism.

"I'm afraid you acted very hastily," she murmured. "You've only known I was here for about six years."

He nodded, entirely unruffled.

"I have only recently been promoted to the high office of 'Master of my fate'—but before we get to that—where are you stopping?"

"Our party will be here at Chatham for several days. We're stopping at The Arms."

"You speak of a party, and that makes me realize the imperative need of improving this golden moment," Stuart Farquaharson announced urbanely, "because I have certain rude and elementary powers of deduction."

"Which lead you to what conclusion?" She turned eyes riffled with amusement from the contemplation of a distant sail to his face, and he proceeded to enlighten her.

"To two. First, that in Chatham, Massachusetts, as in the Valley of Virginia, there is probably a Jimmy Hancock buzzing about. Secondly, that since 'misfortunes come not single spies, but in battalions,' there are probably a flock of Jimmies. By the by, will you swim out here with me to-morrow morning?"

"To-morrow morning," she demurred. "I believe I have an engagement for a horseback ride with Billy Stirling. We're going to look at a wind mill or something."

The man shook his head in mock distress.

"I knew it," he sighed, then his tone grew serious and he began to speak rapidly. "You say I've known where you were for six years and that's true. It's also true that until this summer, I haven't in any genuine sense been the master of my movements. Four years were spent in college, and two in law school. There were vacations, of course, but my mother claimed them at home. She is dead now, and her last few years were years of partial invalidism—so she wanted her family about her."

"Oh," the girl's eyes deepened with sympathy. "I didn't know that. She was, I think, almost the loveliest woman I ever knew. She was everything that blue blood ought to be—and so rarely is."

"Thank you. Yes, I think my mother was just that—but what I meant to claim was that this summer is the first I have been free to use in whatever way I wanted: the first time I've been able to say to myself, 'Go and do whatever seems

to you the most delightful thing possible in a delightful world.' What I did was to come to Cape Cod and why I did it I've already told you."

Conscience studied his expression and back of the whimsical glint in his eyes she recognized an entire sincerity. Perhaps he had retained out of boyhood some of that militant attitude of believing in his dreams and making them realities. She found herself hoping something of the sort as she reminded him, "After I had outgrown pigtails, you know, they would have let me read a letter from you—if it had arrived."

"Certainly. There were a good many times when I started to write; a good many times when I got as far as a half-finished letter. But I always tore it up. You see, it never appeared to me that that was the way. A letter from me, after a long absence would have been a shadowy sort of message. I couldn't guess how clearly you remembered me or even whether you remembered me at all. You were a child then, who was growing into a woman. Your life was an edifice which you were building for yourself. What niches it had for what saints and deities, I couldn't hope to know. I might have been scornfully thrust in among the cobwebs with other promiscuous rummage of outgrown days. I might have been hardly more important than the dolls that preceded me in your affections by only a couple of years. How could I tell?" He paused and questioned her with direct eyes. "No, I meant to come back into your life not as a ghost speaking from the past but as a man intent on announcing himself in person. It was no part of my scheme that you should say, 'Oh, yes, I remember him. A long, thin kid with a vile temper. I used to love to stir him up and hear him roar.' That's why I never wrote."

Her smile was still a little doubtful and so he went on.

"It would have been too easy for you to have simply dropped me cold. Now it happens that in life I am endowed with a certain india-rubber quality. I am practically indestructible. When you biff me into the corner I can come bouncing back for more. In short, I am not so easy to be rid of, when I'm on the ground."

Conscience laughed. They were still young enough to respond thrillingly to the remembered fragrance of honeysuckle and the plaintive note of the whippoorwill, and perhaps to other memories, as well.

She rose abruptly and went down to the water's edge where she stood with the breeze whipping the silk draperies of her blue bathing skirt against her knees and stirring her hair into a dark nimbus about her head. After retrieving from the

sand the blue cap and the blue stocking, her companion followed her.

"Now that I'm here," he asseverated, "I hold that we stand just where we stood when we parted."

But at that she shook her head and laughed at him. "Quite the reverse," she declared. "I hold that by years of penitence I've lived down my past. We're simply two young persons who once knew each other."

"Very well," acceded he. "It will come to the same thing in the end. We will start as strangers, but I have a strong conviction that when we become acquainted, I'm going to dog your steps to the altar. I'm willing to cancel all the previous chapter, except that I sha'n't forget it.... Can *you* forget it?"

She flushed, but shook her head frankly, and answered without evasion, "I haven't forgotten it yet."

He was gazing into her face with such a hypnotism of undisguised admiration that she smilingly inquired, "Well, have I changed much?"

"You have. You've changed much and radiantly. Since you insist on regarding me as a new acquaintance I must be conservative and restrained, so I'll only say that you have the most flawless beauty I've ever seen."

"The tide is rising," she reminded him irrelevantly. "We'd better be starting back." She put her hands up to her wind-blown hair and began coiling it into abundant masses on her head, while he was kneeling on the sand and tying the ribbon of her bathing slipper.

They crossed the bar and went into the water, swimming side by side with easy strokes, and when the return trip was half completed they saw the head of another swimmer coming out.

"That's Billy Stirling," she told him. "He seems to have guessed where I was."

"I was right," sighed the Virginian. "He out-Jimmies Jimmy Hancock. I don't like this Stirling person."

"You don't know him yet, you know."

"Quite true, but I don't have to know him to dislike him. It's a matter of general principle."

But in spite of his announcement, Stuart did like Billy Stirling. He liked him from the moment that gentleman thrust a wet paw out of the water to shake hands and tossed the brine from a grinning face to acknowledge the girl's introduction. He liked him even better for the Puck-like irresponsibility of his good humor as, later on, he introduced Stuart to the others of the party.

"Now that you've met this crew, you are to consider yourself a member," declared Stirling, though he added accusingly, "I promoted this expedition and used great discrimination in its personnel. It struck me as quite complete before your intrusion marred its symmetry, but you're here and we've got to make the best of you."

The women differed with Mr. Stirling and scathingly told him so, to his immense delight.

"The difference between a party made up in handcuffed pairs, like this has been, and one equipped with an extra man or two is the exact difference between frugal necessity and luxury," protested Henrietta Raven, sententiously.

"I suppose you get the fact that these guileless kids over here are our venerated chaperons?" said the host with a pointed finger. "They are so newly-wed that they still spoon publicly—which is disgraceful, of course, but reduces the obnoxiousness of chaperons."

The week that followed in Chatham was a momentous time and a turning point for the young Virginian. In a way it was epochal in his life. Though he was assimilated into the party as if he had been one of them from childhood, he found little opportunity to be alone with Conscience. Indeed the idea came to him at first vaguely, then persistently, that she herself was seeking to avoid anything savoring of the quality of a tête-à-tête.

The realization haunted and troubled him because even in this general association, her personality had flashed varyingly and amazingly from many facets. The dream which had meant so much to his boyhood was swiftly ripening also into the dream of his manhood, or, as he would have expressed it, a fulfillment. His heart had been fallow when he had first known her. It had not been subjected to subsequent conquest and now its predisposed allegiance was ready to grow with tropical swiftness into a purposeful and fiery ardor.

CHAPTER IV

Stuart Farquaharson had that habit of self-analysis which often compelled him to take his own life into the laboratory of reflection and study its reactions with an almost impersonal directness. That analysis told him that Conscience Williams, had she chosen to do so, might have imposed upon him the thrall of infatuation, even had there been no powerful appeal to his mentality. Every fiery element that had lain dormant in his nature was ready to leap into action, in response to a challenge of which she was herself unconscious—a challenge to the senses. And yet he recognized with an almost prayerful gratitude that it was something paramount to physical lure, which beckoned him along the path of love. Into the more genuine and intimate recesses of her life, where the soul keeps its aloofness, she had given him only keyhole glimpses, but they had been such glimpses as kindled his eagerness and awakened his hunger for exploration. There had been candid indications reënforced by a dozen subtler things that her liking for him was more than casual, and yet she denied him any chance to avow himself, and sometimes, when he came suddenly upon her, he discovered a troubled wistfulness in her face which clouded her eyes and brought a droop to the corners of her lips.

On one such occasion as he was passing an old house with a yard in which the grass was tall and ragged and the fruit trees as unkempt and overgrown as a hermit's beard he saw her standing alone by one of the tilting veranda posts. The sunshine was gone from her dark eyes, so that they seemed darker than ever—and haunted with an almost tragic wistfulness. She had the manner of one facing a ghost which she had vainly sought to lay. He came so close before he spoke her name that she turned toward him with a start, as though he wakened her suddenly out of somnambulism, but even as she wheeled, her face brightened and a bantering merriment sounded in her voice, countering all his solicitous inquiries with gay retorts.

When a week of charming but unsatisfying association had passed Stuart Farquaharson felt that the time had come when he must talk with her less superficially. It was as if they had only waded in the shallows of conversation—and he wanted to strike out and swim in deeper waters. The opportunity, when it came, was not of his own making. It was an evening when there was dancing in the large lounge of The Arms. Farquaharson and Conscience had gone, between

dances, to the tiled veranda overlooking the sea. The moon was spilling showers of radiance from horizon to shore, and making of the beach a foreground of pale silver. The veranda itself was a place of blue shadows between the yellow splotches of the window lights. After a little she laid a hand lightly on Stuart's arm.

"Don't you want to take me for a stroll on the beach?" she asked a shade wearily. "I'm tired of so many people."

They followed the twisting line of the wet sands and at last halted by the prow of a beached row-boat, where the girl enthroned herself, gazing meditatively off to sea.

"Conscience," he asked slowly, "you have used a diplomacy worthy of a better cause, in devising ways to keep me from talking with you alone—why?"

"Have I done that?" she countered.

"You know you have. Of course you've known I wanted to make love to you. Why wouldn't you let me?"

"Because," she answered gravely, meeting his eyes with full candor, "I didn't want you to—make love to me. I'm not ready for that."

"I haven't said I wasn't willing to wait, have I?" he suggested quietly. "You don't appear to throw barriers of silence between yourself and Billy."

"No. That's different.... I'm not—" Suddenly she broke off and laughed at herself.

Then a little startled, at her own frankness, she admitted in a low voice, "I'm not afraid of Billy's unsettling me."

The man felt his temples throb with a sudden and intoxicating elation. He steadied himself against its agitation to demand,

"And you are—afraid that I might?"

She was sitting with the moonlight waking her dark hair into a somber luster and a gossamer shimmer on the white of her evening gown. Her hands lay unmoving in her lap and she slowly nodded her confession.

"You see," she told him, after another long pause, "it's a thing—falling in love—

that I should do rather riotously—if I did it at all. I shouldn't be able to think of much else."

Stuart Farquaharson wanted to seize her in his arms and protest that she could never love him too riotously, but he instead schooled his voice to a level almost monotonous.

"I fell in love with you—back there in the days of our childhood," he said slowly. "Maybe it was only a boy's dream—then—but now it's a man's dream—a life dream. You will have to be won out of battle, every wonderful reward does—but victory will come to me." His voice rose vibrantly. "Because winning it is the one inflexible purpose of my life, dominating every other purpose."

She had not interrupted him and now she was a little afraid of him—and of herself. Perhaps it was only the moon—but the moon swings the tides.

"Stuart—" Her voice held a tremor of pleading. "If you do love me—like that—you can wait. Just now I need you—but not as a lover. I need you as a friend whom I don't have to fight."

The man straightened and bowed. "Very well," he said, "I can wait—if I must. Your need comes first."

She gave him a grateful smile, then suddenly came to her feet and began speaking with such a passionate earnestness as he had not before heard from her lips.

"I think it's the right of every human being to live fully—not just half live through a soul-cramping routine. I think it's the right of a man or a woman to face all the things that make life, to *think*—even if they make mistakes—to fight for what they believe, even if they're wrong. I'd rather be Joan of Arc than the most sainted nun that ever took the veil!"

The young man's face lighted triumphantly, because that was also his creed. "I knew it!" he exclaimed. "I didn't have to hear your words to know that marking time in an age of marching would never satisfy you."

"And yet every influence that means home and family seems bent on condemning me to the dreariness and mustiness of a life that kills thought. I've thought about it so much that I'm afraid I've grown morbid." Once more her voice rang with passionate insurgency. "I feel as if I were being sent to Siberia."

Stuart answered with forced composure through which the thrill of a minute ago crept like an echo of departing trumpets. "Of course, I came out here to declare my love. I had waited for this chance ... the sea ... the moon—well! It's rather like asking for a field-marshal's baton and a curveting charger—and getting instead a musket and place in the ranks. The man who doesn't serve where he's put isn't much good...." He paused and then went on calmly, "What is this thing that haunts you?"

"When I finished at the preparatory school," she began, "father thought I'd gone far enough and I *knew* I needed college. At last I won a compromise. I was to have one year by way of trial, and then he was to decide which idea was right—his or mine."

"So now—"

"So now the jury has the case—and I'm terribly afraid I know the verdict in advance. Father is a minister of the old school and the unyielding New England type. I don't remember my mother, but sometimes I think the inflammatory goodness at home killed her. In our house you mustn't question a hell where Satan reigns as a personal god of Damnation. To doubt his spiked tail and cloven hoofs, would almost be heresy. That's our sort of goodness."

"And colleges fail to supply a course in the Chemistry of Brimstone," he suggested.

"They don't even frown on such ungodly things as socialism and suffrage," she supplemented.

He nodded. "They offer, in short, incubation for ideas questionably modern."

Her voice took on a fiery quality of enthusiasm.

"Life was never so gloriously fluid—so luminous—before. Breadth and humanity are being fought for. Men and women are facing things open-eyed, making splendid successes and splendid failures." After a moment's pause she added, wearily, "My father calls them fads."

"And you want to have a part in all that. You don't want only the culture of reading the *Atlantic Monthly* at a village fireside?"

"I want to play my little part in the game of things. The idea of being shielded from every danger and barred off from every effort, sickens me. If I am to lead a

life I can be proud of, it must be because I've come out of the fight unshamed, not just because no one ever let me go into a fight."

She was standing in an attitude of tense, even rapt earnestness, her chin high and her hands clenched. Her voice held the vibrance of a dreamer and her eyes were looking toward the horizon as if they were seeing visions off across the moonlit water.

"I might fail miserably, of course, but I should know that I'd had my chance. The idea at home seems to be that a woman's goodness depends on someone else keeping it for her: that she should stick her head into the sand like an ostrich and, since she sees nothing, be womanly. If I have a soul at all, and it can't sail beyond a harbor's breakwater, I have nothing to lose, but if it can go out and come back safe it has the right to do it. That's what college means to me: the preparation for a real life: the chance to equip myself. That's why the question seems a vital crisis—why *it* is a vital crisis."

"Conscience," he said thoughtfully, "you have described the exact sort of intolerant piety, which tempts one to admire brilliant wickedness. You can't accept another's belief unless it's your own. That is one of Life's categorical rules. It's not a problem."

"It's so categorical," she retorted quickly, "that there is no answer to it except the facts. My father is old. He has burned out his life in his fierce service of his God and his conscience. To tell him how paltry is the sum of his life's effort, in my eyes, would be like laughing aloud at his sermon."

"And yet you can't possibly take up the life of an outgrown age because he prefers the thought of yesterday."

"I'm afraid I'll have to—and—"

"And what?"

"And I think—it's going to break my heart. I've got to live a lie to keep a man, who regards a lie as a mortal sin, happy in the belief that he has never tolerated a lie."

"My God, Conscience," Stuart broke out, "this is the New England conscience seeking martyrdom. Life runs forward, not back. Rivers don't climb hills."

"I have said that to myself a thousand times," she gravely replied, "but it doesn't

answer the question. There's no compulsion in the world so universal as the tyranny of weakness over strength. Haven't you seen it everywhere? Wherever people have to live together you find it. You find the strong submitting to all sorts of petty persecutions, and petty persecutions are the kind that kill, because the weak are nervous or easily wrought up and must have allowances made for them. And the person so considered always thinks himself strong beyond others and never suspects the truth. Only the weak and foolish can strut independently through life."

"And yet to draw the blinds and shut out the light of life because some one else chooses to sit in the dark is unspeakably morbid."

Conscience shrugged her shoulders. "Sitting in the dark or living righteously—there's no difference but point of view. My father has been true to his convictions. The fact that his goodness is no broader than his hymn book doesn't alter that." There was a pause, then suddenly the girl laughed and stretched both arms out to sea. "Oh, well," she said, "I don't often indulge in these jeremiads. Now it's over, and I've at least got the summer ahead of me. I guess we'd better go back. I promised Billy a dance."

She rose, but the Virginian stood resolutely in her path. "Just a moment more," he begged. "It won't be love-making. The day we drove down to Provincetown you were sitting on the sand dunes. For a background you had the sea and sky—and they were gorgeous. But while I looked at it I saw another picture, too. May I try to paint *that* picture for you?"

"Surely, if you will."

"Well, I'm rather leaving the sunlight now," he admitted. "I'm painting gray. I'm converting it into terms of winter storm and equinox. Last year a ship was pounded to pieces in the bay while the people on Commercial street looked helplessly on. It was the same sea, but it wasn't smiling then. It wore the vindictive scowl of death. That's the mood which has made this strip of coast a grave-yard of dead ships. That's the mood, too, which has given color to the people's thought—or taken the color out of it, leaving it stout and faded like weatherbeaten timbers—making of it the untrustworthy thought of melancholia."

"And am I the spirit of that picture, too?"

"You are the exact antithesis of all that, but you are threatening to fade into its grayness—and to deaden all the glow that was on the palette with which God

painted you."

They walked slowly back to the verandah, but paused a space before going into the light and crowds where a waltz had just begun—and as they waited a hotel page came dodging between the smoking, chatting loungers calling her name —"Miss Conscience Williams—Miss Conscience Williams," and waving a yellow telegraph envelope.

The girl's face paled a little as she took the message from the urchin's hand and her eyes widened in an expression of fear. But she tore the covering and drew out the sheet deliberately, reading in the yellow light that flooded through a window. Then an almost inaudible groan came from her lips and she stood holding the paper so loosely that it slipped from her fingers and drifted to the floor. Stuart retrieved it and handed it to her, but she only commanded in a stunned voice, "Read it."

The man stepped from the shadow to the light and read:

"Your father had paralytic stroke. He wants to see you."

It was signed by initials which Stuart inferred to be those of the elderly aunt of whom she spoken. He laid his hand very gently on her arm and turned her a step to the side so that she passed out of the broad band of window-light and stood in the shadow. The blaze from the interior gave too much the effect of a spotlight playing on her eyes and lips and brow, for him to be willing that the idling crowds of strollers should read what he read there. He knew that in a moment she would regain control sufficiently to face even the fuller publicity inside, but during that moment she had the right to the limited privacy afforded by the dark shadow of the tiled veranda.

She stood leaning against the wall for a moment, then she straightened herself with an effort and pressed the tips of her fingers to her temples.

"What can you get out of your car?" she asked. And the man answered quickly, "As much speed as the roads let me—I have done sixty."

"Please take me home." The words came abruptly and with undisguised wretchedness, "and take me *fast*."

CHAPTER V

Twenty minutes later Stuart Farquaharson swung himself to the driver's seat of his low-hung roadster, and threw on the switch, while Billy Stirling and the others stood at the curb, waving farewells and finding nothing suitable to say.

The car went purring through the quiet streets where gabled houses slept under the moon, but having passed the town limits, leaped into a racing pace along the road for Orleans.

Stuart made no effort to talk and Conscience spoke only at long intervals. She was gazing ahead and her eyes were wide and wet with tears.

Once she leaned over to say: "If any of the things I said seemed disloyal, please try to forget them. Of course, I'm only too glad he wants me, and that I can help."

"I understand," he assured her. "I never doubted that."

The moon had set and it wanted only two hours of dawn when Conscience roused herself from her revery to say, "It's the next gate—on the right."

Wheeling the car into the driveway, he had a shadowy impression of an old and gabled place, inky except for the pallid light of a lamp turned low in an upper window.

As the girl hesitated on the verandah, he caught the complaining creak of an old plank, and while she waited for her bag there came to his ears the whining scrape of a tree branch against the eaves. The little voices of the hermitage were giving their mouselike welcome.

With her key fitted in the door, Conscience turned and held out both hands.

"You've been wonderful, Stuart," she said, with tears in her voice. "You've understood everything and I want to thank you while we're here alone. You'll come in, of course? I'm afraid it will be dismal, but the hotel is worse."

The man shook his head. "No," he answered, as he pressed her hands in his own, "I'll go back to the village and rouse up the hostelry, but I'm coming to-morrow

—to inquire."

Many dogs were aroused to a noisy chorus before his hammering on the door of the old house which passed for a hotel received official response, and the east was breaking into a pallid rosiness before his thoughts permitted him to leave his seat by the window and stretch himself wearily on his uninviting bed.

But when the sun had waked him at eight o'clock the landscape framed by his window was a smiling one to which the youth in him responded and he dressed clear-eyed and ready for a new day. In the hope that Conscience had been able to sleep late, he meant to defer his visit of inquiry, and in the meantime he breakfasted at leisure and went out to search for a barber. The quest was not difficult, and while he awaited his turn he sat against the wall, mildly amused at the scraps of local gossip that came to his ears couched in homely vernacular.

"I heard that Eben Tollman cal'lates to jam Lige Heman with a foreclosure on his mortgage. It's move out and trust in Providence for Lige and Lige's." This comment came in piping falsetto from a thin youth who had just been shaven raw, but still lingered in the shop, and it met prompt reply from a grizzled old fellow with a wooden leg.

"Pshaw, Seth, that ain't no news. You can't scace'ly get folks excited by a yarn about a shark's bitin' a cripple—but if you was to give in a yarn about a cripple bitin' a shark—well, there'd be some point to that. If you told where somebody had got a dollar away from Eben, now, we'd call you a liar, I s'pose—and be right at that—but we'd listen."

"If you got a nickel from Tollman," retorted the first speaker, "you couldn't put it in a slot machine. It would be squeezed till it was bent double. Well, you can't blame him, I s'pose. He ain't got more'n a million."

Just at that moment the door was opened by a gentleman entering from the street, and Farquaharson was immensely diverted at the sudden hush in which that particular vein of conversation died. It was an easy guess that this was Eben Tollman himself.

The newcomer bore himself with a cold reserve of conscious superiority. He might have been forty, though the humorless immobility of his face gave him a seeming of greater age. In stature he was above the average height and his eyes were shrewd and piercing. To the salutations of those present, he responded with a slight, stiff inclining of his head—and appeared to withdraw into the shell of

self-sufficiency.

When Stuart, later, presented himself at the old manse, he found it a venerable place, whose shingled roof was moss-green and whose gables were honorably gray with age and service. An elderly servant directed him to the garden, and elated at the prospect of a tête-à-tête among the hedge rows, he went with a light step along the mossy path, noting with what a golden light the sun filtered through the fine old trees and flecked the sod. But inside the garden he halted among the flower borders, for a glance told him that Conscience was not alone. She sat leaning toward a wheel-chair, reading aloud from a book which he divined, rather than recognized, to be a Bible. As he hurried forward the girl looked up and rose to meet him with a swift eagerness of welcome.

Because Stuart had catalogued Conscience's father, who was old enough to be her grandfather, as a bigot and an obstructionist standing between her and the sun, he was prepared to dislike him. Yet when he came up he confessed to a sort of astonished admiration. He stood looking at a head which suggested the head of a lion, full maned and white as a snow-cap, shaggy and beetling of brow, and indomitable of eye. Such a man, had he lived in another day, would have gone uncomplaining to the agonies of the Inquisition—or as readily have participated in visiting Inquisitional tortures on another. Yet it was a face capable of kindliness, too, since its wrath was only for sin—or what it regarded as sin.

He held out a hand in greeting.

"Conscience has told me how you rushed her home to me. It was very kind of you. I was hungry to see her, but I hadn't dared to hope for her so soon."

The old man spoke with a smile, but it was unconsciously pathetic. Stuart could see that he was stricken not only in his useless legs but also in his heart, though his eagle-like eyes were steady.

Conscience had been crying, but now she smiled and the two chatted with a forced vivacity, pretending to ignore the thing of which each was thinking and, though vivacity was foreign to his nature, the sufferer joined in their conversation with a grim sort of self-effacement. Soon they saw another figure approaching by the flagged path. It was the figure of Eben Tollman and his manner was full of solicitude—but as he talked with the father, Farquaharson saw him more than once steal covert glances at the daughter. Obviously he bore, here, the relationship of family friend, and though Conscience seemed to regard him as a member of an older generation, he seemed to regard her as a

contemporary.

In the days that followed Stuart Farquaharson's car standing at the front of the old manse became a fixture in the landscape. The invalid minister, seeking to accustom himself stoically to a pitiful anticlimax of life, found in the buoyant vitality of this newcomer—of whom he thought rather as a boy than a man—a sort of activity by proxy. He, himself, moved only in a wheel chair, but Stuart could laughingly override his protests and lift him with an easy strength into the seat of the roadster to spin out across the countryside which he had told himself he should hardly see again.

Even the spinster aunt, who had begun by regarding him with suspicion, decided first that he was harmless, then that he was useful and finally that he was charming.

Yet the young Virginian was not altogether beguiled into the hope that this enviable status would be permanent. The talks and drives brought incidental glimpses into the thoughts that had habitation under the white mane and that came militantly out through the unyielding eyes even in silence. Stuart winced often under the sting and irritation of a bigotry which could, without question or doubt, undertake to rule offhand and with absolutism on every question of right or wrong.

He was keeping and meant to keep a constant rein on his speech and conduct, but he foresaw that, with all his restraint, a day might come when the old puritan would divine the wide divergence of their thought and have out upon him for one of the ungodly. Once he voiced something of this to Conscience herself in the question, "How long do you think your father will continue to welcome me here?"

Her eyes widened. "Welcome you? Why shouldn't he? He's leaning on you as if you were a son. He declared his liking for you from the first day."

Stuart shook his head in doubt and his eyes darkened with gravity. "It never pays to blind one's eyes to the chances of the future," he said slowly. "He won't continue to like me, I'm afraid. Just now he thinks of us both as children. I am only your overgrown playmate—but realization will come—and then—"

"You think that he will change?"

"I know it."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and fell silent, but after a pause she spoke again impulsively, with a note of fear in her voice. "You won't go away and leave me here alone, will you—even if nobody else likes you?"

"No one but you can send me away—" he declared almost fiercely, "and before you can do it you must prove yourself stronger than I."

She gave a little sigh of relief and fell to talking of other things. It was when he rose to go and she walked to his car with him that he asked with seeming irrelevance, "Has this Mr. Tollman ever—made love to you?"

She burst, at that, into a gale of laughter more spontaneous than any he had heard since the telegram had sobered her. It was as though the absurdity of the idea had swept the sky clear of everything but comedy.

"Made love to me!" she mockingly echoed. "Honestly, Stuart, there are times when you are the funniest mortal alive—and it's always when you're most serious. Picture the Sphinx growing garrulous. Picture Napoleon seeking retreat in a monastery—but don't try to visualize Mr. Tollman making love."

"Perhaps I'm premature," announced Farquaharson with conviction. "But I'm not mistaken. If he hasn't made love to you, he will."

"Wherefore this burst of prophecy?"

"I don't have to be prophetic. I saw him look at you—and I didn't like the way he did it. That man thinks he loves you."

"If so, he hasn't mentioned it to me."

"He will—I say 'thinks' he loves you," Stuart persisted in a level and somewhat contemptuous voice, "because I don't believe he can really love anything but himself and his money. But in a grasping, avaricious way he wants you. His eyes betrayed him. He wants you in the fashion that a miser wants gold. He wants you in the way a glutton wants a peach which he has deliberately watched ripen until finally he says to himself, 'It's about ready to pick now.'"

A more intimate view of Eben Tollman failed to remove the initial dislike, and yet Farquaharson acknowledged that nothing concrete was added to the evidence of sheer prejudice. In his application to the business affairs of the minister, he was assiduous and untiring, and the invalid depended upon his advice as upon an infallible guidance. Stuart told himself that to attribute this service of friendship

to a selfish motive was a meanness unworthy of entertainment, yet the suspicion lingered. When they met, Tollman was always courteous and if this courtesy never warmed into actual cordiality neither was it ever tinctured with any seeming of dislike.

The summer had spent its heat and already there was a hint of autumn in the air, but Stuart had kept his promise. There had been no lovemaking.

He and Conscience walked together one afternoon to a hill where they sat with a vista of green country spread before them, just beginning to kindle under the splendid torch of an incendiary autumn. Off beyond was the sea, gorgeously blue in its main scheme, yet varying into subtle transitions of mood from rich purple to a pale and tender green. The sky was cloudless but there was that smoky, misty, impalpable thing like a dust of dreams on the distance. The girl stood with one hand resting on the gnarled bole of a pine. She wore a blue sweater, and her carmine lips were more vivid because these months of anxiety had given to her checks a creamy pallor. The man, standing at her elbow, was devouring her with his eyes. She was gorgeous and wholly desirable and his heart was flaming with emotions that ran the whole gamut of love's completeness from clean passion to worship.

Yet he held his truce of silence and it was she herself who spoke at last.

"The girls are all meeting on the campus—under the big trees about now," she said, and her eyes held a far-away wistfulness. "They are chattering foolishly and delightfully about their summer adventures ... and the dormitories are being allotted. There'll be several new English readers, I guess."

"Does it hurt as badly as that?" he asked, and her answer was a low, rather hysterical little laugh, coming nearer bitterness than anything he had ever heard from her lips before.

"You've been here. You've seen it all. Haven't you stopped instinctively often when you broke into a sudden laugh with a moldy feeling around your heart as if you'd shouted out in church? Haven't you watched yourself and stultified yourself in every conversation, except when we were alone, to keep from treading on the toes of some inch-wide prejudice?"

"I've felt those things, of course—all of them." His reply was grave. "But then, you see, you've been here, and that made the whole thing lyric. The rest was just a somber background. It only made you stand out the more triumphantly in

contrast. It's like a Sorolla picture hung against gray."

"We don't stand out against dull backgrounds—not for long," she declared. "We fade into them." But after a moment she wheeled with a sudden impulsiveness and gazed contritely into his face.

"Forgive me," she pleaded. "It's shameful and petty and mean to wreak all my protests against you. You've been splendid. I couldn't have borne it without you."

Stuart Farquaharson's cheeks paled under an emotion so powerful that instead of exciting him it carried a sense of being tremendously sobered—yet shaken and tried to the limit of endurance.

"You've forbidden me to make love to you," he said desperately, "and I'm trying to obey, but God knows, dear, there are times when—" He broke off with an abrupt choke in his throat.

Then Conscience said in a changed and very gentle voice, "You wouldn't have me until I could be utterly, unmistakably sure of myself, would you?"

"No," he replied uncompromisingly, "the very intensity of my love would make it hell for both of us unless you loved me—that way, too—but I wish you were certain. I wish to God you were!"

Again she turned her eyes seaward, and when she spoke her voice was impersonal, almost dead, so that he thought, with a deep misery, she was trying to make it merciful in tempering her verdict.

"I am certain now," she told him, still looking away.

He came a step nearer and braced himself. He could forecast her words, he thought—deep friendship but no more!

"Your mind is—definitely—made up?"

Very abruptly she wheeled, showing him a face transformed and self-revealing. Against her ivory white cheeks her parted lips were crimson and her eyes dilated and softly black. "I think I've known it from the first," she declared, and her voice thrilled joyously. "Only I didn't know that I knew."

There was no need to ask what she knew. Her eyes were windows flung open and back of them was the message of her heart.

"I don't know how you love me," she went on tensely, "but if you don't love me rather madly, it's all one sided."

As his arms closed about her, he knew that he was violently shaken, but he knew that she was trembling, too, through all the magnificent softness and slenderness of her. He knew that the lips against which he crushed his kisses were responsive.

Later he declared, with a ring of triumph, "I told you when you were a little girl that they might take you to the North Pole and surround you with regiments of soldiers—but that I'd come to claim you. I tell you that again. *He* wrote our two names in one horoscope and it had to be."

CHAPTER VI

In the library at the old manse that afternoon there was less of sunlight and joy. Shadows hung between the walls and there were shadows, too, in the heart of one of the men who sat by a central, paper-littered table.

It was at best a cheerless room; this study where the minister had for decades prepared the messages of his stewardship—and sternly drawn indictments against sin. In the drawers of the old-fashioned desk those sermons lay tightly rolled and dusty. Never had he spared himself—and never had he spared others. What he failed to see was that in all those sheaves upon sheaves of carefully penned teaching, was no single relief of bright optimism, no single touch of sweet and gracious tolerance, not one vibrating echo of Christ's great soul-song of tenderness.

Now it was ended. He had dropped in the harness and younger men were taking up the relay race. They were men, he feared, who were not to be altogether trusted; men beguiled by dangerous novelties of trend. With worldliness of thought pressing always forward; with atheism increasing, they were compromising and, it seemed to him, giving way cravenly, step by step, to encroachment.

But the conversation just now was not of religion, or even dogma which in this room had so often been confused with religion. Eben Tollman was sitting in a stiff-backed chair across from his host. His face wore the immobile expression of a man who never forgets the oppressive fact that he is endowed with dignity.

"Eben," said the minister, "for years you have advised me on all money matters and carried the advice into effect. You have virtually annexed my business to your own and carried a double load."

"You have devoted your life to matters of greater moment, Mr. Williams," unctuously responded the younger man. "Your stewardship has been to God."

"I could have wished," the minister's face clouded with anxiety, "that I might have seen Conscience settled down with a godly husband and a child or two about her before I go. Those are restless days and a girl should have an anchorage."

There was a pause and at its end Tollman said hesitantly, almost tentatively, "There is young Mr. Farquaharson, of course."

"Young Mr. Farquaharson!" The minister's lower jaw shot out pugnaciously and his eyes flashed. "Eben, don't be absurd. The two of them are children. This boy is playing away a vacation. To speak of him as a matrimonial possibility is to talk irresponsibly. You astonish me!"

"Of course, in some respects it seems anomalous." Tollman spoke thoughtfully and with no resentment of his companion's temper. He was quite willing that any objections to Stuart which were projected into the conversation should appear to come from the other. "For example, his people are not our people and the two codes are almost antithetical. Yet his blood is blue blood and, after all, the war is over."

"If I thought that there was even a remote danger of this friendship ever becoming more than a friendship, I'd have Conscience send him away. I'd guard her from it as from a contagion." The announcement came fiercely. "Young Farquaharson's blood is blood that runs to license. His ideas are the ideas of a hard-drinking, hard-gaming aristocracy. But nonsense, Eben, he's a harmless boy just out of college. I like him—but not for my own family. What put such an absurdity into your head?"

"Possibly it is an absurdity." Tollman gave the appearance of a man who, having suggested a stormy topic, is ready to relinquish it. In reality he was making Williams say everything which he wished to have said and was doing it by the simple device of setting up antagonism to play the prompter. "What put it into my head was perhaps nothing more tangible than their constant companionship. They are both young. He has a vital and fascinating personality. There is a touch of Pan and a touch of Bacchus in him that—"

"Those are somewhat pagan advantages," interrupted the minister with a crispness which carried the bite of scorn.

"Pagan perhaps, but worth considering, since it is not upon ourselves that they operate." Tollman rose and went over to the window which gave off across the garden. He presented the seeming of a man whose thought was dispassionate, and because dispassionate impossible to ignore. "This young man has in his blood bold and romantic tendencies which will not be denied. To him much that we revere seems a type of narrowness. His ancestors have made a virtue of the indulgences of sideboard and card table—but the boy is not to blame for that."

Eben Tollman was playing on the prejudices of his host as he might have played on the keys of a piano. He maintained, as he did it, all the semblance of a fair-minded man painting extenuations into his portrait of the absent Farquaharson.

"And you call this predisposition to looseness and license a thing to be condoned, to be mixed with the blood of one's own posterity? Eben, I've never seen you make excuses for ungodliness before." The fierce old face suddenly cleared. "But there—there! This is all an imaginary danger. I'll watch them, but I'm sure that these two have no such reprehensible thought."

Mr. Tollman took up his hat and gloves. "I will see you again to-morrow," he said, as he passed out of the library, leaving the old puritan behind him immersed in a fresh anxiety.

It was not the intention of William Williams to act with unconscientious haste—but he would watch and weigh the evidence. He prided himself on his rigid adherence to justice, and escaped the knowledge that his sense of justice was a crippled thing warped to the shape of casuistry. If he had permitted the affliction, which God had visited upon him, to blind his eyes against duty to his daughter, he must rouse himself and remedy the matter. It was time to put such self-centered sin behind him and make amends. In this self-assumption of the plenary right to regulate the life of his daughter, or any one else, there was no element of self-reproach. He held God's commission and acted for God!

The gradual, almost imperceptible change of manner was observable first to the apprehensive eyes of Stuart Farquaharson himself. The Virginian's standards as to his bearing in the face of hostility were definite and could be summed up in the length of an epigram: Never to fail of courtesy, but never to surrender more than half of any roadway to aggression. Yet here was a situation of intricate bearings and a man whom he could not fight. A brain must be dealt with, too old for plasticity, like sculptor's clay hardened beyond amendment of form. A man whose fighting blood is hot, but whose spirit of sportsmanship is true, can sometimes maintain a difficult peace where another type would fail, and that was the task Stuart set himself. That same spirit of sportsmanship would have meant to Williams only a want of seriousness, a making play out of life. But to Stuart it meant the nearest approach we have to a survival of chivalry's ideals: a readiness to accept punishment without complaint: a willingness to extend every fair advantage to an adversary: a courage to strive to the uttermost without regard to the material value of the prize—and paramount to all the rest, a scorn for any meanly gained advantage, however profitable. If there was any value in his

heritage of gentle blood and a sportsman's training, it should stand him in good stead now, for the sake of the girl he loved.

One evening in the garden Conscience asked him, "Do you think I over-painted the somberness of the picture? But it's a shame for you to have to endure it, too. I think the confinement is making Father more irritable than usual."

The man shook his head and smiled whimsically.

"It's not the confinement. It's me. He's discovered that you and I have grown up, and he's seeking to draw me into a quarrel so that he can tender me my passports."

Conscience laid her hands on his arm and they trembled a little.

"I'm sure it isn't that," she declared, though her words were more confident than her voice. "You've stood a great deal, but please keep it up. It won't"—her voice dropped down the key almost to a whisper—"it won't be for long."

The hills were flaming these days with autumnal splendor. Conscience and Stuart had just returned from a drive, laden with trophies of woodland richness and color. About the cheerless house she had distributed branches of the sugar maple's vermilion and the oak's darker redness, but the fieriest and the brightest clusters of leafage she had saved for the old library where the invalid sat among his cases of old sermons.

"Stuart and I gathered these for you," she told him as she arranged them deftly in a vase.

The old man's face did not brighten with enjoyment. Rather it hardened into a set expression, and after a moment's pause he echoed querulously, "You and Stuart."

His daughter looked up, her attention arrested by his tone. "Why, yes," she smiled. "We went for a drive and got out and foraged in the woods."

"How long has Mr. Farquaharson been here now?"

"Something over six weeks, I believe."

"Isn't it nearer two months?"

The girl turned very slowly from the window and in the dark room her figure and profile were seen, a silhouette against the pane with a nimbus about her hair.

"Perhaps it is. Why?"

For a while the father did not speak, then he said: "Perhaps it's time he was thinking of terminating his visit."

The girl felt her shoulders stiffen, and all the fighting blood which was in her as truly, if less offensively than in himself, leaped in her pulses. Defiant words rushed to her lips, but remained unsaid, because something grotesque about his attempted movement in his chair accentuated his helplessness and made her remember.

"What do you mean?" she asked in a level voice, which since she had suppressed the passion came a little faint and uncertain.

"I had no objection," he replied quietly enough but with that inflexible intonation which automatically arouses antagonism, since it puts into its "I want's" and its "I don't want's" a tyrannical finality, "to this young gentleman visiting us. I extended him hospitality. I even liked him. But it has come rather too much, for my liking, to a thing that can be summed up in your words of a minute ago —'Stuart and I.' It's time to bring it to an end."

"Why should it come to an end, Father?" she asked with a terrific effort to speak calmly.

"Because it might run to silly sentiment—and to such an idea I could never give consent. This young man, though a gentleman by birth, is not our sort of a gentleman. His blood is not the kind of blood with which ours can be mixed: his ideas are the loose ideas that put pleasure above righteousness. In short, while I wish to say good-by to him as agreeably as I said welcome, the time has come to say good-by."

She came over and sat by his chair and let one hand rest on his white hair. "Father," she said in a low voice, tremulously repressed, "you are undertaking to rule offhand on a question which is too vital to my life to be treated with snap judgment. I've tried to meet your wishes and I want to go on trying, but in this you must think well before you take a position so—so absolute that perhaps—"

He shook her hand away and his eyes blazed.

"I *have* thought well," he vehemently declared. "I have not only thought, but I have prayed. I have waited silently and watched in an effort to be just. I have asked God's guidance."

"God's guidance could hardly have told you that Stuart Farquaharson has loose ideas or that he's unrighteous or that his blood could corrupt our blood—because none of those things are true or akin to the truth."

For an instant the old man gazed at her in an amazement which turned quickly to a wrath of almost crazily blazing eyes, and his utterance came with a violence of fury.

"Do you mean that such an unspeakable idiocy has already come to pass—that you and this—this—young amateur jockey and card-player from the South—" He broke suddenly off with a contempt that made his words seem to curl and snap with flame.

The girl rose from her place on the arm of his chair. She stood lancelike in her straightness and her eyes blazed, too, but her voice lost neither its control nor its dignity.

"I mean," she said, "that this gentleman who needs no apologist and no defense, has honored me by telling me that he loves me—and that I love him."

"And his high courage has prevented him from admitting this to me and facing my just wrath?"

"His courage has been strong enough to concede to my wish that I might tell you myself, and in my own time."

The library door stood open and the hall gave out onto the verandah where Stuart Farquaharson sat waiting for Conscience to return.

The minister attempted to rise from his chair and fell back into it, with a groan, as he remembered his helplessness. That helplessness did not, however, abate his anger, and his voice rose as it was accustomed to rise when, pounding the pulpit pillow, he wished to drive home some impassioned utterance, beyond the chance of missing any sleepy ear.

"If what you say is true, this man has abused my hospitality and used my roof as an ambuscade to attack me. He is not, as you say, a man of honor or of courage, but a coward and a sneak! I have more to say, but it had better be said to him

direct. Please send him to me."

The girl hesitated, then she wheeled with flaming face toward the chair. "I have been willing," she said, "to smother my life in an effort to meet your ideas, though I knew them to be little ideas. Now I see that in yielding everything one can no more please you than in yielding nothing. If he goes, I go, too. You may take your choice."

But as her words ended Conscience felt a hand laid gently on her shoulder, and a voice whispered in her ear, "Don't, dear; this will always haunt you. Leave it to me." Stuart turned her gently toward the door, then faced the irate figure in the chair. In a voice entirely quiet and devoid of passion he addressed its occupant. "I thought I heard you call for me, sir. I am here."

CHAPTER VII

For a little while the study remained silent, except for the excited panting of the minister, whose face was a mask of fury. The passion in Conscience's eyes was gradually fading into an expression of deep misery. The issue of cruel dilemma had come in spite of every defensive effort and every possible care. It had come of her father's forcing and she knew that he would make no concession. When Williams spoke his voice came chokingly.

"Conscience, leave us alone. What I have to say to this man is a matter between the two of us."

But instead of obeying the girl took her place at Stuart's side and laid her hand on his arm.

"What you have to say to him, Father, is very much my affair," she replied steadily. "My action for the rest of my life depends upon it."

"Dear," suggested the Virginian in a lowered voice, "you can trust me. I'm not going to lose my temper if it's humanly possible to keep it. There's no reason why you should have to listen to things which it will be hard to forget."

"No," she declared with a decisiveness that could not be shaken, "I stay here as long as you stay. When you go, I go, too."

Farquaharson turned to the minister, "I believe you called for me, sir," he repeated, in a tone of even politeness. "You have something to say to me?"

The old man raised a hand that was palsied with rage and his voice shook.

"I fancy you heard what I said of you. I said that you had abused my hospitality and that you are a coward and a sneak. You are worse than that; you are an infamous scoundrel."

Conscience felt the muscles in the forearm upon which her fingers rested grow tense and hard as cables. She saw the face pale to lividness and the lips stiffen, but except for that, the man made no movement, and for some ten seconds he did not speak. They were ten seconds of struggle against an anger as fierce as it was just, but at the end of that time he inquired quietly, "Is that all you meant to say

to me?"

"No! There's much more, but for most men that would be enough. To let it go unanswered is a confession of its truth."

"My invariable answer to such words," said Stuart Farquaharson slowly, "is made with a clenched fist. The triple immunity of your cloth, your age and your infirmity denies me even that reply."

"And what immunity makes a denial unnecessary?"

"A denial would dignify a charge which I can afford to ignore as I ignore vulgar talk that I hear in an alley."

The old man bent forward, glaring like a gargoyle, and his first attempts to speak were choked into inarticulate rumblings by his rage. His face reddened with a fever of passion which threw the veins on his temples into purple traceries.

"I repeat with a full responsibility—with the knowledge that the God whom I have tried to serve is listening, that you *are* what I have called you, because you have come into my house and practiced a continuous and protracted deceit. You have abused the freedom granted you as a guest to try to win my daughter away from everything worth holding to and everything she has been taught. I was a blind fool. I was a watchman fallen asleep at the gate—a sentry unfaithful at his post." The voice of the minister settled into a clearer coherence as he went on in deep bitterness. "You say I have accused you sternly. I am also accusing myself sternly—but now the scales have fallen from my eyes and I recognize my remissness. God grant I am not too late."

He paused for breath and his fingers clenched rigidly at the carvings of his chair arms. "You know that my daughter is young and inexperienced—an impressionable child not sufficiently seasoned in wisdom to repudiate the gauzy lure of dangerous modernisms."

"Father," broke in Conscience during his accusing pause, "you are starting out with statements that are unjust and untrue. I am not a child and no one has corrupted my righteousness. We simply have different ideas of life."

The minister did not take his eyes from the face of the young man and he ignored the interruption of his daughter.

"I could not blame her: it was the natural spirit of unthinking youth. You,

however, did know the consequences. Here in my house—which you must never reënter—you have incited my family against me to serve your own covetous and lustful interests." Again he halted while the young man, still standing as rigid as a bronze figure, his flushed face set and his eyes holding those of his accuser with unblinking steadiness, made no attempt to interrupt him.

"What, indeed, to you were mere questions of right or wrong? You had a world of light and frivolous women to choose from, your own kind of women who could dance and fritter life away in following fads that make for license—but you must come into the household of a man who has tried to fight God's battles; standing against these encroachments of Satan which you advocate—and beguile my only daughter into telling me that I must choose between surrender or the wretchedness of ending my life in deserted loneliness."

Farquaharson, despite the storm which raged in his heart, answered with every outward show of calmness, even with dignity.

"You accuse me of having made love to your daughter. For that I have no denial. I have loved her since she was a child. I have told her so at every opportunity, but that love has been honorable and free of deceit and I know of no law which forbids a man of decent character to plead his cause. That I should win her love is a marvelous thing, but, thank God, I have it and hope to hold it till death."

"You have filched it! You have it as a thief has another man's purse or another man's wife. You have gained favor by arousing discontent for a Godly home: a home where she is sheltered and where she belongs."

There was a tense silence and Farquaharson's voice was almost gentle when he next spoke.

"There is more than one way of looking at life—and more than one may be right. Conscience wanted the wider scope which college would have given her. She wanted it with all the splendid eagerness of a soul that wishes to grow and fulfill itself. That rightful privilege you denied her—and she has not complained. Why shouldn't she want life's fullness instead of life's meagerness and its breadth instead of its bigotries? Is there greater nobility in the dull existence of a barnacle that hangs to one spot than in the flight of a bird? I have sought no quarrel and I have cruelly set a curb upon my temper, but I have no apologies to make and no intention of giving her up. I should be glad of your consent, but with it or without it I shall continue to urge my love. It would be a pity for you to force a breach."

"There is no question of my forcing a breach." The first words wore spoken sharply, but as they continued they began again to rush and mount into an access of passion. "You are as insolent as your words prove you to be reckless. You have tried to corrupt every idea of righteousness in my daughter's heart. It would almost appear that you have succeeded. But I believe God is stronger than Satan. I believe my prayers and the heritage of Godfearing forefathers will yet save her. As for you, you are to leave my house and henceforth never to cross my threshold."

"Very well," answered Stuart quietly; then he added: "To what extent am I indebted to Mr. Eben Tollman for your sudden discovery that I am a sneak and a coward?"

"That," shouted the invalid, "proves your meanness of spirit. Had Mr. Tollman held a brief for you he could not have defended you more stoutly. He, too, was deceived in you, it seems."

"Stuart," suggested the girl, "it's no use. You can't change him now. Perhaps when he's less angry—"

"Less angry!" screamed the old man. "For almost seventy years my wrath against the machinations of hell has burned hot. If God grants me strength to the end, it will never cool. You, too, have turned to my enemies in my last days. You would leave me for a young wastrel who has sung in your ears the song of a male siren. But before I will surrender my fight for the dictates of the conscience God has given me to be my mentor, I will see you go!"

"Father!" cried the girl. "You don't know what you're saying."

His face had become frenzied and purpled, his hands were shaking. His voice was a thunder, rumbling with its agitation. "I must have sinned deeply—but if the Almighty sees fit to take from me my health, my child, my last days of peace on earth—if He chooses to chastise me as He chastised Job—I shall still fight for His righteous will, and war on the iniquitous chil—"

The last word broke with a choke in his throat. The white head rocked from side to side and the hands clawed the air. Then William Williams hunched forward and lurched from his chair to the floor.

In an instant Farquaharson was at his side and bending over the unconscious form and a few minutes later, still insensible, the figure had been laid on a couch

and the roadster was racing for a physician.

When Conscience came out into the yard later, where her lover was awaiting her, her lips were pale and her eyes tortured. She went straight into his outstretched arms and with her head on his shoulder sobbed out a misery that shook her. At last the man asked softly, "What did the doctor say?" And she answered brokenly.

"It seems that—besides the paralysis he has a weak—heart."

The man held her close. "I wish to God it could have been averted. I tried."

"You did all you could," she declared. "But, Stuart, when he came back to consciousness, his eyes were awful! I've never seen such terror in a human face. He couldn't speak at first and when he could ... he whispered in absolute agony, 'Has she gone?' He thought I'd left him lying there—and gone with you."

"Great God!" It was more a groan than an exclamation.

"And when he saw me he stretched out his hands like a child and began crying over me, but even then he said bitterly, 'That man's name must never be mentioned in this house.'... What are we to do?"

"There is only one thing to do," he told her. "We are young enough to wait. You can't desert a dying father."

While they talked the physician came out of the door.

"The patient will pull through this attack," he said briskly. "It's a leaky valve. There is only one rule that I have to lay upon you. It is absolutely vital that he shall not be excited. A blow with an ax would be no more fatal than another such stroke."

Conscience looked desperately about her, as Stuart with the doctor beside him started the car again down the drive. In a front window her eyes lighted on a flaming branch of maple leaves. Only two hours ago she and her lover had been watching the sunlight spill through the gorgeous filter of the painted foliage. They had carried in their hearts the spirit of carnival. Now the storm had broken and swept them.

She walked unsteadily to the veranda of the house and dropped down on the steps. Her head was swimming and her life was in a vortex.

CHAPTER VIII

The days that followed were troubled days and they brought to Conscience's cheeks an accentuated pallor. Under her eyes were smudges that made them seem very large and wistful. The minister was once more in his arm chair, a little more broken, a little more fiercely uncompromising of aspect, but the one normal solution of such a spent and burdensome life: the solution of death, stood off from him. Upon his daughter, whose lips were sealed against any protest by the belief that even a small excitement might kill him, he vented long and bigoted sermons of anathema. In these sermons, possibly, he was guilty of the very heresy of which his daughter had said he was so intolerant. He seemed to doubt himself, these days, that Satan wore a spiked tail and a pair of cloven hoofs. Of late he rather leaned to the belief that the Arch-tempter had returned to walk the earth in the guise of a young Virginian and that he had assumed the incognito of Stuart Farquaharson.

One refrain ran through every waking hour and troubled his sleep with fantastic dreams. God commanded him to strip this tempter of his habiliments of pretense and show the naked wickedness of his soul to the girl's deluded eye. To that fancied command he dedicated himself as whole-heartedly as a bloodhound gives itself to the man hunt.

To Stuart one day, as they walked together in the woods, Conscience confessed her fear that this constant hammering of persecution would eventually batter down her capacity for sane judgment and she ended with a sweeping denunciation of every form of bigotry.

"Dear," he answered with the gravity of deep apprehension, "you say that and you believe it and yet this same instinct of self-martyrdom is the undertow of your life flood. If your given name didn't happen to be Conscience your middle name would be just that."

"I suppose I have a conscience of a sort—but a different, sort, I hope. Is that such a serious fault?" she asked, and because the strain of these days had tired and rubbed her nerves into the sensitiveness of exhaustion, she asked it in a hurt and wounded tone.

"It's an indispensable virtue," he declared. "Your father's conscience was a

virtue, too, until it ran amuck and became a savage menace. When you were a child," he went on, speaking so earnestly that his brow was drawn into an expression which she mistook for a frown of disapproval, "your most characteristic quality was an irrepressible sense of humor. It gave both sparkle and sanity to your outlook. It held you immune to all bitterness."

"And now?" She put the query somewhat faintly.

"Now, more than ever, because the life around you is grayer, it's vital that you cling to your golden talisman. To let it go means to be lost in the fog."

They were strolling along a woodland path and she was a few steps in advance of him. He saw her shoulders stiffen, but it was not until he overtook her that he discovered her eyes to be sparkling with tears.

"What is it, dearest?" he contritely demanded, and after a long pause she said:

"Nothing, except that I feel as if you had slapped me in the face."

"I! Slapped you in the face!" He could only reëcho her words in bewilderment and distress. "I don't understand."

Laying a hand on her arm, he halted her in a place where the setting sun was spilling streams of yellow light through the woodland aisles and then her lips trembled; her eyes filled and she pressed both hands over her face. After a moment she looked up and dashed the tears contemptuously away.

"No, I know you don't understand, dear. It's my own fault. I'm a weak little fool," she said, "But it's all gotten horribly on my nerves. I can't help it."

"For God's sake," he begged, "tell me what I did or said?" And her words came with a weary resignation.

"I think you had better put me out of your life, Stuart. I've just realized how things really are—you've told me. I can't go because I'm chained to the galley. While Father lives my place is here."

She broke off suddenly and his face took on a stunned amazement.

"Out of my life!" exclaimed the man almost angrily. "Abandon you to all this abysmal bigotry and—to this pharisaical web of ugly dogmas! Conscience, you're falling into a melancholy morbidness."

As she looked at him and saw the old smoldering fire in his eyes that reminded her of his boyhood, a pathetic smile twisted the corners of her lips.

"Yes—I guess that's just it, Stuart," she said slowly, "You see, I may have to stay here until, as you put it, I'm all faded out in the fog. If I've changed so much already there's no telling what years of it will turn me into."

Stuart Farquaharson caught her impulsively in his arms and his words came in tumultuous fervor.

"What I said wasn't criticism," he declared. "God knows I couldn't criticize you. You ought to know that. This is the nearest we've ever come to a quarrel, dear, since the Barbara Freitchie days, and it's closer than I want to come. Besides, it's not just your laughter that I love. It's all of you: heart, mind, body: the whole lovely trinity of yourself. I mean to wage unabated war against all these forces that are trying to stifle your laughter into the pious smirk of the pharisee. There's more of what God wants the world to feel in one peal of your laughter than in all the psalms that this whole people ever whined through their noses. You're one of the rare few who can go through life being yourself—not just a copy and reflection of others. A hundred years ago your own people would probably have burned you as a witch for that. They've discontinued that form of worship now, but the cut of their moral and intellectual jib is, in some essentials, the same. Thank God, you have a different pattern of soul and I want you to keep it."

She drew away from him and slowly her face cleared of its misery and the eyes flashed into their old mischief-loving twinkle. "That's the first real rise I've had out of you," she declared, "since Barbara waved the stars and stripes at you. Then you were only defending Virginia, but now you've assumed the offensive against all New England."

But even in that mild disagreement they had, as he said, come nearer than either liked to a quarrel—and neither could quite forget it. Both felt that the thin edge of what might have been a disrupting wedge had threatened their complete harmony.

Because he could mark the transition of this thing called conscience into an obsession, and because he, too, was worn in patience and stinging with resentment against the injustice of the father, he fought hotly, and his denunciations of various influences were burning and scornful. So slowly but dangerously there crept into their arguments the element of contention. Hitherto Stuart had made no tactical mistakes. He had endured greatly and in patience,

but now he was unconsciously yielding to the temptation of assailing an abstract code in a fashion which her troubled judgment might translate into attacks upon her father. Out of that attitude was born for her a hard dilemma of conflicting loyalties. It was all a fabric woven of gossamer threads, but Gulliver was bound into helplessness by just such Lilliputian fetters.

Late one night, when the moon was at two-thirds of fullness and the air touched with frost, Stuart abandoned the bed upon which he had been restlessly tossing for hours. He kindled a pipe and sat meditating, none too cheerfully, by the frail light of a bayberry candle. Through the narrow corridors and boxed-in stair wells of a ramshackle hotel, came no sounds except the minors of the night. Somewhere far off a dog barked and somewhere near at hand a traveling salesman snored. In the flare and sputter of the charring wick and melting wax shadows lengthened and shortened like flapping flags of darkness.

Then the jangle of the telephone bell in the office ripped the stillness with a discordant suddenness which Farquaharson thought must arouse the household, but the snoring beyond the wall went on, unbroken, and there was no sound of a footfall on the creaking stair. At last Stuart, himself, irritated by the strident urgency of its repetitions, reached for his bath robe and went down. The clapper still trembled with the echo of its last vibrations as he put the receiver to his ear and answered.

Then he started and his muscles grew taut, for the other voice was that of Conscience and it shook with terrified unevenness and a tremulous faintness like the leaping and weakening of a fevered pulse. He could tell that she was talking guardedly with her lips close to the transmitter.

"I had to speak to you without waiting for morning," she told him, recognizing his voice, "and yet—yet I don't know what to say."

Recognizing from the wild note that she was laboring under some unnatural strain, he answered soothingly, "I'm glad you called me, dear."

"What time is it?" she demanded next and when he told her it was well after midnight she gave a low half-hysterical laugh. "I couldn't sleep.... Father spent the afternoon exhorting me ... he was trying to make me promise not to see you again ... and I was trying to keep him from exciting himself." Her voice was so tense now as to be hardly recognizable. "Every few minutes it looked as if he were about to fly into a passion.... You know what that would mean ... and of course I—I—couldn't promise."

She paused for breath, but before he could speak, rushed on.

"It's been an absolute reign of terror. Every nerve in my body is jumping and quivering.... I think I'm going mad."

"Listen." The man spoke as one might to a child who has awakened, terrified, out of a nightmare and is afraid to be alone. "I'm coming out there. You need to talk to some one. I'll leave the car out of hearing in the road."

"No, no!" she exclaimed in a wildly fluttering timbre of protest. "If he woke up it would be worse than this afternoon—it might kill him!"

But Stuart answered her with a quiet note of finality. "Wrap up well—it's cool outside—and meet me on the verandah. We can talk more safely that way than by 'phone. I'm going to obey the doctor implicitly—unless you fail to meet me. If you do that—" he paused a moment before hanging up the receiver—"I'll knock on the door."

The moon had not yet set as he started on foot up the driveway of the manse and the bare trees stood out stark and inky against the silver mists. Before he was more than half-way to the house he saw her coming to meet him, casting backward glances of anxiety over her shoulder.

She was running with a ghostlike litheness through the moonlight, her eyes wide and frightened and her whole seeming one of unreasoning panic so that the man, who knew her dauntlessness of spirit, felt his heart sink.

"You shouldn't have done it," she began in a reproachful whisper. "You shouldn't have come!" But he only caught her in his arms and held her so close to his own heart that the wild palpitation of her bosom was calmed against its steadiness. Her arms went gropingly round his neck and clutched him as if he were the one stable thing that stood against an allied ferocity of wind and wave.

"You needed me," he said. "And when you need me I come—even if I have to come like a burglar."

The eyes which she raised to his face were tearless—but hardly sane. She was fear-ridden by ghosts that struck at her normality and she whispered, "Suppose he died by my fault?"

At all costs, the lover resolved, Conscience must leave this place for a time—until she could return with a stabler judgment. But just now he could not argue

with her.

"We'll be very quiet," he said reassuringly. "If you hear any sound in the house you can go back. You're overwrought, dearest, and I've only come to be near you. Nobody will see me except yourself, but if at any time before daylight you want me, come to your window and raise the blind. I'll be where I can see."

For a while she clung to him silently, her breath coming fast. About them the moon shed a softness of pale silver and old ivory. The silence seemed to carry a wordless hymn of peace and though they stood in shadow there was light enough for lovers' eyes. The driven restlessness that had made Conscience doubt her sanity was slowly yielding to a sense of repose, as the tautened anguish of a mangled body relaxes to the balm of an anesthetic. Slowly the slenderly curved and graciously proportioned modeling of her lithe figure quieted from spasmodic unrest and the wild racing measure of her heart-beat calmed. Then she turned up her face. Her eyes cleared and her lips tilted their corners in a smile.

"I'm a horrid little demon," she declared in a voice freighted with self-scorn, but no longer panic-stricken. "I've always hated a coward, and I'm probably the most amazingly craven one that ever lived. I do nothing but call on you to fight my battles for me when I can't hold my own."

"You're an adorable little saint, with an absurd leaning toward martyrdom," he fervently contradicted. "Why shouldn't you call on me? Aren't you fighting about me?"

Her dark eyes were for a moment serene because she was treasuring this moment of moonlight and the respite of love against the chances of to-morrow.

"Anyhow you came—" she said, "and since you did there's at least one more fight left in me." Then her voice grew again apprehensive. "It was pretty bad before ... just hearing you preached against and being afraid to reply because ... of the warning. Now he wants my promise that I'll dismiss you forever ... and the worst of it is that he'll pound on it to the end. What am I to do?"

"Is there any question?" he gravely asked her. "*Could* you make that promise?"

"No—no!" He felt the figure in his arms flinch at the words, "There's no question of *that*, but how am I to keep him from raging himself to death?"

"Hasn't the doctor warned him that he mustn't excite himself?"

The dark head nodded and the fingers of the hands about his neck tightened. "Of course," she said. "But there you have the tyranny of weakness again. I must make the fight to keep him alive. He would regard it as going righteously to death for his beliefs. That's just the goodness-gone-wrongness of it all."

"Blessed are the self-righteous," mused Farquaharson half aloud, "for they shall supply their own absolution." To himself he was saying, "The wretched old hellion!"

"And then you see, after all," she added with the martyr's sophistry, "in the fight for you, I'm only fighting for myself and in doing what I can for him I'm trying to be unselfish."

"Listen," the man spoke carefully, "that, too, is the goodness-gone-wrongness as you call it; the sheer perversion of a duty sense. If it were just myself to be thought of, perhaps I couldn't fight you on a point of conscience. But it isn't just me—not if you love me."

"Love you!" He felt the thrilled tremor that ran through her from head to foot, and that made her bosom heave stormily. The moon had sunk a little and the shadow in which they were standing had crawled onward so that on her head fell a gleam of pale light, kindling her eyes and touching her temples under the sooty shadows of her hair. Her lips were parted and her voice trembled with the solemnity of a vow, too sacred to be uttered without the fullest frankness. "In every way that I know how to love, I love you! Everything that a woman can be to a man I want to be to you and all that a woman can give to a man, I want to give to you."

It was he who trembled then and became unsteady with the intoxication of triumph.

"Then I'll fight for you, while I have breath, even if it means fighting with you."

Suddenly she caught at his arm with a spasmodic alarm, and he turned his head as the screeching whine of a window sounded in the stillness. The effort to raise it cautiously was indicated not by any noiselessness but by the long duration of the sound. Then a woman's head with hair in tight pigtails stood out against the pallid light of a bedroom lamp, turned low, and the whispered challenge came out to them. "Who's out there?"

"Ssh!" cautioned the girl, tensely. "It's I, Auntie. Don't wake Father."

Grudgingly the window creaked down and for seconds which lengthened themselves interminably to the anxious ears of the pair in the shadows, they waited with bated breath. Then Stuart whispered, "You must go to sleep now."

The rest of the far-spent night Stuart stood guard outside the house. Once, a half hour after Conscience had gone in, her blind rose and she stood silhouetted against the lamp-light. The man stepped out of his shadow and raised a hand, and she waved back at him. Then the lamp went out, and he surrendered himself to thought and resolves—and mistakes. This submission to the tyranny of weakness had gone too far. She must go away. He must take up the fight aggressively. He did not realize that he who was fighting for her sense of humor had lost his own. He did not foresee that he was preparing to throw the issue on dangerous ground, pitting his stubbornness against her stubbornness, and raising the old duel of temperaments to combat—the immemorial conflict between puritan and cavalier.

CHAPTER IX

Stuart Farquaharson had tempered a dignified strength with a gracious fortitude. He had endured slanderous charges and stood with the steadiness of a reef-light when Conscience was steering a storm ridden course, but the constant pressure on the dykes of his self-command had strained them until they might break at any moment and let the flood of passion swirl through with destructive power. He was being oppressed and seeing Conscience oppressed by a spirit which he regarded as viciously illiberal—and he accused Conscience, in his own mind, of blind obedience to a distorted sense of duty. Unconsciously he was seeking to coerce her into repudiating it by a form of argument in which the graciousness of his nature gave way to a domineering insistence. Unconsciously, too, that form of attack aroused in her an unyielding quality of opposition.

When he saw her next after the mid-night meeting she had seemed more normally composed and he had seized upon the occasion to open his campaign. They had driven over and stopped the car at a point from which they could look out to sea, and though the summer vividness had died out of wave and sky and the waters had taken on a touch of a leaden grimness, there was still beauty in the picture.

For awhile they talked of unimportant things, but abruptly Stuart said: "Dearest, I told you that I meant to fight for you even if I had to fight with you. That's the hardest form in which the battle could come, but one can't always choose the conditions of war." He paused and, seeing that his eyes were troubled, Conscience smiled encouragingly.

"At least," she laughed, "I believe you will wage war on me humanely."

The man went on hurriedly. "I've been talking with the doctor. He says that your father's condition holds no immediate danger—danger of death, I mean. Unless he suffers another stroke, he may live for years."

The girl nodded her head. "Yes, I know," she said wearily, "and for him life only means continuation of suffering." She did not add that it meant the same for her and Stuart, looking steadily into her face, said with decision, "For awhile you must go away."

"I!" Her eyes widened with an incredulous expression as if she thought she had misunderstood, then she answered slowly and very gently, "You *know* I can't do that, dear."

"I know that you must," he countered, and because he had keyed himself for this combat of wills he spoke more categorically than he realized. "At first thought, of course, you would feel that you couldn't. But your ability to stand a long siege will depend on conserving your strength. You are human and not indestructible."

She shook her head with a gentle stubbornness. "Stuart, dear, you're trying to make me do a thing you wouldn't do yourself. A sentry placed on duty can't go away until his watch is over—even if it's raw and gloomy where's he's stationed."

"No, but soldiers under intolerable stress are relieved and given breathing space whenever it's possible."

"Yes, whenever it's possible."

"It's possible, now, dearest, and perhaps it won't be later. You could visit some friend for a few weeks and come back the better able to carry on the siege. Otherwise you'll be crushed by the weight of the ordeal."

"Stuart," she began slowly, "who is there to take my place, even for a few weeks?"

"And the whole intolerable situation arises," he broke out with a sudden inflection of wrath, "from inert, thick-skulled bigotry. Thought processes that are moral cramps and mental dyspepsia threaten to ruin your entire life."

"Don't, dear—please!" She leaned toward him and spoke earnestly. "I know it's hard to endure without retort, but please don't make me listen to things like that about Father. It's bad enough without any more recriminations."

Then logic retreated from Stuart Farquaharson. He, the gracious and controlled, gave way to his first moment of ungenerous temper and retorted bitterly.

"Very well, but it seems you can listen to his abuse of me."

Conscience flinched as if lash-stung and for an instant indignation and anger kindled in her eyes only to die as instantly out of them, as she bit her lip. When she spoke it was in an even gentler voice. "You know why I listened to him,

Stuart. You know that I didn't listen ... before his stroke. I didn't listen when I told him that if you went, I went, too, did I?"

The man's face paled and with a spasmodic gesture he covered it with his hands. "My God!" he exclaimed, "I don't think I've ever said such a damnably mean and caddish thing before—and to you!"

But Conscience bent over and drew his hands away from his face. "It wasn't you. It was just the strain. You could make allowances for me when I called you out to calm me in the middle of the night. I can make them, too. Neither of us is quite sane."

But having had that warning of Stuart's slipping control, Conscience kept locked in her own bosom certain fresh trials which discussion would have alleviated. She did not tell him how she spent sleepless nights devising plans to meet the grim insistence upon his banishment which she knew the morning would bring. But she felt that the comfort of a complete unburdening of her feelings had been curtailed and with a woman's genius for sacrifice she uncomplainingly assumed that added strain.

One afternoon Eben Tollman came out of the house, as she was walking alone under the bare trees of the driveway, and stopped, hat in hand, at her side.

"Conscience," he began thoughtfully, "Mr. Williams has just told me of his insistence that Mr. Farquaharson shall not only be denied the house, but sent away altogether. You must be carrying a pretty heavy load for young shoulders."

The girl stood regarding her father's counselor gravely. He had never appealed to her as a person inviting confidence, and she had thought of his mind as cut to the same austere pattern as the minister's own. Yet now his face wore an expression of kindliness and sympathy to which his manner gave corroboration. Possibly she had misjudged the man and lost his underlying qualities in her careless view of externals. Tollman seemed to expect no answer and went on slowly, "I tried to point out to your father the unwisdom of an insistence which must stir a spirit like yours to natural opposition. I suggested that under the circumstances it was scarcely fair."

"What did he say?" She put the inquiry with a level glance as if reserving her right to accept or reject his volunteered assistance.

"He could only see his own side. He must do his duty, however hard he found

it."

Conscience remembered Stuart's warning that Tollman thought he loved her, and smiled to herself. This voluntary championing of another man's cause hardly seemed to comport with such a conception.

"I don't know what to do," she admitted wearily. "Obviously I can't make the promise he asks and no more can I let him fly into a rage that may kill him. I'm between the upper and nether mill-stones."

The man nodded with a grave and courteous comprehension.

"I hesitate to volunteer advice—and yet—" He came to a questioning halt.

"Yes," she prompted eagerly. "Please go on."

"I had thought," he continued, with the diffident manner of a man unaccustomed to proffering counsel before it was asked, "that, if you cared to use me, I might be of some help—as an intermediary of sorts."

"An intermediary?" she repeated. Then more impulsively, because she felt that her attitude had been wanting in graciousness, she added, "I know you're offering to do something very kind, but I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"I think I am entirely in your father's confidence," he explained, "and because, on many subjects, we hold common opinions, I can discuss—even argue—matters with him without fear of antagonism or excitement to him. Still I hope I am not too old to be in sympathy with your more youthful and more modern outlook on life. If at any time I can help, please call on me."

They had been walking toward his buggy at the hitching post—it was not a new or particularly well-kept vehicle—and there they halted.

"This is good of you," she said, extending her hand cordially, and as he took it he suggested, "Meanwhile an old man is not speedily weaned from an idea which has taken deep root, and that brings me to another suggestion." Once more he paused deferentially as if awaiting permission, "if I may make it."

"I wish you would."

"It is the idea of Mr. Farquaharson's constant proximity and influence which keeps your father's animosity stirred to combat. With a temporary absence it would relax. I think it might even come to an automatic end.... When

Farquaharson returned Mr. Williams's mind might have lost its inflammation."

He smiled and shook the reins over the back of the old horse and when he drove away he left Conscience standing with her lips parted and her gaze set.

Send Stuart away for a time! She had told that she could not stand it without him, and now Tollman had expressed the unbiased view of one whose personal desires were not blinding his judgment. She moved over to the side of the road and leaned heavily against a tree. She felt as if she were standing unprotected under the chilling beat of a cold and driving rain, and her lips moved without sound, shaping again the three words "send him away!"

She had been holding her lover at her side until she could see his nerves growing raw under the stress of his worry about herself and the temper which nature had made chivalric giving way to acerbity. Yes, Tollman was right—it required a sacrifice to save a wreck—and because he was right the sun grew dark and the future as black as the floor of the sea.

But the next time she saw Stuart she did not broach the suggestion, nor yet the next time after that. The man gave her no opportunity, so indomitably was he waging his campaign to have her go. And as her equally inflexible refusal stood impregnable against his assaults, he grew desperate and reënforced his arguments with the accusation of indifference to his wishes. In each succeeding discussion, his infectious smile grew rarer and the drawn brow, that bore close kinship to a frown, more habitual. His own talisman of humor was going from him, and two unyielding determinations settled more and more directly at cross odds.

When the breach came it was almost entirely the Virginian's fault, or the fault of the unsuspected Hyde who lurked behind his Jekyll.

"Conscience," he pleaded desperately on the afternoon which neither of them could ever remember afterwards without a sickness of the soul, "you're simply building a funeral pyre for yourself. You're wrecking your life and my life because of an insane idea. You're letting the pettiest and unworthiest thing in you—a twisted instinct—consume all that's vital and fine. You're worshiping the morbid."

"If I'm guilty of all that" she answered with a haunted misery in her eyes which she averted her face to hide, "I'm hardly worth fighting for. The only answer I have is that I'm doing what seems right to me."

"Can't you admit that for the moment your sense of right may be clouded? All I ask is that you go for a while to the home of some friend, where they don't rebuff the sunlight when it comes in at the window."

"Stuart," she told him gently but with conviction, "you have changed, too. Once I could have taken your advice as almost infallible, but I can't now."

The Virginian's face paled, and his question came with an irritable quickness, "In what fashion have I changed?"

"In a way, I think I've recovered my balance," she said with deep seriousness. "I couldn't have done it without you. You've taken my troubles on yourself, but at a heavy price, dear. They've preyed on you until now it's *you* who can't trust his judgment. All you say influences me, but it's no longer because of its logic, it's because I love you and you're talking to my heart."

Farquaharson paced the frosty path of the woods where they were talking. His face was dark and his movements nervous so Conscience would not let herself look at him. She had something difficult to say and of late she had not felt strong enough to spend vitality with wastefulness.

"You say I'm wrecking both our lives...." she went on resolutely. "I don't want to wreck either ... but yours I couldn't bear to wreck. I love you enough to make any sacrifice for you ... even enough to give you up."

Stuart wheeled and his attitude stiffened to rigidity. The woods raced about him in crazy circles, and before his eyes swam spots of yellow and orange.

"Do you mean—" he paused to moisten his lips with his tongue and found his tongue, too, suddenly dry—"do you mean that you've let this tyranny of weakness conquer you? Have you promised to exile me?"

She flinched as she had flinched on the one other occasion when he had accused her of a disloyalty which would have been impossible to her, but she was too unhappy to be angry.

"No," she said slowly, "I haven't even considered such a promise. I said just now that you had changed. The other Stuart Farquaharson wouldn't have suspected me of that."

"Then what in Heaven's name do you mean?"

"I mean that you must go away—for awhile. It's only selfishness that has blinded me to that all along. I'm killing all the best in you by keeping you here."

"You are strong enough to bear the direct strain, I suppose," he accused with a bitter smile. "But I'm too weak to endure even its reflection."

"It's always easier to bear trouble oneself," she reminded him with a gracious patience, "than to see the person one loves subjected to it."

"When did you think of this?"

"I didn't think of it myself," she told him with candid directness. "I guess I was too selfish. Mr. Tollman suggested it."

"Mr. Tollman!" The name burst from his lips like an anathema and a sudden gust of fury swept him from all moorings of control. "You love me enough to give me up—on the advice of my enemies! You are deaf to all my pleadings, but to the casual suggestion of this damned pharisee you yield instant obedience. And what he suggests is that I be sent away."

Her twisted fingers clenched themselves more tautly and had passion not enveloped Stuart in a red wreath of fog he must have refrained from adding to the acuteness of her torture just then.

"Why," she asked faintly, "should he be your enemy?"

"Because he wants you himself, because, with me disposed of, he believes he can get what his unclean and avaricious heart covets as a snake charms a bird, because—"

Conscience rose with an effort to her feet. Her knees were trembling under her and her heart seemed to close into a painful strangulation.

"Stuart," she faltered, "if you think that my love can only be held against any outsider by your being at hand to watch it, you don't trust it as it *must* be trusted —and it isn't worth offering you at all."

"You've fallen under the spell of these Mad Mullah prophets," he retorted hotly, "until you can't trust yourself any longer. You've been inflamed into the Mohammedan's spirit of a holy war and you're ready to make a burnt offering of me and my love."

"Now," she said with a faintness that was almost a whisper, "you *must* go,

whether you agree or not. You distrust me and insult me ... and I don't think ... I can stand many ... interviews like this."

But Farquaharson's curb had slipped. His anger was a frenzied runaway which he, like a madman, was riding in utter recklessness.

"If I go now," he violently protested, "if I am sent into exile at the behest of Tollman, my enemy, I go for all time, knowing that the woman I leave behind is not the woman I thought I knew or the woman I have worshiped."

Their eyes met and engaged in a challenge of wills in which neither would surrender; a challenge which had built an issue out of nothing. His burned with the moment's madness. Hers were clear and unflinching.

"If you *can* go like that," she said, and the tremor left her voice as she said it, "the man who goes isn't the man to whom I gave all my love and to whom I was ready to give my life."

She straightened, sustained by a temporary strength, and stood clothed in a beauty above any which even he had before acknowledged; a beauty fired with the war spirit of a Valkyrie and of eyes regal in their affronted dignity. "If you can feel about me as your words indicate, we could never know happiness. The man whose love can make such accusations isn't the Stuart Farquaharson that made me willing to die for him. Perhaps after all I only *dreamed* that man. It was a wonderful dream."

She carried the fingers of one hand to her temple in a bewildered gesture, then shook back her head as one rousing oneself with an effort from sleep. "If it was a dream," she went on with a forced courage, "it's just as well to find it out in time."

"Then—" he made several attempts before he could speak—"then you are sending me away. If that's true—as there's a God in Heaven, I'll never come back until you send for me."

"As there's a God in Heaven," she answered steadily, almost contemptuously, "I'll never send for you. You'll never come back unless you come yourself—and come with a more absolute trust in your heart."

They stood under the leafless branches in a long silence, both white of cheek and supremely shaken, until at last the man said huskily: "I suppose I may take you to your gate?"

She shook her head. "No," she answered firmly, "I'm going across the field. It's only a step." She turned then and walked away and as he looked after her she did not glance backward. An erect and regal carriage covered the misery of her retreat—but when she reached her house she went up the stairs like some creature mortally wounded and as she closed the door of her room, there came from her throat a low and agonized groan. She stood leaning for a space against the panels with her hands stretched out gropingly against the woodwork. Her lips moved vacantly, then her knees gave way and she crumpled down and lay insensible on the floor.

CHAPTER X

After awhile her lashes trembled and rose flickeringly upon the vague perplexity of returning consciousness. Her head ached and her muscles were cramped, because she had crumpled down as she stood, so that she regained her feet falteringly and went with difficulty over to a chair before the mirror of her dressing-table. For awhile she sat gazing dully into her own reflected eyes. Under them were dark rings. Her cheeks were pale and her whole face was stricken with the bleak hopelessness of heartbreak. Her gaze fell on a framed photograph, just before her, and she flinched. It was an enlarged snapshot of Stuart Farquaharson. But other pictures more vitally near to her recent past were passing also before her. She felt again the muscles of his forearms snap into tautness as he stood silent under her father's insults. She felt the strength of his embrace calming the panic of her own heart; the touch of the kisses that had brought her both peace and ecstasy and wakened in her latent fires. Surely if, at last, the hot temper had broken through and blinded him with its glare of passion, it had not—could not—have burned to ashes all the chivalric record of these trying months. Surely it was a thing she could forgive. The man upon whom she had leaned so long and whom she had known so well must be more real than this alien revealed in an ungenerous half hour. The pale sunset died into the ashes of twilight. Her bureau clock ticked out a full hour—and a second hour while she sat almost immovable. She argued with herself that this conflict which had so impalpably gathered and so suddenly burst in storm was a nightmare coming out of the shadows and had no substance of reality.

At last she lighted a lamp and moved wearily to her writing desk. Her pen developed a mutinous trick of balking, and her eyes of staring, unseeing, at the wall. But at last when she had torn up sheet after sheet, she finished her task.

> "Dear Stuart," she had written. "You told me once that no one should send you away—not even I—unless I proved myself stronger than you. To-day you accused me of being the dupe of your enemies—and you are going—not because I am strong enough to banish you, but because you think me too weak to be trusted with your love. Without absolute trust we could never hope for happiness. So this isn't a plea, Stuart. It's not even an apology—except that I freely acknowledge a large share of fault—but I

> can't let you go without thanking you for all the gallant sacrifices you have made and for all the ways in which you have sought to stand between me and distress. Until to-day you have, under fire, proven true to your code of knighthood, and to-day I could forget—but could you? Of all the things I have ever said to you, of love, I have no syllable to retract. Even now I repeat it. I love you absolutely. When I suggested your leaving for a time I did a desperately hard thing—and you misunderstood it. Unless you can understand it, dear, it would do no good to come back, it would only mean other humiliating memories. This is not an easy letter to write and it's not well done. If your attitude of this afternoon is anything more than the delusion of anger—in other words, if your love is not one of complete trust, it's better that we shouldn't see each other again. If you can come in the spirit that I can receive you, to-day can be erased as if it had never happened—but until I have your answer (given after you have searched your heart) I shall be—but that is neither here nor there."

Tollman, who was taking supper at the manse that evening, noted the pallor of her face, but made no comment. He had, in fact, already divined a lover's quarrel and that was a thing into which even the most friendly interference might well bring rebuff. But he was not surprised, on leaving, to find Conscience waylaying him at the front door with an envelope in her hand, which she asked him to post without fail in the morning when after his invariable custom he drove to the village post office. Within the last few days the invalid's irritability had taken the form of intense dislike for the jingle of the telephone and in deference to his whim it had been disconnected. Consequently the family friend had of late both mailed and delivered notes between the lovers and knew the handwriting of each.

That night Stuart slept not at all. For hours after he reached his room in the hotel he paced it frantically. First cumulative anger, long held in leash, swept him like a forest fire, charring his reason into unreason. He had fought for Conscience and lost her. She had thrown her lot with the narrow minds and cast him adrift. He had placed all his trust in her and she had failed to rise above her heritage. But as the night wore on a nauseating reaction of self-indictment followed. He saw that he had grossly affronted her and brutally accused her. The generosity and fairness he worshiped had had no part in his conduct. He, too, spent hours writing, destroying and rewriting letters.

At last he let one stand.

> "But, dearest," he said at its end, "if you *do* let me come back, you must still let me fight—not with temper and accusation, but patiently—against the strangling of your life. After this afternoon there can be no middle ground. I stand before you so discredited that unless you love me enough to forgive me you must hate me wholly and completely. If it's hate, I have earned it—and more, but if it *can* still be love, I have a life to spend in contradiction of to-day. I shall remain here twenty-four hours waiting for my answer, and each hour until it comes will be a purgatory. I've forfeited my right to come to you without permission. I must wait for your verdict. I don't even claim the right to expect an answer—but I know you will give one. Not to do so would be to brand me, for life, not only with bitter hatred but bitter contempt as well."

At dawn, without having been to bed, he posted the letter and sat down to wait with the anxiety of a defendant who has seen the jury locked into its chamber of fateful decision.

When Eben Tollman came into the post office that morning, he called for his mail and that of the Williams household.

Conscience's note to Stuart he did not mail. Stuart's letter to Conscience he did not deliver, but later in the day he deposited both in a strong-box in which he kept his private papers.

Three days Stuart Farquaharson spent waiting for an answer and while he waited his face became drawn, and the ugly doubt of the first hours settled into a certainty. There would be no answer. He had told her that to ignore his plea would be the superlative form of scorn—and she had chosen it.

Conscience, too, who had humbled herself, was waiting: waiting at first with a trust which refused to entertain doubt, and which withered as the days passed into such an agony that she felt she must go mad. If Stuart had deliberately done *that*—she must make herself forget him because to hold him in her heart would be to disgrace herself. The man, in the hour of ugly passion, had been the real one after all; the other only a pleasing masquerade!

"Did you mail my letter?" she finally demanded of Tollman, and he smilingly responded. "I don't think I ever forgot to post a letter in my life."

In a final investigation she walked to the village and inquired at the hotel desk, "Is Mr. Farquaharson here?"

"No, Miss Conscience," the clerk smilingly responded, "he checked out last night. Said he'd send his address later."

One afternoon several days later a stranger left the train at the village and looked about him with that bored and commiserating expression with which city men are apt to regard the shallow skyline of a small town. He was of medium height and carefully groomed from his well-tailored clothes to the carnation in his buttonhole and manicured polish of his nails. His face, clean-shaven save for a close-cropped and sandy mustache, held a touch of the florid and his figure inclined to stoutness. At the livery stable where he called for a buggy, after learning that no taxis were to be had, he gave the name of Michael Hagan and asked to be directed to the house of Mr. Eben Tollman.

Mr. Tollman was obviously expecting his visitor, and received him upon arrival in his austere study. Yet the fact that there was no element of surprise in Mr. Hagan's coming failed to relieve Mr. Tollman of traces of nervousness as he inquired, "You are Mr. Hagan?"

"Yes, Mr. Tollman, I came up in answer to your letter."

The stranger had no roving eye. He seemed, indeed, steady of hearing to the verge of stolidity, yet in a few seconds he had noted and drawn rapid conclusions from the environment. The cheerlessness of the house had struck him and the somber room, decorated, if one calls it decoration, with faded steel engravings of Landseer hunting dogs guarding dead birds and rabbits, impressed him.

Mr. Tollman bowed coldly.

"The matter I wish to discuss with you is confidential," he began by way of introduction, and Hagan smiled as he replied, "Most matters which clients discuss with me, *are* confidential."

Even with this reassurance, Mr. Tollman appeared to labor under embarrassment and it was only after some thought that he suggested, "This business is so new to me that I hardly know how to approach it."

"A man should be extremely frank with his physician or his lawyer," volunteered the newcomer. "It's even truer in the case of a detective."

"In this instance," Mr. Tollman proceeded with the wariness of one wading into water of unknown depth, "I am acting for friends whose business interests I represent, and who do not care to appear in the matter. Therefore your dealings

will be exclusively with me."

"Certainly, that's quite usual. Now, what's the nature of the case? Your letter didn't indicate."

"Well, the fact is I wish to have a somewhat searching investigation made into the personal character and conduct of a young gentleman, who for reasons unnecessary to state, is of interest to my friends."

"Let me understand you clearly," prompted Mr. Hagan, with a briskness that accentuated the other's air of secretiveness. "Is this man to be shown up? Is that what you mean?"

Mr. Tollman stiffened. "I should suppose," he said with cool dignity, "that would be dependent to a certain extent on the facts."

But Mr. Hagan had in his police-detective days made use of the third degree, and when he next spoke his voice was firm almost to sternness. "I thought," he reminded the other, "we were going to be frank."

Thus encouraged, Tollman proceeded slowly, "I'm not seeking to whitewash the character of the gentleman, if that's what you mean."

"Good! Now, we're going somewhere. There are very few people who have no skeletons in their closets."

The hand of the employer came up with fastidious distaste. "Let this be understood from the beginning, Mr. Hagan, I have no wish to hear anything but reports of results obtained. In the details of your work I have not the slightest interest."

Mr. Hagan nodded, and inquired, "Is it with a view to criminal prosecution, now, that this case is to be worked or—?" He paused interrogatively.

"It is not. It is only necessary to convince a young lady, whose family disapproves of the man, that their suspicions are based on fact. She is so prejudiced in his favor, however, that the facts must be substantial—and of a character calculated to weigh with a woman."

Hagan drew a cigar-case from his pocket, and proffered it, but his offer being declined with a cold shake of the head, he settled himself as comfortably as possible in his uncomfortable chair and engaged in reflection. After digesting the

preliminaries, he began to speak musingly, as though to himself.

"Of course if the lady knew that detectives were working on the case, the force of any disclosure would be discounted."

His eyes were on his employer as he spoke and he saw Tollman start. Tollman's words, too, came with an impulsiveness which had been absent heretofore.

"Neither of them must know, of course, that this investigation is being made. Unless you can assure me on that point you mustn't undertake the business."

With some difficulty the detective repressed a smile. "That goes without saying, Mr. Tollman. Now if it could be shown that this man was mixed up in some sort of a scandal—with a married woman, or a shady one, for instance—that ought to fit the case, oughtn't it?"

"Precisely." Again Tollman's voice was tinged with an unaccustomed quickness of interest, but at once, as though he had made a mistake, he amended with a heavy gravity, "However, we can hardly forecast what you will learn. I understand that he has directed his mail forwarded to an apartment hotel near Washington Square in New York."

The two talked for perhaps forty minutes—though it must be admitted that a portion of that time was devoted to a discussion of the terms of employment. Mr. Tollman had never undertaken having a man shadowed before and he regarded the fees as needlessly large.

Back once more in his office in a building on Forty-second Street, Mr. Hagan cut the end from a cigar and gazed out across the public library and the park at its back. The frosted glass of his hall door bore the legend, "The Searchlight Investigation Bureau. Private."

"Well, what did you find out about this job?" inquired a member of the office force who had entered from a communicating room, and the chief wrinkled his brow a little as he studied his *perfecto*.

"It's a dirty business, Schenk," he replied crisply. "It's the kind of thing that gives knockers a license to put detectives in the same class as blackmailers—and the old Whey-face himself is a tight-wad. He wrangled over the price—but I made him come through."

"What does he want done?"

"He wants a guy framed. You remember what the bulls did for Big Finnerty, when Finnerty was threatening to squeal to the District Attorney's office about police graft?"

Schenk nodded. "They pulled the old stuff on him. Sent him to the Island a year for gun-toting."

"Sure, and he didn't have a gat at that—that is, not until the bulls planted it in his kick on the way to the station house." The dignity of Mr. Hagan's consultation manner had dropped from him, and he had relapsed into the gang argot with which police days had given him an intimate familiarity.

"Sure he didn't. That's the way they frame a man. It's the way they framed—"

"Can the reminiscence stuff," interrupted the head of the Searchlight Investigation Bureau. "The point is that it's just about the deal we're being hired to put over on this Farquaharson person. He wants to marry a girl and we've got to frame him up with a dirty past—or present. Our respected employer is a deacon and a pious hypocrite. He wants results and he wants us to go the limit to get 'em. But he must never know anything that soils the hem of his garment. He has no interest in the petty doings of detectives. His smug face must be saved. He didn't tell me this, but I wised myself to it right away. He's got his eye on that girl, himself."

The winter came close on the heels of a short autumn that year and it came with the bluster and roar of squalls at sea and the lashing of the woods inland. For some weeks Conscience followed the colorless monotony of her life with a stunned and bruised deadness about her heart. She had shed no tears and the feeling was always with her that soon she must awaken to a poignant agony and that then her mind would collapse. Mechanically she read to her father and supervised the duties of the attendant who had been brought on from Boston, but often when he spoke to her he had to repeat his question, and then she would come back to the present with a start.

The invalid had learned from Tollman that Farquaharson had gone away after a quarrel, and he piously told himself that his prayers were answered and his daughter had been snatched as a brand from the burning. But for once an instinct of mercy tinged his dealings with the frailities of humanity. He refrained from talking of Stuart and from the pointing of morals. That would come later.

CHAPTER XI

Thinking through days when a cold and tortured moisture would burst out on her temples and through nights when she lay wide-eyed and sleepless, only one answer seemed to come to Conscience. All Stuart's love must have curled in that swift transition into indifference and contempt.

Admitting that conclusion, she knew that her pride should make her hate him, too, but her pride was dead. Everything in her was dead but the love she could not kill and that remained only to torture her.

The most paradoxical thing of all was that in these troubled days she thought of only one person as a dependable friend. Eben Tollman had evinced a spirit for which she had not given him credit. It seemed that she had been all wrong in her estimates of human character. Stuart, with his almost brilliant vitality of charm, had after a quarrel turned his back on her. Eben Tollman, who masked a diffident nature behind a semblance of cold reserve, was unendingly considerate and no more asked reward than a faithful mastiff might have asked it. It contented him to anticipate all her wishes and to invent small ways of easing her misery. He did not even seek to force his society and satisfied himself with such crumbs of conversation as she chose to drop his way in passing. If ever she should come out of this period of torpid wretchedness, she would owe Tollman a heavy debt of gratitude.

Three months after the day when Mr. Hagan returned from Cape Cod, that gentleman called into his private office a member of his staff, who responded to the name of Henry Rathbone, and put him through a brief catechism.

"What have you got on this Farquaharson party?" he inquired. "Tollman complains that you're running up a pretty steep expense account and he can't quite see what he's getting for his money."

Rathbone seated himself and nodded. "Mr. Tollman knows every move this feller's made. You gotta give him time. A guy that think's he's got a broken heart don't start right in on the gay life."

"Why don't he?" inquired Mr. Hagan with a more cynical philosophy. "I've always heard that when a man thinks the world's gone to the bow-wows he's just

about ripe to cut loose. Don't this feller ever take a drink or play around with any female companions?"

"You ain't got the angle straight on Farquaharson," observed the sleuth who had for some time been Farquaharson's shadow. "He ain't that kind. I'm living in the same apartment hotel with him and my room's next door to his. I don't fall for the slush-stuff, Chief, but that feller gets my goat. He's hurt and hurt bad. It ain't women he wants—it's *one* woman. As for female companions—he don't even seem to have any male ones."

"What does he do with his time?"

"Well, he went down to the farm for a few weeks and closed up the place. He studied law, but he's passed it up and decided to write fiction stories. Every morning he rides horseback in the park, and, take it from me, those equestrian dames turn all the way round to rubber at him."

"What else does he do?"

"He walks miles, too. I fell in with him casual like one day and tagged along. Well, he hiked me till my tongue hung out. We started at the Arch and ended up at Dolrandi's café at the north end of the speedway—it ain't but only about a dozen miles.... During that whole chummy little experience he spoke just about a couple of times, except to answer my questions. Sometimes when he thought I wasn't looking his eyes would get like a fellow's I seen once in death-row up the river, but if he caught me peepin' he'd laugh and straighten up sudden."

"Well, I don't suppose you can get anything on him till he gives you a chance," said Mr. Hagan grudgingly, "but what this man Tollman wants is results. He ain't paying out good money that he's hoarded for years, just to get merit reports. He didn't wring it out of the local widows and orphans just for that."

"I get you, and I'll keep watching. Since Farquaharson got this bug about writing stories he's taken to rambling around town at night. I said he didn't seem to want companions, but when he goes out on these prowls he'll talk for hours with any dirty old bum that stops him and he always falls for pan-handling. Beggars, street-walkers, any sort of old down-and-outer interests him, if it's hard luck they're talking."

But the face which reminded Mr. Rathbone of the man who was awaiting the electric chair was the public face of Stuart Farquaharson. He did not see the

same features during the hours when the door of his room was closed. The hotel he had selected, near Washington Square, was a modest place and his window looked out over roofs and chimney-pots and small back yards.

There, sitting before his typewriter, his sleeves rolled above his elbows, he sought to devote himself to his newly chosen profession: the profession which he had substituted for law. Through a near-by window he had occasional glimpses of a girl who was evidently trying to be an illustrator. Stuart imagined that she was poor and ambitious, and he envied her the zest of her struggle for success. He himself had no such incentives. Poverty was not likely to touch him unless he became a reckless waster, and he fancied that his interests were too far burned to ashes for ambition. It was with another purpose that he forced himself to his task. He was trying to forget dark hair and eyes and the memory of a voice which had said, "Love you! In every way that I know how to love, I love you. Everything that a woman can be to a man, I want to be to you, and everything that a woman can give a man, I want to give you."

And because he sought so hard to forget her, his fingering of the typewriter keys would fall idle, and his eyes, looking out across the chimney-pots, would soar with the circling pigeons, and he would see her again in every guise that he remembered—and he remembered them all.

She had been cruel to the point of doing the one thing which he had told her would brand him with the deepest possible misery—and which pledged him in honor not to approach her again by word or letter without permission. But that was only because the thing which he conceived to be her heritage of narrowness had conquered her.

On the floor below was a young man of about his own age, who was also a candidate for the laurels in literature. Stuart had met him by chance and they had talked a little. This man's enthusiasms had gushed forth with a vigor at which the Virginian marveled. For him ambition blazed like an oriflamme and he had dared to gamble everything on his belief in himself. With scant savings out of a reporter's salary in the West he had come to wrest success from the town where all is possible, but now a shadow of disappointment was stealing into his eyes. A fear was lurking there that, after all, he might have mistaken the message of the Bow Bells which had rung to him the Dick Whittington message that the city was his to conquer.

Perhaps because Louis Wayne desperately needed to succeed, while Stuart

Farquaharson wrote only as an anodyne to his thoughts, Wayne vainly peddled his manuscripts and almost from the first Stuart sold his at excellent rates.

Mrs. Reinold Heath was rarely in a sunny mood at the hour when her coffee and rolls came to her, as she sat propped against the pillows of the elaborately hung bed in her French gray and old-rose room. The same hour which brought the breakfast tray brought Mrs. Heath's social secretary and those duties which lie incumbent upon a leader of society's most exploited and inner circles.

Mrs. Heath, kimono-clad in the flooding morning light, looked all of her fifty years as she nodded curtly to her secretary. It was early winter and a year had passed since Stuart had left Cape Cod.

"Let's get this beastly business done with, Miss Andrews," began the great lady sharply. "What animals have you captured this time? By the way, who invented week-ends, do you suppose? Whoever it was, he's a public enemy."

The secretary arranged her notes and ran efficiently through their contents. These people had accepted, those had declined; the possibilities yet untried contained such-and-such names.

"Why couldn't Harry Merton come?" The question was snapped out resentfully. "Not that I blame him—I don't see why any one comes—or why I ask them for that matter."

"He said over the 'phone that he was off for a duck-shooting trip," responded Miss Andrews.

"Well, I suppose we can't take out a subpœna for him. He's escaped and we need another man." Mrs. Heath drew her brow in perplexed thought, then suddenly demanded: "What was the name of that young man Billy Waterburn brought to my box at the horse show? I mean the one who rode over the jumps like a devil and blarneyed me afterward like an angel."

The secretary arched her brows. "Do you mean the Virginian? His name was Stuart Farquaharson."

"Do you know where he lives—or anything else about him?"

"Why, no—that is, nothing in the social sense." Miss Andrews smiled quietly as she added, "I've read some of his stories in the magazines."

"All right. Find out where he lives and invite him in Merton's place. Don't let *him* slip—he interested me and that species is almost extinct."

As Miss Andrew jotted down the name, Mrs. Heath read the surprised expression on her face, and it amused her to offer explanation of her whim.

"You're wondering why I'm going outside the lines and filling the ranks with a nobody? Well, I'll tell you. I'm sick of these people who are all sick of each other. The Farquaharsons were landed gentry in Virginia when these aristocrats were still grinding snuff. Aren't we incessantly cudgeling our brains for novelty of entertainment? Well, I've discovered the way. I'm going to introduce brains and manners to society. I daresay he has evening clothes and if he hasn't he can hire them."

Decidedly puzzled, Stuart Farquaharson listened to the message over the telephone later in the day, but his very surprise momentarily paralyzed his power of inventing a politely plausible excuse, so that he hung up the receiver with the realization that he had accepted an invitation which held for him no promise of pleasure.

It happened that Louis Wayne, who had by sheer persistency seized the outer fringes of success, had come up with a new manuscript to read and was now sitting, with a pipe between his teeth, in Stuart's morris chair.

"Sure, go to it," he exclaimed with a grin, as Stuart bewailed his lack of a ready excuse. "It'll be a bore, but it will make you appreciate your return to the companionship of genius."

"The Crags" was that palatial establishment up the Hudson where the Reinold Heaths hold court during the solstices between the months at Newport and the brief frenzy of the New York season, and the house party which introduced Stuart Farquaharson to Society with a capital S was typical. One person in the household still had, like himself, the external point of view, and her ditties threw her into immediate contact with each new guest.

"Miss Andrews," he laughed, when the social secretary met him shortly after his arrival, "I'm the poor boy at this frolic, and I'm just as much at my ease as a Hottentot at college. When I found that I was the only man here without a valet,

I felt—positively naked."

The young woman's eyes gleamed humorously. "I know the feeling," she said, "and I'll tell you a secret. I took a course of education in higher etiquette from the butler. You can't do that, of course, but when in doubt ask me—and I'll ask the butler."

But it was Mrs. Heath's prerogative to knight her protégés with the Order of the Chosen, and Stuart Farquaharson would have graced any picture where distinction of manner and unself-conscious charm passed current.

"Who is the girl with the red-brown hair and the wonderful complexion and the dissatisfied eyes?" he asked Miss Andrews later, and that lady answered with the frankness of a fellow-countryman in foreign parts:

"Mrs. Larry Holbury. That's her husband over there—it's whispered that they're not inordinately happy."

Farquaharson followed the brief glance of his companion and saw a man inclining to overweight whose fingers caressed the stem of a cocktail glass, and whose face was heavy with surliness.

It subsequently developed, in a tête-à-tête with the wife, that she had read all of Mr. Farquaharson's stories and adored them. It leaked out with an air of resignation that her husband was a bit of a brute—and yet Mrs. Holbury was neither a fool nor a bore. She was simply a composite of flirtatious instinct and an amazing candor.

In the life of Stuart Farquaharson the acceptance of that invitation would have passed as a disconnected incident had it been altogether a matter of his choosing, but he had let himself be caught. Mrs. Reinold Heath had chosen to present him as her personal candidate for lionizing and whom she captured she held in bondage.

"Honestly, now, Miss Andrews," he pleaded over the telephone when that lady called him to the colors a second time, "entirely between ourselves, I came before because I couldn't think of an excuse in time. Let me off and I'll propose a substitute arrangement. Suppose we have dinner together somewhere where the *hors d'œuvres* aren't all gold fish."

Her laugh tinkled in the telephone. "I wish we could," she said. "I knew you let yourself in for it the first time—but now you're hooked and you *have* to come."

So he went.

On later occasions it was more flattering than satisfying to him that the beautiful Mrs. Holbury should drop so promptly into a sort of easy intimacy and treat him almost from the start with a proprietary manner. It soon became an embarrassment of riches. Stuart was thinking of himself as a woman-hater, these days, and he held a normal dislike for wagging tongues. Holbury, too, who was reputed to be of jealous tendency, seemed to regard him unfavorably and took no great pains to affect cordiality.

One day Wayne dropped, coatless, into Farquaharson's room and grinned as he tossed a magazine down on the table. "*Sic fama est*" was his comment, and Stuart picked up the sheet which his visitor indicated with a jerk of the thumb. The magazine was a weekly devoted ostensibly to the doings of smart society, but its real distinction lay in its innuendo and its genius for sailing so close to the wind of libel that those who moved in the rarified air of exclusiveness read it with a delicious and shuddering mingling of anticipation and dread. Its method was to use no names in the more daring paragraphs, but for the key to the spicy, one had only to refer back. The preceding item always contained names which applied to both.

Stuart found his name and that of Mrs. Holbury listed in an account of some entertainment—and below that:

> "A young Southerner, recently arrived and somewhat lionized, is whispered to be complicating the already uneven balance of domesticity in the home of a couple whose status in society antedates his own. This gallant has all the attractiveness of one untouched with ennui. He rides like a centaur, talks like a diplomat and flatters as only a Virginian or an Irishman can flatter. The same whisper has it that the husband suffers in the parallel."

Farquaharson's face darkened and he reached for his discarded coat.

"Hold on; you have company," suggested Wayne placatingly. "Where do you think you're going in such hot haste?"

Stuart was standing with his feet well apart and his mouth set in a stern line.

"Wayne," he said with a crisp and ominous decisiveness, "I've never slandered any man intentionally—and I require the same decency of treatment from others."

"Go easy there. Ride wide! Ride wide!" cautioned the visitor. "That little slander is mild compared with many others in the same pages. Are the rest of them rushing to the office to cane the editors? They are not, my son. Believe me, they are not."

"They should be. Submission only encourages a scoundrel."

"In the first place they would find no one there but a rather fragile and extremely polite young lady. The editor himself doesn't sit around waiting to be horsewhipped. In the second, society tacitly sanctions and supports that sheet. Your fashionable friends would call you a barbarian and what is worse—a boob."

Farquaharson stood in a statuesque ire, and Wayne went philosophically on. "Take the advice of a singularly wise bystander. At least treat it with the contempt of silence until you've consulted the lady. Caning people in New York is attended with some degree of notoriety and she would have to share it. When you're in Rome, be as Romanesque as possible."

"For my part," declared Stuart, "I like another version better. When you're a Roman, be a Roman wherever you are."

Yet after some debate he took off his coat again and announced cryptically, "After all, the one unpardonable idiocy is sectionalism of code—damn it!"

He knew that Marian Holbury and her husband were near a break and that the husband's jealousy looked his way. But, conscious of entire rectitude, he gave no thought to appearances and treated the matter lightly. But the Searchlight Investigation Bureau, whose employment had been discontinued as not paying for itself, was now re-employed and instructed to send a marked copy of the weekly to Miss Conscience Williams. That copy was anonymously mailed, bearing a New York postmark, and its sending was a puzzle which its recipient never solved.

Spring came, and Stuart, who had begun the writing of a novel, took a small house in Westchester County, where he could work apart from the city's excitement. Had he been cautious he would not have selected one within two miles of the Holbury country house, yet the fact was that Marian Holbury had discovered it and he had taken it because of its quaintness. He had been there several weeks alone except for a man servant when, one night, he sat under the lamp of his small living-room with sheets of manuscript scattered about him. It

was warm, with clouds gathering for a storm, and the scent of blossoms came in through the open doors and windows. There was no honeysuckle in the neighborhood, but to his memory there drifted, clear and strong and sweet, the fragrance of its heavy clusters.

He sat up straight, arrested by the poignancy of that echo from the past. The typewriter keys fell silent and his eyes stared through the open window, wide and full of suffering. He heard himself declaring with boyhood's assurance, "They may take you to the North Pole and surround you with regiments of soldiers—but in the end it will be the same."

Then without warning a wild sob sounded from the doorway and he looked up, coming to his feet so abruptly that his overturned chair fell backward with a crash.

"Marian!" he exclaimed, his voice ringing with shocked incredulity. "What are you doing here—and alone?"

Mrs. Holbury stood leaning limply against the door-frame. She was in evening dress, and a wrap, glistening with the shimmer of silver, drooped loosely about her gleaming shoulders.

"It's over," she declared in a passionate and unprefaced outburst. "I can't stand it! I'm done with him! I've left him!"

Stuart spread his hands in dumfounded amazement. "But why, in God's name, did you come here? This is madness—this is inconceivable!"

She went unsteadily to the nearest chair and dropped into it. "I came to stay—if you don't turn me out," she answered.

CHAPTER XII

Except for the low yet hysterical moaning of the woman in the chair and the distant whistle of a Hudson River boat, there was complete silence in the small room, while the man stood dumfounded and speechless.

Marian's evening gown was torn and one silk stocking sagged at the ankle. Stuart Farquaharson noted these things vaguely and at last he inquired, "How did you get here?"

Her answer came between sobs, "I walked."

"You have done an unspeakably mad thing, Marian," he said quietly. "You can't stay here. There is no one in this house but myself; even my servant is away to-night. Why didn't you go to 'The Crags'?"

She lifted a tear-stained face and shot her answer at him scornfully. "'The Crags'! I had to talk to some one who was *human*. They would have bundled me back with cynical advice—besides, they're off somewhere."

"You're in distress and God knows I sympathize with you. I shall certainly offer no cynical advice, but I mean to call your husband on the telephone and tell him that you're here."

He turned toward the side table and lifted the desk instrument, but with the impetuous swiftness of a leopardess she came to her feet and sprang upon him. For an instant he was borne back by the unexpected impact of her body against his own and in that moment she seized the telephone from his hand and tore loose its wires from the wall. Then she hurled it with a crashing violence to the stone flagging of the hearth where it lay wrecked, and stood before him a palpitating and disordered spirit of fright and anger.

He had sought in that brief collision to restrain her, but she had wrenched herself free so violently that she had torn the strap which held her gown over one shoulder. Then as she reeled back, with a wildly ungoverned gesture she ran her fingers through her hair until it fell in tangled waves about her shoulders. It was perhaps a full minute before she could speak and while she stood recovering her breath, Stuart Farquaharson looked helplessly down at the instrument which she

had succeeded in rendering useless.

With blazing eyes and quivering nostrils, the woman rushed headlong into explanation, accusation and pleading.

"If you telephoned that I was here he'd try to kill me. I tell you I'm done with him! I hate him—hate him; don't you understand? He's been drinking again and he's a beast. That's why I came ... that's why I had to come.... I came to you because I thought you'd understand ... because I thought ... you ... cared for me."

"I care enough for you to try to prevent your ruining your life by a single piece of lunacy," he told her as he sought to steady her with the directness of his gaze. "You don't have to go on with Holbury if you choose to leave him, but this is the one place of all others for you to avoid." He cast a hasty glance about him and then, hurrying to the front of the room, closed the door and drew the blinds. For a half hour he argued with forced calmness, but the ears to which he spoke were deaf to everything save the wild instinct of escape.

"Here you are in a house that sits in full view from the road: doors and windows open: you with your hair streaming and your gown disordered; hairpins strewn about: the telephone dead. Now, I've got to walk to your house and tell him."

Under the level insistence of his eyes she had fallen back a pace and stood holding the unsupported gown over her bosom, but when he finished with that final announcement, which seemed to her a threat, she sprang forward again and threw her arms about him, not in an embrace but with the instinct of a single idea: to prevent his carrying out his announced intention.

Stuart attempted gently to disengage himself, but the soft arms clung and the figure was convulsed with its agitation. "No, no!" she kept repeating. "You sha'n't go. You sha'n't leave me here alone.... I couldn't stand it."

"You walked two miles to get here and that took you about forty-five minutes," he reminded her. "You've been here a half hour. Do you fancy your husband's jealousy won't tell him where you went?" But the idea terrified her into such renewed hysteria that he broke off and stood silent.

The gathering clouds had broken now into a wild spring storm and the rain was drumming like canister on the roof of Stuart's cottage, so they did not hear the purr of a motor which stopped outside. They were without warning when the door suddenly burst open, and across the bare shoulder of the woman, who still

hung sobbing to him, Stuart saw the bloated and apoplectic face of Larry Holbury and at his back the frightened countenance of two servants.

The husband came unsteadily several steps into the room, and lifted a hand which shook as he pointed to the tableau. He addressed his retainers in a voice which trembled with drink and rage, but even in its thickness it was icy by virtue of a fury that had passed through all period of bluster.

"I want you to look well at that," he said. "Mark every detail in your memories, both of you. There they are—in each other's arms. Notice her condition well, because, by God—"

Marian's scream interrupted his sentence, and the scream itself died away in a quaver, as she faded into insensibility, and Farquaharson lifted her clear of the floor and carried her to the lounge.

After that he turned to face Holbury and addressed him with a quietness which the glitter in his eye contradicted. "This is a pity, Holbury. It seems that you frightened her with some brutality. She lost her head and came here. I was trying to persuade her to go back."

"Yes," Holbury's laugh rang with the uncontrolled quality of a maniac's. "Yes, I know. You tore the clothes off of her trying to persuade her to come back to me! Well, you needn't trouble about sending her back now—the door's locked. She's yours. Do what you like with her. Of course I ought to kill you, but I won't. I brought these men to establish beyond doubt the identity of the co-respondent. It's a gentle riddance—a crooked wife and a crooked paramour."

One of the men advanced into the room and ostentatiously gathered in a couple of hairpins and a bit of torn lace, while Farquaharson crossed and stood face to face with the irate husband.

"Do you mean that you believe that?" The question came with a deadly softness.

"I don't have to believe. I have seen."

"Then," Stuart's words ripped themselves out like the tearing of cloth, "send your damned jackals outside, unless you want them to see their master treated as such a cur deserves."

A moment later the two servants were assisting Holbury to his motor, one of them nursing a closed and blackened eye on his own account as a badge of over-

impetuous loyalty; and most of that night, while Marian Holbury lay groaning on the couch, Stuart Farquaharson sat before his empty hearth with eyes which did not close.

The Holbury divorce suit, after filling advance columns of spicy print, was awarded with a sealed record and Farquaharson was given no opportunity to tell his story to the public. He saw nothing more of Marian and was widely accused of having compromised and then abandoned her. So Stuart closed the house on the Hudson, as he had closed the house in Virginia, and with a very bitter spirit went to Europe.

It was some time before this, perhaps several months, that Eben Tollman, the indispensable friend—serving hitherto without reward or the seeking of reward—ventured to aspire openly to more personal recognition. He had been building slowly, and if perseverance is a merit, he deserved success. Perhaps Conscience had changed. There had been many things to change her. She had lived long without a break in an atmosphere which she had dreaded and her father had not grown sunnier. A life of dogma had acidulated into so impossible a fanaticism that in contrast Tollman seemed to assume something like breadth of gauge.

The heart attacks which had been painted as such sure death had been a greater threat to the girl than to the man whose heart was physically involved. There had been two of them and both had been survived. William Williams was a man who was always dying, but who never died. Yet these seizures served their purpose since they kept the daughter freshly reminded that a sword of Damocles hung over her—and that her father must not be crossed. It became a thought with which she lived, with which she slept, until it carried her to more and more absurd lengths of self-effacement and ate out the heart of her independence. Of Eben Tollman she no longer thought as a man old enough to be her father and as impersonal as the Sphinx.

If he lacked the fire and buoyancy which had made association with Stuart Farquaharson a thing of light and color and sparkle, so did her whole life lack that fire in these gray days. So did she herself lack it, she told herself wistfully. At all events he came nearer being *fides Achates* than any one else. Stuart was a memory and she was trying very hard to make him even less than that—only the gnawing ache in her heart wouldn't let her.

Yet when Tollman shifted her abstract acceptance of what he meant to her to a question of a concrete application, she felt the sudden sinking of despair.

All afternoon her father had been petulant and reminiscent. He had seemed perversely bent on committing a righteous suicide by forcing her to make him angry. He had cast into damnation all the "fads" and "isms" of an ungodly present and, since he judged the time had come to point a moral, he had buried Stuart Farquaharson at the bottom of the heap.

Even now Conscience winced under these tirades. The truth was that she was heart-broken; that the image of Stuart, despite his feet of clay, was still shrined in her life. But she was fighting that and she did not know that the fight was hopeless.

So to-night, as she sat with a sewing basket in her lap and Tollman sat across from her in the chair he had so often occupied of late, the surprise came.

"Conscience," he said, and something in the tone of his voice caused her to look suddenly up, "I've tried to be your friend because I've known that it was only that way I could be anything."

Suddenly his voice leaped with a fierceness of which she had never thought it capable. To her he had always been sort of extinct volcano, and now he broke into eruption. "Must it always be only that? Is there no hope for me?"

The piece of sewing in her hand dropped suddenly to her lap with the needle thrust half through. She sat as if in tableau—a picture of arrested motion.

She should have foreseen that the comfortable and platonic relation could not last—but she had not foreseen it. It came with a shock and in the wake of the shock came crowding pictures of all the rest of life, painted in these dun tints of New England lethargy from which she had prayed to be delivered. Then slowly and welling with disquiet, her eyes rose to his and she found them full of suspense.

"I suppose," she answered in a bewildered tone, "I ought to have known. But it's been so satisfying just as it was—that I didn't pause—to analyze."

"Couldn't it still be satisfying, dear?" He took an eager step forward. "Am I too much of a fossil?" He paused and then added with a note of hurt. "I have felt young, since I've been in love with you."

The middle-aged lover stood bending forward, his face impatiently eager and his attitude as stiffly alert as that of a bird dog when the quail scent strikes into its nostrils.

"I've accepted all you had to give," she said with the manner of one in the confessional, "and I never stopped to think that you might want something more than I was giving." Still he waited and she hurriedly talked on. "I must be honest with you. I owe you many debts, but that comes first of all. I've tried to forget—tried with every particle of resolution in me—but I can't. I still love him. I think I'll always love him."

Tollman bowed. He made no impassioned protest and offered no reminder that the man who still held her affection had proven himself an apostate, but he said quietly. "I had hoped the scar was healed, Conscience, for your own sake as well as mine. So long as I knew it hurt you, I didn't speak."

For the first time in months tears started to her eyes and she felt that she was wounding one who had practiced great self-sacrifice. He spoke no more of his hopes until some time after the news came of Stuart's participation in scandal.

At first Conscience instinctively refused that news credence, but in many subtle and convincing ways corroboration drifted in and her father, with his prosecutor's spirit, pieced the fragments together into an unbroken pattern. Until this moment there had lurked in Conscience's heart a faint ghost of hope that somehow the breach would be healed, that Stuart would return. Now even the ghost was dead. She was sick, unspeakably sick: with the heart-nausea of broken hope and broken faith.

Much of what she heard might be untrue, but it seemed established beyond doubt that from her and from his early ideals—like the oath of Arthur's knights—he had gone to careless living. He had played lightly with a woman's honor and his own, and had not come out of the matter unsoiled. Now nothing mattered much and if Tollman claimed the reward of his faithfulness and her father would died happier for it why should she refuse to consider them?

In these days the old man's urgency of Tollman's suit was rarely silenced, but one afternoon he pitched it to a new key, and the girl's habitual expression of weariness gave way to one of startled amazement.

"Of one phase of the matter," he said, "I have never spoken. I refrained because Eben was unwilling that you should know, but justice is justice—you should honor your benefactor."

"Honor my benefactor? I don't understand."

The old man shook his lion-like head and, out of the parchment of his bony face, his eyes burned grimly.

"This house—this farm—all of it—we have only by the sufferance of Eben's generosity, and yet I've heard men call him close."

Conscience thought that she had lost the possibility of being stunned, but now she sat speechless as her father continued.

"I never was a competent business man and I put affairs in Eben's hands too late. He concealed from me how dire my straits were—and our income continued—but it was coming out of his resources—not mine. If Tollman had chosen to demand payment, we would have been wiped out."

"How long have you known this?"

"Since shortly after my affliction came upon me."

Conscience moved over and stood by the window. She pressed her temples with her finger tips and spoke in a dead quiet. "You have known—all that time—and you never told me. You have urged his suit and you never let me guess that my suitor had already—bought me and paid for me."

With a low and bitter laugh—or the fragment of a laugh, she turned and left the room.

After weeks of patient silence, Tollman asked once more, "Conscience, is there still no hope for me?" To his surprise she met his questioning gaze very directly and answered,

"That depends on your terms."

"I make no terms," he hastened to declare. "I only petition."

"If you ask a wife who can be a real wife to you—who can give you all her love and life—then the answer must still be no," she went on steadily with something like a doggedness of resignation. "I can't lie to you. I have only a broken heart. Beyond friendship and gratitude, I have nothing to offer you. I can't even promise that I will ever stop loving—him. But—" her words came with the flatness of unending soul-fag—"I suppose I can give you the lesser things; fidelity, respect; all the petty allegiance that can go on without fire or spirit."

"I will take what you can give me," he declared, and at the sudden ring of autumnal ardor in his voice and the avid light in his eyes, she found herself shivering with fastidious distaste. She did not read the eyes with full understanding, yet instinctively she shrank, for they held the animal craving of a long-suppressed desire—the physical love of a man past his youth which can satisfy itself with mere possession. "I will take what you can give me, and I shall win your love in the end. I have no fear; no doubts. I lack the lighter charms of a youthful cavalier, but I believe I have still the strength and virility of a man." He swelled a little with the strutting spirit of the mating male. "You will learn that my heart is still the heart of a boy where you are conceded and that our life won't be a shadowed thing."

"I must have time to think," she said faintly. "I don't—don't know yet."

Driven by wanderlust and an unappeasable discontent, Stuart Farquaharson had been in many remote places. Around those towns which were Meccas for tourists he made wide detours. His family had jealously kept its honor untarnished heretofore and though he bore himself with a stiffer outward pride than ever, he inwardly felt that fingers of scandal were pointing him out, through no misdeed of his own. Now he was back in Cairo from the Sudan and the upper Nile, almost as brown and hard of tissue as the Bedouins with whose caravans he had traveled and for the first time in many weeks he could regain touch with his mail. That was a matter of minor importance, but his novel had come from the press on the day he sailed out of New York harbor and perhaps there awaited him at Shepheard's some report from his publisher. That gentleman had predicted success with an abundant optimism. Stuart himself had been sceptical. Now he would know.

He sent his luggage ahead and drifted on foot with the tide. What a place this would be, he reflected, to idle time away with the companionship of love. His eyes narrowed painfully with a memory of how Conscience and he had once

talked of spending a honeymoon in Egypt. That seemed as long ago as the age of Egypt itself and yet not long enough to have lost its sting. Grunting and lurching along the asphalt, with bells tinkling from their trappings, went a row of camels and camel-riders. They threaded their unhurried way on cushioned hoofs through a traffic of purring roadsters and limousines. Drawn by undersized stallions, an official carriage clattered by. Its fez-crowned occupant gazed superciliously out as the gaudily uniformed members of his *kavasse* ran alongside yelling to the crowds to make way for the Pasha! Fakirs led their baboons, magicians carried cobras in wicker trays, and peddlers hawked their scarabs and souvenirs. Against the speckless overhead blue, rose the graceful domes and minarets of mosques and the fringed tops of palms.

Farquaharson lightly crossed the terrace at Shepheard's Hotel and traversed the length of the hall to the office at its back where mail is distributed. For him there was a great budget and he carried it out to one of the tables on the awninged terrace which overlooks the street.

Yes, here was the publisher's note. He tore the envelope. "You have become famous," began his enthusiastic sponsor. "The thing has been a knockout—the presses are groaning."

He read that letter and turned to others. A dramatist wished to convert his book into a play ... several magazines wanted to know when his next story would be complete ... two or three clipping bureaus wished to supply him with the comments of the press ... many of the missives bore the marks of much forwarding. Some had followed him half way around the world. Then at the bottom of the pile he found a small but thickly filled envelope. As it peeped out at him from under others his heart leaped wildly and he seized it. It was addressed in the hand of Conscience Williams. She had written to him! Why should she write except to tell him he might come back? Cairo was a wonderful place! The entire world was a wonderful place! A street fakir thrust a tray of scarabs up from the sidewalk and grinned. Farquaharson grinned back and tossed him *backsheesh*. Then he opened his missive. A young British army officer looked on idly from the next table, amused at the boyish enthusiasm of the American. As the American read the officer saw the delight die out of his eyes and the face turn by stages to the seeming of a mummy.

Conscience had written a letter in which she suggested that, now at least, they might say farewell in all friendliness. She was going to marry Tollman, to whose great kindness she paid a generous tribute. The date was not set but it would be

some time that winter.

"I've had a great deal of time to think and little else to do, Stuart," she wrote, and at this point the penmanship had suffered somewhat in its steadiness. "We have both had some troublesome times, but isn't there a great deal we can remember of each other with pleasure? Can't it be a memory which we need not avoid? I was bitterly rebellious and heart-broken when you ignored the note in which I asked you, as humbly as I could, to come back, but that is over now—"

A note which asked him to come back! The letter fell from Farquaharson's fingers. His hands themselves fell limp to the table. He sat stupefied—staring and licking his lips.

The English officer rose and came over, dropping a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"I beg pardon, sir," he said, "but are you ill? Can't I get a nip of brandy?"

Stuart turned his head stupidly and looked up. Then slowly he pulled himself together, with a shamed realization that the eyes of a hundred pleasure-seekers had witnessed his collapse. He straightened and set his jaw. "No, thank you. I'm all right," he declared. "I've been in the desert, you see, and—" But the Englishman had nodded and gone back to his table.

Ten minutes later, scornful of over-sea tolls, Farquaharson was filing a cablegram. The letter had said she would be married "some time in the winter." It was now past mid-winter. Would there be time? His hand trembled with his haste as if the saving of a few seconds could avail.

> "Received no note from you. Wrote to you that night begging a chance," he scribbled, as his head swam with the effort and frenzy of his suspense. "Horrible mistake has occurred. Matter of life and death and thousand times more than that that you take no step till I see you. Am sailing by first boat. Wait."

That afternoon he dashed across the gangplank of a P. and O. steamer at Alexandria just as the last whistle blew. While the propellers churned the Mediterranean waters into a restless wake at the stern, Stuart walked the decks like a man demented. Would there be time? His fingers itched for his watch, because his obsession was the flight of hours. But on the second day out a wireless message came, relaying from Cairo. The man did not dare open it on deck. He took it to his cabin and there with the slowness of deep fear, he

unfolded the paper.

CHAPTER XIII

Against the stupor of Stuart Farquaharson's brain, as he sat in the small stateroom of the P. and O. steamer, beat the fear of what he might read.

Subconsciously his senses recorded small and actual things as the vessel lurched through a heavy sea: the monotonous rat-tat of the brass door-hook against the woodwork, and the alternating scraps of sky and water as the circle of his port hole rose and fell across the line of the horizon.

He was thinking of the letter that had come to Cairo—and lain there so long unopened, but he was spared a knowledge of the suspense with which Conscience had awaited an answer.

She had written it early in the fall and had mailed it endorsed "please forward" in the care of his New York publishers, so that it had played tag with him, never catching him, over the length of Europe and, after that, had zig-zagged along the cities of the Levant and the fringes of Africa.

Meanwhile, the man to whom it was addressed was wandering from the upper Nile to Victoria Nyanza and beyond—where mail routes run out and end. Acknowledging in her thoughts, from the first frost on Cape Cod to the middle of winter, that temporizing only spelled weakness, Conscience had none the less temporized. She said to herself: "Nothing he wrote *now* would alter matters." Still with a somewhat leaky logic she added: "But I'll give him a month to answer before I fix the date." When the month had passed without result she granted herself other continuances, facing alike, with a gentle obduracy, the pleas of her elderly lover and the importunities of a father who threatened to murder himself with the self-inflicted tortures of impatience.

At length she capitulated to the combined forces of entreaty, cajolery and insistence. The fight was lost.

Through the preparations for that wedding she went without even the simulation of joy or glamour. At least she would be honest of attitude, but days which filled the house with wedding guests brought to her manner a transformation. Her decision was made and if she was to do the thing at all she meant to do it gallantly and with at least the outward seeming of full confidence. She meant to

betray to these visitors no lurking misery of spirit; no note of struggle; no vestige of doubt. The eyes which burned apprehensive and terror-stricken, throughout the darkness of interminable nights, were none the less serene and regally assured by day. The groom, too, seemed rejuvenated by such a spirit as sometimes brings to autumn a summer quality more ardent than summer's own. At the end of his *fiancée's* doubtings, he fatuously told himself, had come conviction. She knew at last how much stauncher a thing was his own dependable strength and ripened manhood than the frothy charm of a half-fledged gallant who had crumpled under the test.

Among the guests who for several days filled both the manse and Tollman's house, were two who were not entirely beguiled by Conscience's gracious and buoyant demeanor. One pair of these observant eyes was violet blue and full of starry freshness. Intimate letters from Conscience, in the old days, had invested Stuart Farquaharson with a romantic guise for their possessor and Eben Tollman scarcely measured up to that standard.

The other pair of eyes was neither young nor feminine, but elderly and penetrating. Though Doctor Ebbett's temples were whitely frosted, he and Eben Tollman had been classmates at Harvard. Now he was to be best man at his friend's belated marriage. The work in which he had made his name distinguished had to do with the human brain—its vagaries as well as its normalities—and his thought was enough in advance of the general to be frequently misunderstood and sometimes a target for lay ridicule.

On the evening after his arrival he sat in Eben Tollman's study with two other men who were also classmates. Tollman himself was still at the manse, and his guests were beguiling themselves with cigars which he had furnished, and whiskey which he had not—and upon which he would have frowned.

Over his glass Carton, the corporation lawyer, irrelevantly suggested:

"Eben seems a boy again. It makes us chaps whose children are almost grown, feel relegated to an elder generation."

"Miss Williams," observed Henry Standing, "has a pretty wit and a prettier face. I wanted to say to her: 'Now, my dear child, if I were twenty years younger—' and then I caught myself up short. I chanced to remember that Eben *isn't* twenty years younger himself."

Carton nodded thoughtfully. "I can't help feeling that a thing like that is always a

bit chancy. Eben was a sober-sided kid in his cradle and the girl is all fire and bloom. Fortunately it doesn't seem to have occurred to her that there's any disparity." He paused, then demanded: "Ebbett, you're a psychologist. What do you think?"

Dr. Ebbett took his cigar from his lips and studied it with deliberation. When he spoke his words were laconic.

"I think it's as dangerous as hell."

"But a young wife will rejuvenate him and keep him young, won't she?"

"It's rarely been done before," retorted the doctor drily. "Moreover, it's not a question of making him young again. A man of our friend's type is born old."

"Oh, come now," protested Carton. "What's the matter with his type?"

Dr. Ebbett paused, listening to the blizzard's shrieking outside, then he replied evenly:

"He's too intensely a New Englander. The somber and narrow man represses one-half of his being and straightway sets up a Mr. Hyde in ambush to make war on his Dr. Jekyl. Our lunatic asylums are full of patients whose repressions have driven them mad. The whole Puritan code is a religion of repression—and it's viciously dangerous."

Dr. Ebbett paused and sent a cloud of cigar smoke outward. His voice abandoned the lecture-room professionalism into which it had fallen.

"But, as you say, that is all academic. Perhaps the bride has youth and humor enough to leaven the whole lump."

Much less abstruse were the thoughts of Eleanor Kent: she of the violet eyes, as she listened to Mary Barrascale's eulogy of Eben Tollman on the day before the wedding. Eleanor could not forget moments which had seemingly escaped Mary's observation: moments when Conscience, believing herself unnoticed, allowed a look of fright to come to her eyes and a line to circle her lips.

"When you told me in your letter that he was so much older than you," declared Mary, her enthusiasm bubbling as the three engaged themselves over the last details of packing, "I simply couldn't bear it,—but he isn't old at all. He's simply charming, and he has *such* a rare distinction of manner. I feel as if I were talking

to a Prime Minister whenever we have a chat."

"Thank you, dear," said Conscience, quietly, and the happy serenity of her eyes seemed genuine—except to Eleanor.

"Of course, at one time," Mary rushed on, "we all thought that you had decided to marry Mr. Farquaharson—and he sounded well worth while from what you told us. It only shows what an easy thing it is to make mistakes. How did you find out yourself, dear?"

Eleanor Kent thought she saw Conscience wince and close her eyes for an instant as though in a paroxysm of pain, but her question came gravely: "How did I find out what?"

"Why, that he was the sort of man that—well, that his mixing up in that Holbury scandal indicated."

The girl who was to be married rose from the trunk over which she had been bending and averted her face, but her voice was evenly calm as she answered:

"I fancy the reports we had of that were exaggerated."

A sudden fire snapped in the violet eyes of Eleanor Kent and her cheeks burned under a rosy gust of anger.

"Mary," she announced with spirit, "Mr. Farquaharson was a friend of Conscience's and I have no doubt he still is. I don't think either of us knows anything about him that gives us the right to criticize him. Have you read his book?"

"Why, no. Of course, I didn't mean to say anything—"

"Well, I advise you to read that book." Stuart's champion tossed her head with the positiveness of conviction. "It's not the kind of novel that a rake could write. It's straight and clean minded, and if what a man chooses to write, indicates what he thinks, he's that sort himself."

At this defense from an unexpected quarter, a light of gratitude kindled in the face of the bride-to-be.

When the day set for the wedding had worn to dusk, Conscience escaped from the guests and made her way slowly to her unlighted room. Her knees were weak and she told herself that this was the natural stage-fright of the altar—but she

knew that it was more than that.

As she reached for matches the sound of voices beyond the door arrested her, and the challenge of her own name held her attention.

"She's *perfectly* lovely," declared Mary Barrascale, whose speech ran to superlatives, "and she's *radiantly* happy, too. To think that she's being married and we're still in college."

Conscience straightened where she stood near the window. She raised her palms to her temples and stepped back unsteadily until she could lean against the wall. Before her eyes rose a vision of the college campus—another of the care-free dormitory, then the picture dissolved into another and she found herself trembling. Memory was playing tricks and very softly a voice seemed to whisper in her ear, as it had actually whispered long ago in response to these same regrets, "Does it hurt as much as that, dearest?"

She became vaguely conscious of Eleanor's voice again, low pitched and tense.

"I should think, Mary, you would see the truth. You chatter about how happy she is—and she's almost going mad before your eyes. It's ghastly—positively ghastly."

"What in heaven's name do you mean?" Mary's question broke from her in amazement.

"I mean that anyone who wasn't deliberately trying to be deceived ought to see what all this radiant happiness is worth. She's sick with doubt and misgiving. If you ask me I believe it's because she still loves Stuart Farquaharson—and besides I don't believe he was ever given a fair chance." The girl halted and then broke into silent tears. "She's letting them make a sacrifice of her—and I'm utterly ill with the thought of it."

Conscience leaning weakly against the wall, let both hands drop nervelessly at her sides. "I don't believe ... he was ever given a fair chance." Her lips shaped the words she had just heard in a soundless echo.

Was that true? she asked herself, accusingly, and her brain was too confused for a just answer. An avalanche of new doubts rushed down upon her, crushing her reason. She saw in this ceremony a horrible travesty from which she must escape at all costs.... But how? She had no longer the strength to repudiate boldly her settled decision. Her courage was at ebb and she was caught in the grip of

unreasoning panic. She would abandon everything and everybody ... she would slip away ... she would be true to herself first and then try afresh to be true to others. In short she was for the time distracted.

She slipped over noiselessly and closed her door. She selected a small traveling bag from the other pieces of luggage packed for her wedding trip.

Then, overcome by sheer emotional exhaustion, she threw herself on her bed where she sobbed quietly in the flickering of the candles. It was so that the bridesmaids found her when they came in their capacity of tire maidens to remind her that she must soon begin dressing for the ceremony.

At once Eleanor had her arms about her friend, while Mary stood by gasping and ineffectual.

Slowly Conscience raised her face and looked miserably from one to the other. Her voice was dead and colorless.

"I heard what you said, Eleanor," she declared. "It's all true.... I can't go through with it."

"But it's too late now, dear!" began Mary Barrascale's horrified voice which Miss Kent silenced with a glance of contempt.

"Thank God, it's *not* too late—yet," she said calmly. "It's never too late while it's still *now*. But the bag, dear—what was that?"

Conscience rose and stood unsteadily with a trace of panic lingering in her eyes. She spoke faintly.

"I guess I was quite mad.... I had the impulse to—to run away."

"You can't do that, you know." Eleanor Kent was one of those diminutive and very feminine persons, who in moments of crisis can none the less assume command with the quiet assurance of an admiral on his bridge.

"You have still a perfectly good right to change your mind, but it mustn't be just on impulse. We're going to leave you now for thirty minutes. When the time is up I'll be back and if you want to begin dressing—all right." She paused a moment and then with a defiant stiffening of her slender figure she announced crisply. "And if you *don't* want to, I'll go downstairs and tell them that you've decided not to be married."

"What will they think of you?" Mary Barrascale had reached a condition from which her contributions to the talk emerged in appalled gasps.

Eleanor wheeled on her. "They can think what they jolly well like," she announced with a fine abandon of recklessness.

Feeling like watchers beside a jury-room door, the two bridesmaids kept vigil, harboring contrary hopes.

Left alone in her room, the girl stood for a while gazing about her as if her wild eyes were seeking for some secret panel that might open in the walls and give her escape. She must think! There was little enough time at best to bring order out of this panic-ridden confusion of her thoughts. But her mind was like a stream in freshet. It could only race and swirl along one channel, and that was the spillway of memories.

Stuart Farquaharson the boy; Stuart the man, coming to her at Chatham; Stuart standing self-governed as her father scourged him with abuse; Stuart the lover; all those semblances passed before her until her world seemed peopled with them, and her old love grew clamorous in resurrection—and insurrection.

In a little while she would be—unless she halted here—holding up her hand for Eben's ring, and at the thought a sickness swept over her. It was impossible. Instead of victory it was, after all, an abject and hideous surrender. She could not face it and all that must come after it.

Then she heard a feeble rap on her door. At the threshold stood the wheelchair to which her father was confined like a slave chained to his seat in the galley. She caught a brief impression of a pair of eyes beyond him: the eyes of Eleanor Kent, full of the message of strength; eyes that seemed to be saying, "Stand firm. Be sure!" But nearer at hand was the face with skin drawn like parchment over its bony angles, deeply lined with suffering, and crowned with a great shock of snowy hair.

The features, though, were only details of setting for the spirit of the keen eyes that had always burned with an eagle fierceness and an unyielding aggressiveness. Now they were different, and as the guests who had brought the chair and its occupant up the stairs and into the room withdrew in silent respect, the daughter's gaze was held by them with a mesmeric force.

It was a face transfigured; a face in which the hardness of fight had died into the

serenity of peace.

Angles and wrinkles had become only lines of emphasis for this new tranquillity of the eyes; eyes that might have seen a vision of divine accolade and were at peace.

"My daughter," he said, as soon as they were alone together, and his voice held the music of a benediction, "you are standing at the threshold of your life—and I am near the end of mine, but for the first time in many years, I am content and all my sorrows are paid for."

"Father!" she exclaimed brokenly, but he went on.

"I can now go, knowing that your life is secure on the rock of a stable marriage: all your dangers over. You are making of my poor life a success after all—and its end is a thing of peace. Eben is not as young as you, but his heart is great and his character sincere. In the shadow of his strength you will 'be secure and at peace beside still waters' and I can leave you without fear. In his blood is the steadfastness of Plymouth Rock—ay, and the Rock of Ages and the honor of our forefathers."

The old man broke off, and raised his thin hand to his lean face with a gesture of appealing physical weakness. His enthusiasm had tired him and now a smile came to his lips of unaccustomed sweetness and tenderness. When he spoke again it was in a different tone.

"But you know all that. My life has been one of stress, and you've not known a mother. What I came to tell you, my dear, is that I realize you may have missed that tenderness, and that whatever I may have seemed, I have always felt it."

She was kneeling by his chair now with her hands gently stroking his white mane.

"I know, Dad," she declared, and he reached up and took her fingers between his two palms.

"You are making me happy, my daughter, unspeakably happy," he said. "And I, who have long been old, feel young again. The Bible tells us that marriage means leaving father and mother and cleaving only to the one—but thank God, Eben insists that I shall spend my remaining days with you both, and I am very happy."

At last he was rolled out again, leaving behind him a memory of that exalted peace of countenance, and with a stifled groan the bride-to-be turned back to her room—her period of reflection almost consumed.

"It would kill him!" she moaned. "It would be murder. And that look! That happiness! I guess that will have to be my compensation."

CHAPTER XIV

When the bridesmaids entered it was a pale but firm face that greeted them. "It was panic," said Conscience slowly. "If I hadn't decided freely and fully and finally, I wouldn't have come this far. No one has forced me.... He, Eben, is worth a dozen of me.... Please believe me, never speak of this to anyone. It was sheer nerves and panic."

Of the wedding itself, Conscience had always a memory as confused and unreal as that of a dream in which logical events go mad. Through many faces, which at the moment seemed to be floating against black and leering at her, she had the sense of moving without the action of her muscles.... She saw the lion-like mane of her father's head and the ecstasy of his eyes and a voice in her but not of her whispered: "Well, I hope you're satisfied."... She was conscious of the heavy scent of flowers which reminded her of a funeral.... One face stood out distinct and seemed to be boring into her, reading secrets which, she felt through a great dizziness, she ought not to let him fathom. It was the face of Dr. Ebbett.... Then she heard a voice which sounded to her unduly loud saying: "I do," and realized that it was her own. Later she was reliably informed that she had appeared splendidly collected and regally happy. This blurred focus of realization left her only when she found herself in her own room and heard Mary Barrascale's voice speaking.

"I've never seen a bride who was lovelier, or a groom who was happier," announced Mary exuberantly as she began lifting the white veil from the dark hair. Then she added in afterthought:

"Oh, by the way, I guess this is a message of congratulation or something. One of the servants handed it to me a few minutes ago." She drew from the bosom of her gown an envelope bearing the imprint of a cable office.

As Conscience took the missive a sudden intuition hinted the contents and the waxy white of her cheeks became a dead pallor. Very slowly she tore the envelope and read Stuart's message frantically penned in Cairo on the way to the Alexandria train.

"Received no note from you. Wrote to you that night begging a chance.

> Horrible mistake has occurred. Matter of life and death and thousand times more than that, that you take no step till I see you. Am sailing by first boat. Wait. Stuart."

The bride's heart stopped dead, then pounded madly. Stuart had received no note from her! Then he had not abandoned her. He still loved her and from that instant, whenever she told herself she did not love him, she must lie. Now she was Tollman's wife. It had almost come in time. Perhaps it *had* come in time.

Conscience turned to the bridesmaid with a queer and unnatural ring in her voice.

"Mary," she asked, "just exactly when did this message arrive?"

"It must have been immediately before the ceremony," the girl answered with a puckered brow, striving for exactness. "One of the servants handed it to me just as we started down the steps—of course, I couldn't give it to you then."

"No," Conscience spoke as if her words came from a long distance and again she caught her lower lip between her teeth. She had to do that to keep from screaming or breaking into a bitter laugh. "No, of course, you couldn't give it to me then, and yet—" She broke off and Eleanor Kent's arms encircled her.

"Conscience, dear," she demanded, "was it anything you should have known?"

Conscience straightened slowly and shook her head. She even forced a stiff smile. "No," she lied with an effort of fulfilment for her first wifely duty. "It was just what Mary thought. A message about my marriage. I must write an answer."

Farquaharson, sitting in his stateroom, unfolded his cablegram with the feeling of a defendant who sees the door of the jury-room swing open.

With a stunned sense of despair he read:

> "Don't hurry home to explain. It's too late for that. We will be glad to see you when your trip ends.
>
> "CONSCIENCE TOLLMAN."

Conscience Tollman! There was no longer a Conscience Williams then. He could only realize that some hideous mistake had made absolute a life-wrecking edict which—had he only known before—might, perhaps have been set aside. Now it

was irrevocable and his own blindness and a stubbornness masquerading as pride were to blame.

Now she was the wife of Eben Tollman, the bigot whose narrowness would cramp her life into a dreary torture. His imagination eddied in bewildered wretchedness about that whirlpool of thought, bringing transient impulses of madness and self-destruction.

The thought of her as the wife of any man except himself must have meant to him a withering agony—but the idea of marital intimacy between Conscience and Eben Tollman, seemed an unthinkable desecration at which his flesh crawled. He vainly argued with himself that this was no sudden loss which had struck his life barren, but one to which he had already shaped his resignation. All that self-schooling had been swept away as fiercely as fragments of drift in the freshet of news that came with her letter. She had not exiled him but had asked him to return. She had spoken of a bitterness born of disappointment, which she had conquered: a bitterness for which he was responsible. Stark pictures shaped themselves across his brooding: pictures of the gray life to which his desertion had condemned her ... the gradually crushing tyranny of weakness ... the final surrender. It had been a surrender after years of siege, not because her courage had failed, but because she had waited in vain for the reinforcement of his loyalty. This was what he had done with his life and hers. For him there was an empty future: for her marriage with a coldly selfish sensualist who called his greed piety. Stuart Farquaharson sat in a chilled inertia of despair while the ship's bells recorded the passing of hours. From the decks above drifted little fragments of human talk and human laughter, but to him they were meaningless. Late in the evening he rose with an effort and went on deck where he sought out an unoccupied place. Phosphorescent gleams broke luminously in the wake. Clusters of great stars and the bright dust of star-spray sprinkled the sky, but whether he looked up or down Stuart Farquaharson could see only the light of victorious surrender in the eyes of the woman he loved, declaring her love for him. Now she was in the arms of another man—a man who had cunningly and patiently subordinated every lesser thing to his determination of possessing her.

The voice of impulse pleaded with him fiercely to go back and tax that man, panoplied though he was in the sanction of society and the church, with having won foully. Tollman would never kindle the fire that burned deep and blue-flamed in his wife's nature. Her life with him would be thirst and hunger. But Stuart's fever turned to chill again as he remembered. He had forfeited his rights and stood foresworn. His vows had been brave and his performance craven. He

acknowledged with self-scorn that his eagerness to break through Tollman's force of possession went back to a motive more selfish than exalted. He was driven by a personal craving to hold another man's wife in his arms. He was tempted by the sense of insurmountable power which he knew he held upon her thoughts, her love and her imagination.

This must be the persuasiveness of some devil's advocate which whispered to him: "Go now! Despite all her stern allegiance to duty you can make her come into your arms. This marriage is all a hideous mistake. The bigots have trapped her with a bait of false martyrdom. Go while she is still sickened with the first bitterness of this profanation of youth in the custody of age." Then into this hot-blooded counsel crept the old, cold voice of logic, like a calm speaker quieting the incendiary passion of a mob.

It was her right to make the test unhampered, since—through his own delinquency—it was too late to avoid the test.

Two courses lay open to him now that the past was sealed. He might return to his own country, excusing himself on the shallow pretense that he meant only to "stand by" in case she needed rescue from the unendurable, or he might turn his face east and put between himself and temptation as much of space as lies between Cape Cod and the Ganges.

The two alternatives were, roughly, those of passion and reason, yet each was led by so many tributary problems that it was not easy to disentangle the threads of their elements.

Stuart Farquaharson's inheritance of fighting blood brought a red blindness which at times made the voice of reason seem contemptible and pallid with cowardice.

Could Eben Tollman, whom he had always distrusted, have engineered the thing?

Stuart, pacing the deck, halted at the thought and his fevered temples turned abruptly cold. His face set itself into malignant lines of vengeance. If such a thing could be proven—as there was a God in Heaven—Tollman was his to kill and he should die! He stood for a while, his chest heaving with the agitation of his resolve—and then he smiled grimly to himself. The calmer voice denounced him for a fool running amuck with passion. These were thoughts suited to a homicidal half-wit.

How could Eben have achieved such an end? It was absurd to seek such a reason for the fatality of his own senseless course. He had himself to blame.

Buffeted between the two influences, fighting a desperate duel with himself, Farquaharson paced the deck all night.

At times his face burned and his eyes smoldered with a fever only half sane. At times cold sweat stood on his temples and he trembled, with every muscle lax and inert. As dawn began to lighten the eastern sky-line no man could say—and least of all himself—which counsel would in the end prevail.

When the purser appeared on deck he gazed perplexedly at the haggard and distracted face which confronted him and the nervous pitch of the voice that put rapid questions. It was obvious that this solitary passenger had not been in his berth.

"What is our first port of call, and when do we reach it?" demanded Farquaharson.

"Brindisi. To-morrow."

"From Brindisi what are the most immediate connections respectively—for the States and—for India."

The officer replied with a directness that rose superior to personal curiosity.

"For the States the quickest course is to leave this vessel at Gibraltar. I can't tell you precisely what connection you could make there—but I dare say the delay would be only the matter of a day or two."

"And for the east?"

"You mean back-tracking over the route we've come?"

"Yes."

"We should anchor at Brindisi at two o'clock to-morrow afternoon. At two-thirty the *Mogul* weighs anchor for Port Said ... and the Indian Ocean."

Upon the forehead of the passenger who stood in the freshness of the morning air were beads of sweat. His face was pale and drawn with the stress of one called upon for swift decision and terrifically shaken by irresolution. Knowing only that this seemed a stricken man, the purser pitied him.

Farquaharson let his eyes roam west and a momentary light of eagerness leaped in them. Then he wheeled eastward and the light paled into the deadness of despair. After a moment he straightened himself and braced his shoulders. At the end he spoke with a quiet decisiveness.

"Be good enough to send a wireless to Brindisi for me. Please do what you can to have the *Mogul* held in the event of our being delayed. It's a matter of the utmost importance."

The purser nodded. "Very good, sir," was his ready reply. "It may be a near thing, but I fancy you'll make it."

Stuart Farquaharson's acknowledgment of the cablegram was brief. For the same reason which had made him so urgent in entreating Conscience to take no step until he arrived, it seemed better now that he should remain absent. He added assurances that he had never received any letter from her and mentioned the one he had written at the time of their parting. He wished her every conceivable happiness. As for himself, he would be indefinitely in the Orient where life was colorful enough to be diverting.

Of course, Conscience did not receive that letter until her return from the wedding trip, made brief because of her father's condition. The trip itself had seemed in many ways as unreal and distorted an experience as the ceremony had been. She had constantly reminded herself of how much she owed to the generous devotion of her husband, but no self-reproach could stir into life the more fiery sentiments of her heart. For his virtues she had the admiration of a daughter, a friend or a sister—but not the bright enthusiasm of a bride.

Tollman himself, the observer would have said, had left nothing to ask. Seemingly his one wish was to treat his life as a slate upon which every unacceptable word and line should be sponged out and rewritten.

The wife sat in the study of her husband's house a day or two after their return, when Tollman entered with a face full of apprehension. He had just suffered a fright which had made his heart miss a beat or two and had set his brain swirling with a fevered vision of all future happiness wrecked on a shoal of damnable folly. When he had presented his wife with the keys of his house he had not laid upon her any Bluebeard injunction that one door she must never open. Bluebeard

lived in a more rudimentary age, and his needs included a secret chamber. The things which Eben Tollman earnestly desired to conceal from his wife's view could be adequately stored in the small safe of his study, since they were less cumbersome than the mortal remains of prior wives done to death. They were in fact only documents—but for him pregnant with peril—and what had stamped his face suddenly with terror was the realization that now for the only time in all his meticulously careful life—he had left them open to other eyes than his own.

The old minister had been moved bag, baggage and creed over to Tollman's larger house, and in these days of reaccommodated régime, the road between the two places was one busy with errand-running. On one of these missions Eben had been driving with the slow sedateness which was his wont, when upon pleasant reflections, like shrapnel disturbing a picnic, burst the sense of danger, and the realization of his folly. It struck the self-congratulation from his face as abruptly as a broken circuit quenches a lighting system.

He saw the table in his study as he had left it: the strongbox open—the safe, too, from which he had taken it, agape: papers lying in unprotected confusion. Among them were the two purloined letters which had made his marriage possible, and which if discovered would end it in the volcanic flames of his wife's wrath. There were also certain memoranda concerning the affairs of William Williams which might have raised an ugly implication of an estate wrecked at the hands of a trusted friend. His fear-inflamed imagination went a step further until it saw also his wife's figure halting in her task of tidying up the study and her eyes first widening in bewilderment, then blazing into an unspeakable fury—and scorn. How could he have done such a thing—he the martinet of business caution? It seemed to himself inconceivable and not to be accounted for merely by the explanation of a new husband's abstraction.

He remembered now. These particular papers had formerly been kept in a separate box—safe from confusion with others. In sorting things out prior to his wedding trip he had made several changes of arrangement—and had until this moment forgotten that change.

A sudden sweat broke out on his forehead and, snatching the whip from its stalk on the dashboard, he belabored his aged and infirm mare into a rickety effort at speed.

Ira Forman, standing by the green doors of his barn, watched the rich man go by with this unaccustomed excitement. Ira's small resources had, on occasion, felt

the weight of Eben's hand and as he gazed, his observation was made without friendliness. "In a manner of speakin' Eben 'pears to be busier than the devil in a gale of wind. I wonder who he cal'lates to rob at the present time."

Eben had occasion to be busy. He had often told himself that it was the part of prudence to burn those documents, yet some jackdaw quality of setting store by weird trinkets had always saved them from destruction. In a fashion they were trophies of triumph. With indefinable certainty he felt that some time—somehow—their possession would be of incalculable value. They constituted his birth certificate in this new life.

While a frenzy of haste drove him, the realization of what he might find when he arrived made him wish that he dared postpone the issue, and the hand which fitted a key to his own front door trembled with trepidation. Once he had seen his wife's face he would know. Her anger would not burn slowly, in such a case, but in the conflagration of tinder laid to powder. Yet when he stole quietly to the study door and looked in, anxiety made his breath uneven. She was sitting there, within arm's length of the table—which, thank God, seemed to the casual glance, just as he had left it,—but in her fingers she held what appeared to be a letter, and as he watched, unobserved, she crumpled it and tossed it into the flames that cast bright flecks of color on her cheeks. Her face looked somewhat miserable and distraught—but that hardly comported with what should be expected had she learned the truth—unless possibly it was the exhaustion of wretchedness following the violence of a swiftly sweeping and cyclonic storm. On the whole, her attitude was reassuring, he thought, and in any event a bold course was best. So he entered the room, smiling.

CHAPTER XV

"You are looking very serious, dearest," he declared in a tone of assumed lightness, marred by a cumbersome quality which made it grotesque. As his voice broke on her reverie, his wife started, then sat gazing at him with a sphinx-like expression in her eyes, which he found it hard to endure. But he went boldly on: "Very serious indeed for a bride of a month's standing."

Still she did not answer and under the steadiness of her silent gaze, his momentary reassurance wilted. He had foreseen the possibility of encountering a woman turned Valkyrie, but was unaccoutred to face this enigmatical calm.

Standing here now with those cool eyes upon him, a new and cumulative apprehension tortured him. What if, with a swift determination, his wife had decided upon yet another course: that of simulating until her own chosen moment ignorance of what she knew: of drawing him more deeply into the snare before she confronted him with her discovery?

But as he was weighing these possibilities, Conscience broke the silence. She even smiled in a mirthless fashion—and the man began to hope again.

"I *was* serious," she said. "I was reproaching myself."

"Reproaching yourself—" the husband arched his brows—"for what?"

She responded slowly as if weighing her words.

"For many things. You have devoted years of your life to my father and myself—and asked nothing. After a long while I consented to marry you—though I couldn't give myself freely or without reserve."

He bent over a little and spoke with a grave dignity.

"You have given me everything," he said quietly, "except the admission that you love me. I told you before we were married that I had no fear and no misgiving on that point. I shall win your love, and meanwhile I can be patient."

She let the implied boast of word and manner pass without debate and went on self-accusingly:

"You've treated yourself very much like an old house being torn to pieces and done over to satisfy the whims and eccentricities of a new tenant."

Tollman affected a manner meant to be debonair, but his thought was divided and uncontrollable impulse drew his glance shiftily to the table.

"Well, suppose that I have tried to change myself, why shouldn't I? I love you. I'm eager to demonstrate that I'm not too old a dog to learn new tricks."

She only shook her head, and, finding words more tolerable than silence, he proceeded:

"I've discovered the fountain which Ponce de Leon missed. Henceforth I mean to go on growing younger."

"And yet, Eben—" She was still looking at him with that directness which hinted at some thought foreign to her words—something as yet unmentioned which had left her unstrung. "It's not really a congenial rôle to you—this one of reshaping your life. At heart you hate it.... This house proves that. So does this room—and its contents."

The pause which separated the final words brought a sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach, and the discomfort of a fencer, dueling in the dark—a swordsman who recognizes that his cleverness is outmatched. His question came with a staccato abruptness.

"How is that?"

Conscience rose from her chair and for a moment stood letting her eyes travel about the walls, the furniture, the pictures. As they wandered, the husband's gaze followed them, and when they rested for an instant on the open strong box and the untidy papers, his alarm gained a brief mastery so that he stepped hurriedly forward, placing himself between her and the danger.

"What were you saying?" he questioned nervously.

"I was calling your attention to this room. Look at it. If you didn't, at heart, hate all change—all innovation, you couldn't have lived here this long without having altered it."

"Altered it—why?"

Conscience laughed. "Well, because it's all unspeakably depressing, for one

thing. Outside of prisons, I doubt if there is anything drearier in the world than Landseer engravings in black frames and fantastically grained pine trying to be oak—unless it's hair-cloth sofas and portraits that have turned black."

The lord of the manor spoke in a crestfallen manner, touched with perplexity. To what was all this a preamble?

"That portrait is of an ancestor of mine," he said and his wife once more laughed, though this time his anxiety fancied there was irony in it. "All right," she said, "but wouldn't it have been quite as respectful and much more cheerful to send him on a visit to some painter who takes in dingy ancestors and does them over?"

"I hadn't thought of it," he acknowledged, but the idea did not seem to delight him.

"No." They were still standing, she facing the table and he facing her, making of his shoulders as wide a screen as possible.

Now she moved and stood with the fingers of one hand resting lightly on the spot where lay a profusion of scattered sheets and envelopes. These were papers which, should she see and recognize them—granting that she had not already done so—would spell divorce or separation. Tollman drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. At the price of any concession he must get her out of that room for five minutes!

"No," she went on. "It hadn't occurred to you, because you really dislike all change. You are a reactionary ... and I'm afraid I'm what you'd call a radical."

"But, dear—" he spoke eagerly, ready to sacrifice without combat even his cherished reverence for the unchanging order of his fathers: even his aversion to the wasting of money—"I haven't told you before because I wanted to surprise you. I've let all that wait until you should be here to direct it. I wanted the renovated house, like the renovated man, to bear the stamp of your designing."

The wife's eyes flashed with surprise and apparent pleasure. "Do you really mean it?" she exclaimed. "Do you really mean that I may do what I like with the place?"

"Yes, yes—" he hastened to assure her. "You are in supreme command here. You have *carte blanche*."

For a while she did not speak, but when she did her voice was very soft. "Eben," she said almost falteringly, "you give me everything—and I give you so little."

A few minutes later, with vast relief, he watched her go through the door, then collapsed, a limp creature, into the chair by the table, his arms going out and sweeping the papers into a pile close to his body. His face, relaxed from the strain of dissembling, looked old and his jaw sagged.

But before he had sufficiently recovered to investigate the documents he heard a rustle and looked around. Conscience was standing in the door—and he feared that even the slouch of his shoulders, seen from behind, might have been dangerously revealing. His wife's level tone as she spoke, no less than her words, intensified his conviction of defeat.

"The note that I asked you to mail to Stuart Farquaharson—that night when he left—never reached him."

So she had, after all, been playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse! She had left the room, only to return and confront him when he was unmanned. Something of cornered desperation came into his eyes, but with a final instinct of precaution he managed to assume a remnant of poise.

"Never reached him? That seems hardly possible."

She nodded. "Yes; doesn't it? I asked you at the time if you were certain you had mailed it. Do you remember?"

"Perfectly. I said I had never forgotten to mail a letter."

"Still, he never received it—and he wrote one to me—at the same time which I didn't get, either."

Eben Tollman licked his lips. It seemed useless to carry the fight further. He stood with one foot over the brink and momentum at his back. Then when another moment would have ended his campaign of dissimulation his wife spoke again, and the man's brain reeled—but this time with an incredulous reversal of emotion. Some miracle had saved him!

"I've just had a note from him. He's in India."

Eben Tollman straightened up, and shook from his shoulders the weight of a decade or two.

He had been dying the multiple deaths of the coward because he had let his imagination bolt and run away. The menace had passed, and straightway came a transformation. Once more he was full-panoplied in his assurance of self-righteousness. His voice was unctuously calculated, persuasively considerate.

"That is a very extraordinary story, but you aren't letting things that happened so long ago trouble you, are you, my dear?"

"A thing—which has caused bitterness between friends—even long ago, must trouble one."

"Yes, I quite concur in that sentiment." He nodded understandingly. It was the same gentleness of manner to which he had owed so much in the past. "And yet—I don't like to speak critically of a man who was once a rival—yet unhappily there are other things to be remembered. His experiences in New York seemed to prove him wanting of much that your friendship must demand."

Conscience did not answer, but she felt the justice of the criticism.

When his wife had again left him alone he lost no time in bending over memoranda and running through papers with fingers that trembled.

Then he straightened up again. All was as he had left it. The two intercepted letters were tied safely together and the dust which had gathered upon their wrapper was undisturbed.

For some minutes he abandoned himself to the satisfaction of a man whose escape has been narrow—but complete. Eventually, however, his brows drew together with an annoyance which had strayed into his thoughts and poisoned them. He had handled the situation ineptly and expensively.

He had given his young wife *carte blanche* to do what she chose with his old house. She would waste money more lavishly even than he had wasted it when he had employed the services of the Searchlight Investigation Bureau. What, after all, were these cushion-footed sleuths but blackmailers of a legalized sort? He dismissed lightly the circumstance that such enterprises fatten upon the support of gentlemen who have work to do which more open methods fail to favor. This process of thought permitted his armor of self-righteousness to be worn in accord with thrift and the accomplishment of his wishes and to remain the while undented by self-accusation.

The first days of her wedding trip had been marked, for Conscience, by a numbed vagueness, which brought a kindly blunting of all her emotions. In that coma-like condition she could be outwardly normal while inwardly she was living a life of unrealities. She had fought that dangerous comfort as a surrender to phantasy until in a measure she had conquered it.

She had fought steadfastly against all the insurgent influences in her heart aroused by the belated telegram, as one fights the influence of a drug. It was not Eben Tollman's fault—ran her logic—that this message from Egypt had drawn Stuart Farquaharson dangerously close to his wife's inmost thoughts at a time when, she had told herself, he must henceforth be kept in the far background.

But there was no escaping the reality that the cablegram and the letter had brought definite results. They had lifted Stuart out of his place in the past and drawn him into the present. He had not been guilty of desertion, but was, like herself, the victim of a hideous and inexplicable mistake.

It had hurt when Tollman referred to Farquaharson's unfavorable record, even with the consideration of tone he had employed. But Conscience told herself that her duty lay less in defense of the man whom she had once loved and who had fallen from his pedestal than in the square facing of present facts.

Her husband had alluded to Stuart with neither rancor nor resentment but in kindliness and fair judgment. Now, at all events, she argued wildly, seeking to coerce her heart, it was to Eben and not to Stuart that she owed loyalty. So, while her husband sat in his study regretting that he had conceded too much to his fears of unmasking, she wrestled in her room with rebellious heart fires, kindled by the letter from the exile.

She shivered, though the room was warm. Assuredly, she told herself, she must keep burning before her mental vision the memory that, however much Stuart had been the victim of a mistake at the time of their parting, he had since forfeited all claims upon her love.

Stuart Farquaharson, the writer of best sellers, reflected that Life does not divide its chapters by the measure of the calendar, nor does it observe that rule of

literary craftsmanship which seeks to distribute the drama of a narrative into a structural unity of form with the ascending stages of climax.

At this bruised cynicism an older man would have smiled, but to Stuart it was poignantly real.

He had lost the prize which to him seemed the only guerdon worth striving for, while every other recognition had come easily—almost without effort.

The success of his novel had been so extraordinary that Farquaharson fell to reviewing his literary experience with a somewhat impersonal amusement. He had not poured his soul into his work with a bitter sweat of midnight endeavor as the genius is said to do. He had wooed the muse about as reverently as a battered tramp might fondle an equally battered dog, seeking, without illusion, a substitute for better companionship.

One afternoon he sat alone in a Yokohama tea-house, reading the latest collection of newspaper reviews which had come to his hand.

"We have here a book," observed one commentator, "which irritates with a sense of undeveloped power while it delights with a too-facile charm. It would seem to come from a pen more gifted than sincere."

As Stuart slipped the collection of clippings into his pocket a hand fell on his shoulder and he rose to encounter a ruddy-faced young man in the undress uniform of the United States Navy.

"Why so solitary?" demanded the newcomer. "Surely a famous novelist needn't sit alone in the shadow of Fuji Yama. The place teems with charming Americans."

Farquaharson's face lighted with genuine pleasure as he grasped the outstretched hand in a grip of cramping heartiness.

"Jimmy Hancock!" he exclaimed. "Why, man, I haven't seen you since—" He paused, and Jimmy, seating himself, grinned back as he took up the unfinished sentence: "'Since the memory of man runneth not to the contrary—' I'll have Scotch and soda, thank you."

Farquaharson laughed. This was the same breezy Jimmy and the two had met rarely since the first academy days. That was a time which carried them both back almost to Conscience's visit in the Valley of Virginia.

A torrent of questions, many of them intrinsically inconsequential yet important to the exile, had to be put by the officer and answered by the author. Finally came one which Stuart had apprehended.

"When did you see Conscience Williams last? An unspeakably ancient letter from home mentioned your spending a summer up there on Cape Cod? There were even rosy prophecies." Farquaharson winced a little.

"She is married," he said evenly, though with an effort. "She quite recently married a gentleman by the name of Eben Tollman."

"Oh, then I was misinformed. Give me her address if you know it and I'll send my overdue congratulations."

Farquaharson complied with that obedience to social necessity which made him conceal the fact that, for him, this reunion with an old friend had been robbed of its savor and turned into a series of unhappy memories.

"This evening you are coming aboard to dine with me," announced Hancock when he had finished his drink and risen, "and after dinner a handful of people will arrive for an informal dance on deck."

But Farquaharson gave an excuse. He felt weary and shrank from those inevitable confidences which must ensue. This evening he was leaving for Tokyo and would reach Yokohama on his return only in time to make his steamer for Honolulu. Jimmy Hancock was full of regret. His own cruiser, he said, would sail to-morrow for Nagasaki.

Stuart's return from Tokyo and Nikko put him in Yokohama just before his steamer's sailing time. So it happened that he went over the gang plank of the *Nippon Maru* as the whistle was warning visitors ashore.

Having no acquaintances among the figures that lined the deck rail behind a flutter of handkerchiefs, he went to the smoking-lounge where for two hours he busied himself with his author's routine of note books.

It was mid-afternoon when he emerged among those fellow passengers who had long ago claimed their steamer chairs and dedicated themselves to the idleness of the voyage.

Stuart began pacing the boat deck with the adequate companionship of his pipe. He was not lonely for the society of men and women. In his own mind he put a

stress of emphasis on women. Two of them had touched his life closely enough to alter its currents. One, he had lost through his own folly and her inability to free herself from the sectionalism of an inherited code. The other had been foolish in the extreme and had drawn him into the whirlpool of her heedlessness.

In ways as far apart as east and west, each had been fascinating and each had been beautiful.

The orbit of his rounds carried him several times past a woman, who was standing unaccompanied at the rail astern. Her face and glance were turned outward where the propellers were churning up a lather of white spume and where little eddies of jade and lapis-lazuli raced among the bubbles.

He felt, at first, no curiosity for the averted face, but finally the length of time she had been standing there without change of posture, the unusual slenderness and grace of the figure, and the fact that he had *not* seen her features awakened a tepid interest.

But when, for the seventh time, he rounded the white walls of the after cabin and she turned with a smile of seeming welcome on her lips, Farquaharson stopped dead. For just a surprised instant he forgot the requirements of courtesy and glanced about as if instinctively seeking escape. His jaw stiffened, then with a sense of chagrin for this gracelessness he stepped forward with a belated cordiality.

But in the brief interval he saw the exquisitely fair coloring of the woman's cheeks flush pinker, and the lower lip catch between her teeth.

Her eyes, which in the afternoon sun were golden amber, clouded with a swift shadow of pain which as swiftly vanished.

"I was wondering, Stuart," said Marian Holbury slowly, "whether you meant to speak to me at all."

"I didn't know you were on this side of the world," he responded with recovered equanimity.

She leaned against the rail and, while the breeze whipped the sash of her sweater and her white skirt about her, studied him gravely until he said: "Meeting you here was such a coincidence that it astonished me ... don't you find it surprising, too?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said, "I don't. You see I *did* know that you were on this side of the globe. I even knew that you would be on board. Lieutenant Hancock told me."

CHAPTER XVI

Stuart Farquaharson's first impulse upon finding his surprise for the meeting unshared, was an astonishment at Marian herself. Unless some great urgency existed for an immediate return to the States he supposed that she would have avoided sailing with him.

"The circumstance that the one man I knew in Yokohama should also be an acquaintance of yours only heightens the effect of the coincidence," he hazarded, and his companion smiled as though amused at some unimpaired element of humor as she naïvely responded: "Yes—except that in a foreign town we would be apt to meet the same people."

However it had happened, thought Stuart, it was a deplorable accident: their being thrown together for ten days in the narrowed companionship of a sea-voyage. For her, even more than himself, it must bring back the painful notoriety of their last companionship.

It had all been so bootless and uncalled for! Marian Holbury might have divorced her husband had she wished, and remained unstigmatized. Yet she had, by yielding to an ungoverned impulse, reversed their positions of justification. Now the news of their names on the same sailing lists would come to ears at home and set tongues wagging afresh. There had been enough of that.

As she stood there regarding him quietly, with the thorough self-possession of her sex and her class, he reminded himself that there was no profit in a sulkiness of attitude.

"What are your sentiments," he inquired, "regarding a cup of tea?" And she laughed frankly and easily as she responded:

"They are of the friendliest." Together they turned and went toward the nearest white-jacketed deck steward.

As he made a pretense of sipping his tea Farquaharson admitted to himself that the lady whom he was meeting after a long interval had lost nothing of her charm.

The ten days of enforced companionship would at all events be relieved of

tedium, but he was in a quandary as to what should be his attitude. Later in the seclusion of the smoking-room he shaped a tentative policy of such deferential courtesy as he would have tendered a new acquaintance. He fancied that she would appreciate a manner which neither bordered on intimacy nor presumed upon the past.

But as the days went on a variance developed between the excellence of his plan in theory and in practical application. For one thing, Marian herself seemed less grateful in her acceptance of it than he had anticipated. He sometimes felt, from a subtle hint of her manner, that her confidence in her own adroitness and *savoir faire* needed no such assistance from him.

There were moments, too, between their casual conversations when a wistful sort of weariness brought a droop to her lips, as though she would have welcomed a less constrained companionship.

Sometimes when off guard, he found himself slipping into the manner which seemed more natural, and then he wondered if his policy of aloofness might not savor of the priggish.

Not until they were nearing Honolulu did they refer to the past and then it was Marian and not Stuart who broached the subject.

"We were fortunate in being in Japan in cherry-blossom time," suggested Stuart in a matter of fact fashion, as they strolled on deck at sunset. "We saw it all at its best."

"Cherry-blossom time in Japan—" she echoed musingly. Then suddenly she broke out with an almost impassioned bitterness, "Yes, I suppose we were—fortunate! We are both still in our twenties. I am rich and you are better than that—you are along the way of being famous. And yet it occurs to me that neither of us is precisely happy. We are both outcasts from contentment—just Bedouins in the world's desert, after all."

His question came vaguely and uncomfortably, "What do you mean, Marian?"

She laughed, banishing the gravity from her face.

"Nothing—nothing at all, Stuart," she assured him. "It was just a woman's mood." But after a moment she went on in a voice of greater seriousness: "It seems as good a time as any to tell you that I've come to realize with a wretched guiltiness—how I pulled you into the mess I made of my own affairs. If there

were any way of undoing it—"

He interrupted her quickly, "Please don't brood over that, Marian. It's all ended now. You were too confused just then by your own foreground wretchedness to be able to gauge the perspectives."

"One has a right," she declared with self-scorn, "to expect from an adult human being, a reasonable degree of intelligence. I didn't display it to any conspicuous extent."

"You gave way to a moment of panic."

"Yes—and you suffered for it. I didn't quite understand then that sealing the evidence in the divorce, while it was supposed to protect me, really left you no chance to clear yourself."

"Naturally not," he smilingly rejoined. "You weren't a lawyer, you know. But it must pain you to discuss these things and I'm not asking any explanation. Why shouldn't we let them rest in peace?"

Her face flushed a little and she seemed on the point of argument, but she only said: "Yes, I suppose that is better."

The evening before the *Nippon Maru* was due in the Hawaiian port there was no moon, but all the softly blazing stars of the tropics were kindled in the sky and the phosphor waters of the Pacific played in an exquisite echo of light. Marian Holbury, in her simplicity of white skirt and white blouse looked as young as a school girl and, Stuart thought, more beautiful than he had ever seen her. They sat together on the after-deck which, as it chanced, they held in monopoly and the woman said musingly:

"To-morrow we part company, don't we?"

"I'm afraid so," he answered. "My ticket reads to Honolulu."

"I suppose I should thank you," she continued in the same pensiveness of manner. "I guess your unbroken reserve was meant for considerateness."

"Under the circumstances," he replied, a shade piqued by her tone, "anything else might have been embarrassing—for you."

With eyes traveling seaward she spoke again and there was a ghost of quiet irony in her voice.

"That seems to be a thing a man's chivalry never leaves to a woman's own judgment; the determination of what she may find embarrassing."

"At least a man doesn't want to force the dilemma on her." Possibly he did not succeed in saying it entirely without stiffness.

"If I'd been afraid of your doing that," she reminded him, "I might have changed my sailing date."

"I was just a little surprised that you didn't," he admitted.

A strolling couple passed and Marian watched them turn out of sight before she spoke again.

"As a matter of fact, I did change it. I left the friends with whom I'd been traveling and took this earlier steamer home." She caught the expression of surprise in his face, but before he could put it into words she heightened it to amazement with the calm announcement: "I did that because Lieutenant Hancock told me that you were sailing by it."

"But I—I don't understand!"

"No. You wouldn't."

"I'm dense, I suppose," he acknowledged, "but I should have fancied the only result of that would be unpleasant gossip."

"Yes, Stuart, you *are* dense," she interrupted, and into her eyes leaped an insurgent flame of scorn. "Why should I care what gossips thought? Their verdict was rendered long since. I had a reason more important to myself than their opinions."

"Will you tell me what it was? If my attitude was silly, Marian, at least it was sincere."

"I was wondering whether I would tell you or not, Stuart. Most women would not; but I'm reported to be startlingly—perhaps shockingly candid—so perhaps I will."

Formerly he had thought her clever with a play of wit which made for fascination, but he had believed her processes of thought transparent to his own scrutiny. Of late he had discovered in her something baffling and subtle. This was not the same Marian but a Marian of whom his old acquaintance had been

merely the matrix as iron is the beginning of tempered steel. The woman whose eyes dwelt on him now with a sort of inscrutable indulgence was one who reversed their positions. It was as if she read him easily in these days, while in herself she retained depths which he had no means of fathoming. But two things he *could* read in her eyes: courage and utter honesty—and these were qualities which he esteemed.

After a little she asked him with a direct reading of his thoughts which made him start uncomfortably, "You find me changed?"

Stuart drew a long breath. It broke suddenly upon him that if this woman had begun life under other auspices she might have developed into something rather magnificent.

"Not changed—" he answered promptly. "Transformed!"

"Thank you," she said, holding her voice steady. "It was the realization of the change that made me try the experiment."

"What experiment?" His bewilderment was growing.

"If I'm going to tell you—and one can talk frankly of things that belong unmistakably to the past—I must lay the foundation."

"Yes?"

"Of course, you realize that everyone said I fled to you—because we had had an affair. Later when I was divorced and you saw nothing more of me, they laughed at me—they thought I had grabbed at the reflection and dropped my bone in the stream."

"But, Marian! You understood—"

She raised a hand. "Please let me finish in my own way. It's not too easy at best."

"Forgive me."

"To their eyes, my one chance of rehabilitating my life lay in marrying you. I mention this to forestall misunderstanding; because in what I've got to say next it might logically occur to you as a thing I'd contemplated myself."

"Surely," he exclaimed, "you don't think me so mean of mind as that."

With a somewhat rueful smile, she continued:

"When things became unendurable at home and I fled to your cottage, what did you think of me?"

His response was immediate: "That you were in a panic. It seemed to you a case of any port in a storm. I was geographically near and—"

"You really thought that?" A queer note came into her voice and she added almost in a whisper as if echoing it to herself: "Just because you were geographically near!"

"Why else?" he demanded. "Of course, in your indignation against that brute Holbury, you momentarily thought of me with contrasting emotion. I understood that, but I never exaggerated it into anything more important—or permanent."

"No. You just thought me a frivolous little idiot, and the estimate was annoyingly correct. I knew that—and yet I hadn't quite realized how meanly you *did* think of me—until now."

"But, Marian—!"

"If you thought," she went on, and in the starlight, he could not see how the color had left even her lips, "if you thought that—even in those circumstances—even driven by terror of my life—I would have fled to any other man in the world—" Abruptly she broke off.

Stuart Farquaharson's forgotten pipe had died to ashes. Now it fell with a tiny crash to the deck. The man leaned forward toward her and his eyes mirrored an astonishment genuine and absolute.

"Do you mean ... that you really fancied ... that you loved me?"

She turned her face away until he could see only the roundness of her check's contour and the curling softness of the hair on her neck. Her voice carried a burden of lethargic weariness. "No, I didn't fancy it ... I knew it ... I've known it ever since."

As Stuart Farquaharson remained silent in the amazement of these declarations, Marian turned her face again upon him. This time she spoke with a fiery impetuosity:

"I suppose I should be burning with shame at confessing that ... only somehow I've never been able to realize why people should blush so at the truth ... and, as I

said a moment ago, since it's over, there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you, is there?"

"So now—it is over?" He spoke very softly yet with a sense of relief.

Marian's eyes held his own with their remarkably candid gaze, making no effort to mask their misery. Her finely shaped head carried itself high as if in disdain for all dissimulation, and once more she went on in a forced evenness:

"Yes, now it's over, but I'm not through talking. Please don't interrupt me. I've said too much to let it rest there and I've got to say the rest in my own fashion." She paused, then went resolutely forward. "You had spoken to me of Miss Williams, but—you know you were always reticent about the things you felt deeply—I didn't know enough to thoroughly understand. In the last year I've done a lot of thinking.... The point from which I always started was obvious. If you had cared at all about me, you would have looked me up—when the divorce was ended.... But later I heard of her marriage—Miss Williams'.... Perhaps, I told myself, things were different with you now. I heard of you from time to time ... and never as of one who was very happy."

She paused and Stuart laid a hand gently on hers, but she withdrew her own and began afresh:

"I don't care for the word 'chastened,' but I knew that I'd learned some things. I knew that I wasn't that same woman any more. The irresponsible lightness had been pretty well cured ... and I wasn't very happy, either.

"Marian," he declared feelingly, "you don't have to defend yourself to me. The man who won your love could feel nothing but pride."

"Thank you," she said briefly. "I'm not through yet.... I thought that if you met the *new* me ... you might revise your *old* opinion.... I thought at least that I could study you and that afterward there would be no uncertainty.... You spoke of the coincidence of our meeting. There was no coincidence about it. I was traveling more or less at random, but I knew you must come through Yokohama and I waylaid you. When Jimmy Hancock told me at the chance that you were taking this boat, I took it, too.... It meant ten days in which to study you—but I needed only ten seconds. I saw your face when we met on deck ... and that told me all there was to tell."

CHAPTER XVII

She came to a stop and sat looking out at the phosphorescent sea and the star-filled skies. Farquaharson leaned forward, his words coming brokenly and in a heavy misery of embarrassment.

"Marian, I *have* recognized the new you: I've seen the splendid development and fulfilment of you. It's only that ... that—" He broke off and began over impetuously. "I happened to fall in love with—Conscience before I met you. Of course, that's quite hopeless now ... but it seems permanent." He was struggling with a diffidence which, in such circumstances, a man must have been very callous to have escaped. On the lips of his characters, in fiction, words flowed with an ease of dialogue and broke often into epigram. Now they eluded him, leaving him in confusion. The situation was one for which he found himself unprepared. "I doubt if I shall ever feel otherwise—about her," he went on somewhat flounderingly. "You and she are women of almost opposite types in a way and yet—yet I've been realizing while you talked, that in many respects you are alike."

Marian's lips twisted themselves into a smile, stiff with tension of spirit, but a whimsical irony tinged her voice.

> "The Colonel's lady and Rose O'Grady
> Are sisters under their skins,

I suppose we have that kinship, Stuart."

The man's hands closed into a tight grip on the arms of his steamer chair. In his eyes were regret and sincerity, but his words came with the firmness of resolve:

"I have, as you say, been dense," he declared, speaking now in even sentences that had ceased to break disjointedly. "I haven't even done you the justice of recognizing your more genuine self. You spoke of drawing me into the web of your troubles—but you didn't say the thing which you might have mentioned. I was also an adult of supposedly human intelligence. I should have foreseen the dangers of even so innocent an affair as was ours. I should have protected you."

"Against myself?" she inquired.

"Against ourselves," he responded quickly. "I should, for instance, have told you that I was so much in love with one woman, that to me all others must remain—just others. Now you have done me the honor to say you love me."

"Please, Stuart!" Marian's face was momentarily drawn in a paroxysm of pain. "Please don't make me pretty speeches. It isn't necessary—and it doesn't help."

"I'm not making pretty speeches," he declared. "My love is a hopeless one, but I can't deny its force without lying. I've helped you spoil your life and if I can help you mend it—" He broke off there and then abruptly he said: "Marian, will you marry me?"

She carried her hands to her face and covered her eyes. For a moment she sat in a stunned attitude and her words came faintly:

"I understand your motive, dear. It's gallant—but it wouldn't do."

"Why?" he demanded and again her head came up with the bearing of pride.

"I've already told you that it's not rehabilitation in the eyes of the world I seek. For you it would be sacrifice—and for me a failure. If you asked me because you loved me, and I believed I could make you happy I think you know what my answer would be. But to marry you without your loving me—well, that would be —" She paused and then finished: "It would be sheer Hell."

Stuart leaned over and picked up the pipe. His face was rigid and self-accusing, and the woman laid her hand on his arm.

"You have ridden with me in the hunting field, Stuart," she irrelevantly reminded him. "I hope you'll testify that I can take my croppers when they come. Please don't think I'm whimpering."

"One could hardly think that," he declared.

A sudden thought brought a fresh anxiety to her eyes, as she vehemently demanded: "Was she—was Miss Williams, influenced by what people said about you and me?"

"I suppose," he said, "the only version she had was the public one, and I fancy there were those about her who made use of it, but I don't believe it affected her decision."

Marian's voice was very low, almost tender now. "It would mean a good deal to

you, wouldn't it, to have her know the truth?"

His hand gripped her own feelingly for a moment and he nodded his head but, in words, he said only: "Yes—it would."

"I wish I knew her. I wish I could set you straight with her," she told him and after that she rose. "At all events it was worth the experiment," she commented. "Well, '*la comedia e finita*.' I think now I'll go to bed."

Conscience dealt relentlessly with herself in those storms of argument which arose in her mind and had to be fought out; storms involving the readjustment of her life to the partnership of marriage.

Yet she must not, if she placed value upon success, fall into the class of parasite wives who suffer their own independence of thought to languish.

One day she came into the study while Eben was engaged in those matters of business which brought the most unaffected pleasure to his eyes and his attitude was that of such absorption that she did not at once announce her presence. When he turned at length and saw her, he came instantly to his feet, but despite the smile of his welcome, Conscience caught the repressed reluctance with which he shoved back his papers and pencil.

"Eben," she hazarded, "why can't I make myself useful? Can't you delegate some part of your work to me?"

Instead of gratification his expression took on the cast of apprehension, though he laughed.

"What! Do you want to turn business woman, my dear?" he inquired. "Are you ambitious to come into the firm and have your name on the door?"

"I want to have a hand on the oar because I think you have a sort of financial genius and I'd like to share a thing which must come that close to your inner life," she explained, and under the pleasurable spell of her appreciation Tollman found himself expanding with responsive pride. To certain forms of flattery he was as susceptible as a schoolgirl.

"If I have ability," he made modest disavowal, "it's of a slight caliber."

"I don't know anything about your financial rating," went on his wife. "I've never asked any questions about that and I don't care so far as the mere figures go. But I believe you have a gift of business generalship which, in fields of wider opportunity, might have made you a millionaire."

Tollman broke unexpectedly into a peal of laughter. He complacently accepted the tribute to his powers, but would have preferred it laid on with greater lavishness. Quite casually he remarked:

"When I said slight caliber, I spoke comparatively. If the occasion arose, I fancy I could sign a check now—not only for a million but for several."

Conscience's dark eyes must have mirrored their amazement: an amazement which was entirely natural, and which concerned not only the revelation of wealth in itself, but more complex things as well.

The disturbing thought intruded itself that in a land of such sparse opportunities these returns could be wrung out only by a policy so tight-fisted as to be merciless. It must mean draining resources to their dregs. That was an unpleasant suspicion which she instantly expelled with the reminder that her husband had inherited wealth and that in supplementing it he had not been limited to a local field of operation.

The next unwelcome thought suggested that if Eben were so rich as that his generosity to her father and herself was discounted. Out of abundance he had given a moiety and because of it she had put her life into a yoke. But that idea, too, she met with the answer that his conduct must not be measured by a given cost but by its spirit and willingness.

"You are surprised?" His smiling inquiry called her back from her disturbing reverie with a sense of guilty criticism.

"Only at the degree of your success, Eben," she told him gravely; "I had not supposed it so large."

But as time went on, an intelligence less keenly edged than hers would have recognized that it was only to the anterooms of his financial interests that he admitted her.

This was inevitable, and obviously he could not explain what she felt to be a rebuff. To make full disclosure of certain transactions would have stripped Eben Tollman of disguise and brought results as parlous as those he had feared on the

afternoon when he left his strong box unlocked. Structures of self-delusion might have fallen into shapeless débris under the batteries of her frank questioning. Eben Tollman could dismiss from thought the woman who has lost her way or the man who has succumbed to a destructive thirst. That required only the remembrance that the "wages of sin is death." But if real estate which he owned in poor, even disreputable sections of distant cities brought him in surprisingly large rentals, he did not conceive that his duty required an investigation of the characters of his tenants.

Of course should his agents tell him that his property was being prostituted to evil ends for gain he would have to sever relations with them, but he selected agents who troubled him with no such embarrassing details. This was a practical attitude, but something told him that in it Conscience would hardly see eye to eye with him.

It was late in May that Jimmy Hancock wrote a note to the girl with whom he had ridden horseback in the Valley of Virginia.

"I've just had a stroke of luck," he said, "in meeting our old friend Stuart Farquaharson, who is touring the world, crowned gorgeously with bays of literary fame. I ran into him yesterday in Yokohama and from him learned for the first time of your marriage. If I am the last to congratulate you, at least I am among the first in heartiness and sincerity....

"There are some charming Americans here—though I don't think of any others whom I should mention as common acquaintances. Or did you know Mrs. Larry Holbury? She has been reigning graciously over us, and I am among the smitten. However, since both she and Stuart are to sail on the *Nippon Maru* I have no great modicum of hope."

Poor Jimmy! Never was man less bent on purveying morsels of deleterious gossip. Never was man, in effect, more stupidly blundering.

He wrote the day after the dance on his cruiser and he spoke of the things near his current thoughts.

When Conscience had read the note, her eyes wandered thoughtfully and at the end her lips curled. "So she followed him across the world, did she?" she said half aloud, since she was quite alone. Then she added quietly: "Still I guess she didn't pursue him without knowing that she would be welcome. It was just as well that the dream ended in time."

Until his stroke had disabled the Reverend William Williams, his congregation had thought of him less as an individual than as an institution. In their minds he had shared the permanence of the church steeple. Trained through two generations to his intensity and fiery earnestness they saw in other clergymen a tame half-heartedness. Exponents of more modern and liberal thinking had since come and gone leaving the men and women who had been reared on the thundered Word as expressed in his firstlies, secondlies, thirdlies and finalies unable to fill their pulpit to their satisfaction.

Then it was that Sam Haymond, D.D., came to them, as a visiting preacher for a single Sabbath. He came heralded by tidings of power in oratory and zeal of spirit beyond the ordinary. Report had it that his shoulders were above the heads of mediocrity and that, like Saul of Tarsus, he had entered upon his ministry, not through the easy stages of ecclesiastical apprenticeship, but with the warrior-spirit of a man wholly converted from the ranks of the scoffers. Accordingly it was appropriate that he should come as the guest of Eben Tollman, the keystone in the arch of the church's laity and of the old minister who still held power as a sort of director *emeritus*.

Eben being engaged by peremptory affairs in his study, Conscience drove to the station to meet him on a fine young Saturday morning at the beginning of June. She set out from the house which maintained a sort of lordly aloofness among pine-covered hills, more than usually conscious of the lilt of summer in air and landscape.

The Tollman farm had been one of goodly size when Eben had inherited it and outlying tracts had since augmented it by virtue of purchase and foreclosure, until the residence, which faced a lake-like cove, was almost isolated of site. On either side of the sandy road, as Conscience drove to the station, elms and silver oaks and maples were wearing new and tender shades of green. Among the sober pines they reminded her of fashionables flaunting their finery in the faces of staid conservatives.

Between the waxen profusion of bayberry bushes, wild-flowers sprinkled the carpet of pine needles and blackberry trailers crawled in a bright raggedness.

CHAPTER XVIII

Sam Haymond, D.D., gathering together his belongings, as the train whistled for the village, fancied that he could visualize with a fair accuracy the gentleman who had written, "You will be met at the station." Eben Tollman used, in his correspondence, a stilted formality which conjured up the portrait of one somewhat staid and humorless.

Conscience and her husband had, on the other hand, formed no mental portrait of the visiting minister, save that his reputation and accomplishment would indicate mature years.

When the train stopped, and only one stranger emerged upon the crushed-stone platform, Conscience thought that their guest had missed his train. Sam Haymond, D.D., in turn, seeing no elderly gentleman of sober visage, inferred that his host had failed to meet him. There was only a young woman standing alone by a baggage truck and for an instant the thoughts of the minister were fully occupied with the consideration of her arrestingly vivid beauty: a beauty of youth and slender litheness and exquisite color.

Then their glances met and the girl moved forward. It flashed simultaneously upon both of them that faulty preconceptions had caused a failure of recognition.

The tall, young man, whose breadth of shoulder and elasticity of step might have been a boy's, spoke first with an amused riffle in his eyes.

"My name is Sam Haymond. Are you, by any chance, Mr. Tollman's daughter?"

Under the challenge of his humorous twinkle, a sudden mischief flashed into Conscience's face. She was tempted to announce herself as William Williams' daughter and let it go at that, but with a swift reconsideration she laughed and told the whole truth.

"I am Mr. Tollman's wife."

The minister raised his brows in surprise. "Now I don't know why I pictured Mrs. Tollman as a delightful but maternal lady with a gift for mince pies—yet I did."

"I'm afraid I'm below par on my mince pies," she confessed with a mockery of humiliation. He could not, of course, know that the youth in her was leaping up to his bait of spontaneity as a trout leaps to the fly when flies are few. Conscience went on: "But you're below par, too—on ecclesiastical solemnity. I expected a grave-faced parson—"

Sam Haymond's laughter pealed out with a heartiness which seemed gauged to outdoor spaces rather than to confining walls.

"I haven't always been a minister," he acknowledged as he put down his suit-case. There was in his whole appearance an impression of physical confidence and fitness, which made Conscience's thoughts revert to Stuart Farquaharson.

"Once I preached a very bad sermon in a log meeting-house in the Cumberland mountains," he went on. "It is a country chiefly notable for feuds and moon-shining. I was introduced by a gentleman whose avocations were varied. He explained them to me in these words, 'I farms some; I jails some an' I gospels some.' Perhaps I'm cut to a similar pattern."

For both of them the drive proved short. Like a brook which has been running in the darkness of an underground channel, and which livens with sparkle and song as it breaks again into the sun—Conscience found herself in holiday mood and her companion was responsive and frankly delightful.

Haymond was, she understood, a preacher who could move men, but just now he was only a splendidly alive companion. If she thought of him as a preacher at all it was a preacher whose conception was rather that of a knight serving a divinely royal master than a prosecutor thinking in terms of dogma.

As an experiment in psychology, the luncheon was interesting because of the riffles and undercurrents that passed below the conversation's even tenor. The white-haired minister and his bronze-faced junior joined no issues of conflicting opinion and each saw only the admirable in the other—although two men so unlike in every quality except a common zeal might more easily have found points of disagreement than concord.

Tollman was rather the listener than the talker, but when his eyes met those of the visitor, Conscience fancied she detected an instinct of vague hostility in those of the host and a dubiousness in those of the guest. It was as if the waving antennae of their minds had touched and established a sense of antagonism.

Sam Haymond knew types as a good buyer knows his line of wares. Here, he told himself, was a nature cramped and bigoted. Such men had smirched the history of religion with inquisitions and tortures—and had retarded the progress of human thought.

Tollman's impression was less distinct. He fancied that in the penetrating quality of the other's gaze was an impertinence of prying.

Had the visiting clergyman carried his analysis far enough to discover that both men were bigots, he would still have drawn this distinction: the lion and the jackal have the same general motive in life, yet the jackal is hardly a lion.

Possibly it was a feeling of disquiet under silent observation which caused Tollman, after luncheon, to turn his guest over to his wife for entertainment, and Haymond acquiesced with enthusiasm to Conscience's suggestion that they go for a sail to the greater bay.

To Conscience this was all retrieving from monotony a little scrap of the life for which she had so eagerly yearned: the life of progress, stimulus and breadth.

And then they were in the tilting boat, racing before a wind which bellied the taut mains'l and drummed upon its canvas. She and Eben had, once or twice, taken this same sail, but he had endured in patience rather than enjoyed it.

On those occasions Ira had revealed a surly personality, which now expanded and mellowed into conversation as Haymond asked questions about the setting of eel traps and lobster pots and the management of fish weirs.

The wind toyed so persistently with Conscience's dark hair that she took it down from its coils and let it hang in heavy braids. The color rose in her cheeks and the gleam to her eyes making them starry, and a lilt sang in her voice.

There was a wealth of sapphire and purple in the water; there were thin shore lines of vivid green and dazzling sand. Sails bronzed and reddened in the sun and the distance. Gulls quarreled and screamed as they fished—and everything was young.

"Them's mackerel gulls," volunteered Ira as he pointed to two birds perched on a precariously buffeted buoy. "There's a sayin' that 'When the whippoorwills begin to call, the mackerel begins to run'—then the gulls come, too."

But as the sailboat drew near its landing stage again and the sunset was fading

into twilight, the fires died slowly, too, in the eyes of Conscience Tollman and she felt that a vacation had ended.

There seemed to be in the sunlight of the following morning a tempered and Sabbath stillness.

Perhaps the sun itself remained pagan, but if so it only lent contrast to the slumberous restfulness where the shadows fell.

Over the countryside brooded the calm peacefulness of the day and when the church bell gave its first call, its notes floated out across silences disturbed by no noisier interruptions than bird notes and the distant voice of the surf.

When her father had expressed his determination of going, for the first time since he had been stricken, to the church where he had so long preached, Conscience had demurred without avail. She had been, at first, alarmed, lest the associations dwelling between those walls might excite him beyond his strength. He must feel that he was going back, broken, to a place where, in strength, he had been a mentor and potter whose clay was human thought. But he would listen to no objections and when the congregation gathered, his invalid's chair stood at the head of the center aisle and he looked directly up at the pulpit from which, since his youth, he had thundered the damnation of sinners.

When the tall young man took his place in the pulpit, the aged minister swung his finely shaped head around with something of pride as though he would say, "Here is my successor, in whom I am well pleased."

It was the revered elder who first engaged the interest of the congregation, but when Sam Haymond had announced his text: "Let him who is without sin amongst you cast the first stone," there came a shifting of attention. Here was a man gifted with that quality of voice without which there can be no oratory; endowed with that magic of force under which human emotion is a keyboard responsive to the touch; commanding that power which can sway its hearers at will between smile and tear. His reputation was already known to them, but within five minutes after his voice sounded reputation had become a pallid label for something flamingly real: something under which their feeling stirred; something that made their pulses leap like a bugle call; something that soothed them like sleep after weariness—and above all something so convincing that questioning was stilled as by the voice of a prophet who comes direct from the presence of God.

The Reverend William Williams had held their loyalty by virtue of vehemence and fire, and in that the visitor matched and surpassed him. The intensity was there, but much besides—and yet in all else this was a man as opposite to the aged veteran of the pulpit as east is far across from west. In all the fire of his words was no mention of the fires of hell. He seemed to know nothing of the avenging God, whose name had rung terribly from that rostrum for half a century: a God swift of anger and mighty to punish: an omnipotently jealous God. The Deity he served was one of infinite charity to whose forgiveness nothing was unforgivable—except unforgiveness.

He was expounding a doctrine of joy and aspiration: a splendid and uplifting message from a God of the onward and upward march. No suspicion came to him that, in effect, he was assailing the life work of the old man below him, whom he deeply revered, yet he breathed a conception of religion not only unlike, but contradictory to the set and riveted dogma of his listening predecessor.

Minds that had unquestioningly accepted the old and hard gospel of righteousness by duress of brimstone awoke to a new insurgency and eyes little given to the light of thought kindled to this new postulate of brotherhood and the service of brotherhood.

Conscience sat with her eyes hypnotically fixed on the face of the speaker. Yesterday afternoon he had gone sailing with her; to-day he was voicing her own beliefs from the pulpit whose former incumbent had strangled and throttled them with his tyranny of weakness.

Of her father and the influence this sermon might have on him she did not just then think at all. She like the others was being swept on a tide of rapt attention—and she had forgotten that William Williams was not at home in his study. But as that discourse progressed one might have followed the ebb and flow of a man's life-battle, had he watched only the face of the old man, in the wheel chair, crowned with a white mane.

First there was the expression of exaltation which mutely proclaimed: "A prophet is risen among us," but after it came swift doubt and foreboding. The eagle eyes, deep-set in the thin face, were clouded and hurt. Tho talon-like fingers clutched at their chair arms. Must he sit here constrained to silence, while another confounded his teachings?

After doubt came certainty under which the sunken eyes of the paralyzed man

smouldered fiercely and his face blanched to the deadness of parchment. This was all a passionate and revolutionary appeal for liberality—or—by his interpretation—for license. It mounted into an indictment against the cramping evils of intolerance, it scathingly denounced the goodness of the strait-jacket until the old minister saw every effort of his life assailed and vilified. His mind, distorted by suffering and brooding, beheld a prophet indeed, but a prophet who carried Satan's commission and who dared to serve it in the house of God.

Would God himself remain silent and unavenging under such insult? He at least, the lifelong servant, would not sit voiceless while his Master was libeled. He who had spoken here many hundreds of times before would speak once more and his last message would be one of scourging from the temple desecrators more evil than money-changers.

But he shook with so palsied a fury that for a time he could only surrender to his physical weakness. With a mighty effort he braced his withered body and pulled himself forward. He knew he was killing himself, but he would fall at his sentry post, challenging the enemy.

Sam Haymond, himself oblivious until now to all but his own earnestness, brought his gaze back to the chair just below him—and suddenly the resonance of his swelling voice fell silent—snapped by astonishment with a word half spoken.

Of the tragedy which was acting itself before him he realized little. He saw only a venerable colleague stricken by some sudden and terrible ailment.

Then William Williams raised his thin arms above his head. Out of his eyes rained challenge, denunciation, anathema! Mutely he was hurling the curse of God's church. With the last ounce of his attenuated strength he was struggling for the voice which at this moment of supreme need had failed him. Over the body of the congregation, as the preacher halted, fell a deadly stillness.

From the throat of the old man came a strangled groan, which had sought to be a command for silence, and he crumpled forward. Life had gone out of him, and Sam Haymond, lifting both hands, spoke in a voice of hushed awe, "My brethren, the hand of God has fallen here."

CHAPTER XIX

About the churchyard, like sentinels of peace, stood ranks of elms and silver oaks. They had been old and gnarled of trunk, when the man whose life had just guttered out inside had come, young and militant, to preach the letter of that law, whose spirit was to his understanding a fourth dimension. Through the long windows of colored but artless glass, now partly raised, poured slanting panels of summer sun, mottling the interior and its occupants with dashes of red and blue.

Into the hush which had fallen there crept also those minors that seemed to belong rather to an exaggerated quiet than to sound: the trill of a bird, voicing an overflow of joy and the humming of bees among the vines of the church yard, where slanting headstones bore quaintly archaic names and life dates of sailors home from the sea. A wandering butterfly had drifted in and was winging its bright way about the place where the sermon had been interrupted. But the bated breath of awed amazement broke at the end of a long-held pause into a buzz of whispered exclamation.

Conscience rose unsteadily and started forward, her hands clutched to her breast, and the minister came hurriedly down the pulpit stairs.

Later in the day when the body still lay in the parlor of the Tollman house and Conscience sat almost as motionless near by, Eben Tollman paced the floor with features set in an expression unpleasantly suggestive of the undertaker's professional solemnity.

Possibly Tollman was not inconsolably cast down. So long as the old man's precarious life spark had been a danger signal, burning against the influence of Stuart Farquaharson, it was vital that he should live. Now he was entitled to the serenity of a holy man's reward.

It was near to sunset when the husband left the room and the eyes of Conscience kindled for the first time out of their lethargic quiet. Abruptly she rose from her seat and rebelliously demanded of the young minister, "What would you say if I should confess to you that just one thing has been clear and outstanding through all the confusion of my thoughts since this morning? I've been unspeakably sullen."

"I should say," he responded quietly, "that it is a guise which grief often assumes."

"No," she protested, disdaining the cajolery of self-delusion, "my sullenness isn't that sort. It's pure rebellion. I've been thinking of the abysmal failure of those who dedicate themselves most wholly. *His* devotion to righteousness was implacably sincere and severe. It was the doctrine of the hair-shirt. He scorned to ride any wave ... he had to buffet every one head on ... until he battered out his life and wrecked himself."

"A man must serve as he reads his command," her companion reminded her. "He has done his work as he conceived it."

"And yet—" she looked into his face with a deep questioning which held no note of accusation—"if anything that you said to-day is true, his whole effort was not only wasted but perverted, and it was true. It was so terribly true that it killed him!"

"What do you mean?" Haymond's gaze searched her eyes with incredulous amazement. It seemed to be making an effort to steady her against the wild utterances of hysteria, but her response was convincingly calm.

"I mean just that. I myself had nothing in common with his views. To me they seemed narrow—pitifully narrow and uncomprehending—and he was my father. We were warned that in any sudden gust of anger his feeble life spark—would go out, so I put my own conceptions of what counted behind me and tried to shield him." Sam Haymond hardly heard the last words. He could realize only the dazing and crushing import of his own unwilling instrumentality. At last he inquired slowly, "You mean that my sermon—that the things I said—" There he broke off and the distress in his eyes was so poignantly genuine that Conscience replied softly, "No, it wasn't you. It was Fate, I guess. Even I can't blame you. It only proves that the thing I warped my own life to prevent was inevitable—that's all."

For a little while the minister stood silent and across his face passed a succession of bewildered shadows.

"It is hard for me to grasp this," he said at last with a grief-laden voice. "It is hard for me to realize that two men serving the same God; both preaching His Word with identical earnestness could be so at variance that the concept of one should give mortal hurt to the other."

They sat in silence until the sunset pageantry had dimmed to twilight. Then the man spoke again, guardedly.

"You said something about warping your life for your father's sake. I wonder if —well, I wonder if there's anything it would help you to talk about—not to the minister but to the friend."

She met his gaze with one of equal directness, and he could see an impulse, rather hungry and eager, dawn only to be repressed in her eyes. At last she shook her head. "No," she answered. "But it's good of you to ask me. No, there's nothing that talking about will mend."

Eben Tollman's effort at being young was not wholly successful. There were times when even he suspected that it lacked something of complete attainment. He had now been married six months and his wife, though undeniably loyal, was as far as ever from kindling into that eager fire of complete love which he had boasted he would awaken in her.

When Conscience had warned him that their marriage would be an incomplete relationship Tollman had inwardly smiled. Of her faithfulness he could be sure and she herself would be his. The rest was a somewhat gossamer and idealistic matter which her youth exaggerated in importance.

But after six months, possession was no longer enough—and it was all he had. Sometimes indeed it seemed to him that the thing he lacked was greater than the sum of the things he possessed.

He had boasted that in indulging her wishes he found his highest privilege and pleasure, but he was of those who take their pleasures sadly. He had given her unrestricted permission to remodel his house, yet in every fresh detail of the alteration he discovered an act of vandalism under which his spirit writhed.

To his mind everything gained in sanctity by its age: the moth-eaten furniture was hallowed by tradition. The rheumatic old dog of uncertain breed, to which he had never vouchsafed a caress became now, when banished to the stable, a tried and faithful companion relegated to exile.

Privacy, he conceived as a matter of being shut in, and a house without

cobwebbed shadows became a place bereft of decent seclusion. About him, now, all this undesirable metamorphosis was taking place.

"What is this room, my dear?" he inquired one morning as he spread before him on the breakfast table blue prints, while Conscience was pouring his coffee.

A shaft of early light tilting obliquely through the window fell on her head, making a soft nimbus about her dark hair and bringing out the exquisite color of her face. As Tollman looked up, raising the plans with a finger indicating the spot in question, he recognized the radiance of youth which could, under such a searching brilliance, remain flawless. He felt in contrast old and sluggish of life current.

"That?" Conscience's brows were lifted in surprise. "Why, Eben, you've been over those plans a half-dozen times. Surely you're familiar with them. That's your bed-room."

"And this one?" He shifted his finger and his face clouded.

"That's mine."

"Separate apartments?" he inquired dryly, though he was, as she had said, discovering no new cause of displeasure.

"Certainly."

"And three baths, and a garage and a car—and a terrace." He paused and his face fell into a sullen and stubborn expression. After a moment he added coldly, "That's all going to run into money."

Conscience set down the coffee cup and looked at him as she quietly asked, "Is there any reason why it shouldn't? If you were poor, I would share your poverty without complaint, but as you told me, unasked, we are not poor. Economy carried beyond the point of virtue becomes unlovely, I think."

Eben shifted his line of objection. Separate apartments hinted at that modern trend which he believed sought to rob marriage of its sacred intimacy.

"It is not only the expense," he announced stolidly. "Our people have always held close to a certain conception of home and marriage. From the days of the Mayflower these words have stood for a life fully shared. People who play lightly with sacred things are the sponsors for the other style of life: for houses

where the husband and wife lead separate existences and substitute small dogs for children."

He felt, as he concluded, the deep eyes of his wife fixed on him with an expression which he could not quite fathom. Her lips were parted and the freshness of her cheeks colored with a tinge of indignation.

"Have I ever seemed to prefer small dogs to children?" she asked him in a still voice which bordered dangerously on anger. "You talk of a life fully shared. Have I failed to share anything except the business part of your life—which you closed to me?"

Eben Tollman did not wish to pursue that topic.

"I was only expressing general views," he hurriedly assured her, and again under her level scrutiny, he felt the contrast between her vibrant vitality and his own autumnal maturity. But Conscience went steadily on in the unmistakable manner of one who has no intention of being misunderstood.

"But I won't share any cramped delusion that things are good merely because they are dusty and immobile. I won't share the fallacy that to call a thing conservative sanctifies it. There is more virtue in a tiled bathroom than in a cob-webbed chapel. If we change this house at all we will do it thoroughly."

Eben Tollman rose and pushed back his chair. Conscience's face had taken on the glow of something like Amazonian defiance. To her beauty had come a new quality which stirred the senses of her husband like a roll of drums. It was an emotion which he believed to be love and coming around he caught her rather pantingly in his arms.

It was an intolerably wretched misfit, this union of Conscience and Eben Tollman, but so bent was the woman upon redeeming the hopeless experiment that she sought to brace the doomed and tottering structure with fictitious props. To be an "unimpeachable" wife was not to her thinking a sufficient meeting of her problem. Her own fastidiousness and cleanness of character would have made that less a duty to her husband than to herself. The more difficult requirement was to close, and keep closed the port of her thoughts against those dreams and yearnings that stole in like blockade-runners, but these buccaneer thoughts came insistently and impertinently invested with a colorful challenge to the imagination.

From every dream-ship that sailed in, looked out the face of Stuart Farquaharson.

This, she told herself, was a pure perversity. All memories should fade as distance widens, yet of late the banishment of Stuart had been less complete than heretofore.

Slowly she prosecuted Stuart Farquaharson in the court of her own judgment and condemned him to mental exile. The steps of his deteriorating course were clear enough. He had loved her sufficiently to do everything but stand firm in stress. When he thought her lost he had consoled himself with another woman. When the second lady, too, had come to grief through his devotion, he had withdrawn. Then with the reception of Conscience's letter at Cairo, the past had risen with Phœnix upblazing and he had recklessly cabled her to halt at the step of the altar. She confessed with deep humiliation that had the message come in time, she might have obeyed. But that, too, had failed—and now with his versatile capacity for the expedient, he was dallying again with the affections of Marian Holbury. It was, she admitted, not a pretty record. She told herself almost savagely that she hated Stuart Farquaharson as one can hate only where contempt succeeds love.

This was the bulwark of fallacy with which Conscience Tollman sought to safeguard her dwindling confidence in the ultimate success of her wifehood and she clung to it with a bitter determination.

Where the old iron urns, painted a poison green, had stood in the front yard of Tollman's house there was no longer any offense to the eye. Where an unsightly fence had confined a somewhat ragged yard, low stone walls, flower bordered, went around a lawn as trim as plush. The house presented to the eye of the visitor that dignity which should invest the home of a gentleman whose purse is not restricted. The spirit of the colonial had been preserved and amplified, and from the terrace one looked out on a landscape of hill view and water glimpse, as from a fitting and harmonious place.

One afternoon Conscience Tollman was walking among her flowers. They would be gone before long, for already the woods were beginning to burn with the colors of autumn and the bogs where cranberry-pickers worked were blazing

into orange and claret. The road that came out of the pines, formerly deeply rutted and sandy, was now metaled and approached the house in a graded curve.

Looking off down the hill to where it turned from the highway into the farm, she saw a motor which she did not recognize and which even at the distance showed, dust-whitened, as from a long journey. It had entered between the stone gate pillars, and Conscience, with a glance at her garden apron, muddied from kneeling at the flower beds, turned and went hastily into the house. The car evidently brought visitors and as, from her bed-room window, she watched it round the nearer curve and draw up at the yard entrance, her perplexity grew.

It was a large machine of foreign make and, when the liveried chauffeur opened the tonneau door, a woman stepped out whose face was obscured by her dust veils.

When the maid appeared above stairs a few minutes later the mystery of the unknown visitor's identity remained unsolved.

"The lady said," announced the servant, "that she hoped you would see her for a few minutes."

"Who is the lady?"

"I don't know, ma'am. She said she had no card with her and would I please just deliver that message."

As Conscience came noiselessly and lightly down the stairs a few moments later her guest was standing by one of the pillars of the terrace, looking off across the breadth of landscape, but her figure and profile were revealed. The veil, thrown back, was faintly aflutter about a head crowned with red-brown hair and a face delicately chiseled. Her eyes held the clear luminosity of lighted amber, but, unconscious of being observed, they held a note of pain—almost of timidity. Conscience's first impression untinged by any bias of preconception expressed itself in the thought, "Whoever she is, she is very lovely." Then she stepped out onto the tiles and the lady turned. The eyes of the two met and the lips of the two smiled.

"You are Mrs. Eben Tollman?" inquired the visitor and Conscience nodded with that quick graciousness of expression which always brought to her face a quality of radiance.

"Yes, the maid didn't get your name, I believe."

The hint of pain and timidity had left the amber eyes now and in their place had come something more difficult to define.

"No, I preferred giving it to you myself. I am Marian Holbury."

CHAPTER XX

The visitor did not miss the sudden and instinctive change on the face of her hostess or the impulsive start as if to draw back in distaste. Conscience evidently saw in this visit a violation of all canons of good taste. At all events she remained standing as if letting her attitude express her unwillingness to prolong the situation.

"I suppose if I were diplomatic," went on Marian when it was evident that the other had no intention of making inquiries as to the cause of her coming, "I might say that I'd turned in to make inquiry about these bewildering roads—or to borrow gasoline."

"If there is any motoring assistance I can give—" began the hostess, but the other woman interrupted her with a short laugh and a glance of almost reckless straightforwardness.

"No, it isn't for that, that I came. You see I'm *not* diplomatic. I'm said to be startlingly frank. I came to talk with you, if you'll let me, about Stuart Farquaharson. He is a common friend of ours, I believe."

A pale flush rose to Mrs. Tollman's cheeks and she volunteered no reply.

The two women, each unusual in her beauty and each the other's opposite of type, stood with the quiet repression of their breeding, yet with an impalpable spirit of enmity between them: the enmity of two women who at heart love one man. Mrs. Holbury spoke first.

"You are thinking that my coming here is an unwarrantable impertinence, Mrs. Tollman. Perhaps that's true, but I think my reason is strong enough to justify it. At all events I'm not doing this because it's easy for me, or because I have anything to gain. Do you think you can spare me ten minutes and reserve hostility of judgment until you hear what I came to say?"

Conscience was somewhat bewildered, but she answered quietly, "Of course, Mrs. Holbury. You must forgive me if I seemed discourteous.... I was so surprised. Won't you be seated?"

"Thank you." The visitor took a chair and for a moment sat gazing across the

coloring hills where the maples were flaring with yellow and the oaks were russet-brown. "Stuart Farquaharson has been a friend ... more than a casual friend ... to both of us."

"Stuart Farquaharson," said Conscience quickly, "was one of my best friends. I hope he is still, but for a long while I haven't seen him. He drifted into another world ... a world of travel and writing ... and so I think of him as belonging to the past—a sort of non-resident friend."

Marian Holbury's face flushed. "My interest, on the contrary," she made candid declaration, "is not the sort that will ever be of the past, though I doubt if I shall see him again, either."

Even now under their composure they had the masked feeling of fencers and antagonists.

"I saw him last years ago," said Conscience, and Marion answered at once, "I have just returned from the Orient. Mr. Farquaharson was a fellow passenger."

"I had happened to hear of it." Eben Tollman's wife spoke casually and Marion countered with an equal urbanity.

"Yes, one does happen to hear of these things, doesn't one? He called the meeting a coincidence and was surprised."

"And you?"

"I could hardly be astonished because you see I had, without his knowledge, waylaid him."

The hostess may have indicated the astonishment she sought to conceal, for Mrs. Holbury laughed and again her eyes had that unmasked frankness which made surprisingly unconventional assertions seem quite normal.

"I am wondering, Mrs. Holbury," Conscience spoke now without any hint of hostility—disarmed by her visitor's candor, "why you are telling me this."

"When one has valued a friend and has had reports of him which are both deleterious and unfair it is quite conceivable, don't you think, that that person would wish to know the truth and to see the friend vindicated?"

Mrs. Eben Tollman met the direct eyes with a level glance almost of challenge.

"What reports do you mean?"

"Mrs. Tollman," said Marian earnestly, "you have agreed to listen. Please don't let us fence evasively. You had the same reports of Stuart that the rest of the world had; reports for which I feel largely responsible because many things which seemed most damaging, he might have explained to his own full credit. He refrained on my account." She paused a moment, then continued resolutely, "Incidentally he knows nothing of this effort I am making to have you understand the truth. Do you want to hear the unfalsified story of how I was discovered by my husband in his cottage and in his arms?"

Conscience nodded gravely and when, ten minutes later, her visitor had finished a narrative in which she had not spared herself, the hostess had an unpleasant feeling that her own attitude had been priggish while the other woman's had been astonishingly generous.

That conviction gave a softness to her voice as she put her next question softly. "Why should it mean anything to Mr. Farquaharson now—my opinion?"

"In the Philippines," said Marian Holbury, "the army officers have a name for a dishonorable discharge from the service. They call it the 'yellow furlough.' Do you imagine that Stuart Farquaharson could willingly retire in that fashion? Don't you see how greatly he would covet an honorable discharge?"

Conscience felt suddenly glad that Eben would not return to the house before evening. She had another thing yet to learn and she asked faintly, "But it must have been hard for you to come and tell this to a stranger. Why did you do it?"

"Hard!" For the first time the even control of Marian's voice broke into vehemence. "It was more than hard. It was all but impossible. But he couldn't tell you himself, without discrediting me and there was no one else to do it."

"Even so I don't quite see—"

But Mrs. Holbury cut her short with an imperious gesture and her voice held a vibrant thrill of feeling.

"You say that Stuart Farquaharson stands for a past chapter in your thoughts. I love him and I know him. If the good opinion of a woman to whom he is only a memory means more to his happiness than the possession of everything in life I can give—and would gladly give—" She broke off and added with regained composure, "Well, I love him enough to try to get him what he wants, that's all."

She wheeled and went hurriedly down the path toward her car, leaving Conscience standing on the terrace, with her lips parted and her hands nervously clenched.

Conscience did not mention to her husband the visit of Marian Holbury. To do so would not only have been the violation of a self-sacrificing confidence but the pleading of a cause for which Eben could feel no response except distaste. She knew that Eben thought of Marian as a light and frivolous woman who had been cashiered from matrimony.

During the next two years—which passed in labored slowness, she kept the matter to herself, though to her it was not merely a visit. It was a time from which she dated other times. It was the day upon which her dam had broken: the dam of her carefully reared fallacy. From that day on she could no longer fall back on the idea of a discredited Stuart in support of her efforts to exile him from her thoughts.

Thus disarmed, she asked herself, how was she to carry on the fight to find contentment; and to the question came two and only two answers. Children might fill the void of her existence or she might in time school herself into a tame acceptance by a sheer crushing of impulses.

In the responsibilities of motherhood there might be even now a fullness of compensation which would make of sacrifice an enthusiasm. The whole unsatisfied abundance of her nature could laugh at disappointment, striking out the past and living afresh in the lives of her children.

This was not a new thought and it held little hope. For two years she had prayed for its fulfillment and now her faith faltered.

So the one thing left seemed to be a vapid and colorless resignation.

Alone in her bedroom one night, which was typical of many nights, she pondered these matters. By her dresser mirror burned bayberry candles and in their faintly wavering illumination she caught an occasional glimpse of herself. She was not vain, but neither was she totally blind. She knew that God had given her a mind suitable for alert companionship. God had bestowed upon her, too, beauty of body and face, which might have been gifts for the glorification of

love.

It was one of those midsummer nights when the air, no longer void, teems with an indefinable influence of restlessness. Like prisoners beating on their iron doors at night, the repressed longings were all awake, too—and clamorous. A sense of fear obsessed her, almost of panic gaining force of volume like an inrunning tide.

Eben, she knew, was slowly but very certainly reading an aversion to himself into every small manifestation of personal independence.

Suddenly her eyes grew wide and terrified. Was not her feeling, after all, if only she had the courage to admit it, one of aversion for him? Vehement denial rose at the thought, prompted by the discipline of fixed ideas.

"But why," whispered a small voice of inner mockery, "did you just now turn the key in your door? What was *that* but an impulse of withdrawal—a barrier?"

There had been another night when she had felt such a nameless and restless fear. Then she had dreaded being left alone. Now she was afraid she might not be. Then a man had come to her and soothed her, but it had been another man.

Why should these thoughts of Stuart Farquaharson always obtrude themselves on every revery?... Was there no key she could turn against him, whom it was her duty to shut out?

If he were ever to return to her and find her in such a mood as possessed her now, she feared that she would throw herself into his arms. Thank God he would never come!

Something of the same restlessness that obsessed her was at work with her husband, too, that night, though it led him less into panic and self-questioning than into a brooding conviction of life's injustice.

Above the mantel of his study hung a portrait of an ancestor garbed in the blue and buff of the army of Independence. Until quite recently this portrait's features had been well-nigh extinguished under the accumulated soot and tarnish of many decades, but Eben had revered them with that veneration of ancestor-worship which is an egoism overflowing the boundaries of a single generation. Lately Conscience had had the picture restored and now the renovated forebear, almost jaunty in his refurbishing, looked down on his descendant and the descendant's pride was quickened.

To-night, however, the eyes of the portrait seemed full of grim accusation. In their cold depths Eben could fancy the question sternly put, "Where are your sons? Are you going to let the flame of our honorable line flicker out with your own death?"

Perhaps the root of ancestor-worship, in all forms, lies deep in the wish of the devotee to be, in his own turn, honored. Perhaps, too, the obsession of self-perpetuation grows rather than wanes as the line becomes less worth perpetuating.

At all events Eben Tollman had no children and his thoughts fell into brooding and bitterness. His present attitude needed only a spark, such as jealousy or suspicion might supply, to fire it into some quirk of mad and bitter resentment.

He turned out the lamp and went slowly up the stairs. Outside his wife's door he paused, and, without knocking, tried the knob—to find the door locked against him. A deep flush of resentment spread over his cheeks. He drew back his hand, being minded to rap peremptorily—then he refrained and went on to his own room.

CHAPTER XXI

Conscience was sitting on the terrace one day with a book, which she smilingly laid down as her husband joined her. Eben took up the small volume of Browning's verse and idly turned its pages, his eyes falling almost immediately on the old inscription, "Stuart to Conscience." His unfixed jealousy seized upon a frail mooring but he stifled the scowl that instinct prompted and turned the pages to the point where a narrow ribbon marked "The Statue and the Bust."

He had often wondered what people found to admire in Browning, but now he read with an unflagging interest. Here was a document in evidence: the narrative of a wife who dissembled her love and the ungodly moral of the thing was that the culpability of the lovers lay—not in their clandestine devotion but in their temporizing postponement of a guilty love:

> "And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost ...
> Is, the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin...."

Before Eben Tollman's eyes swam spots of red and in his heart leaped a withering flame of betrayed wrath.

Had Conscience, after all, through these months and years, deceived him? Had she surreptitiously kept in touch with the erstwhile lover who had already wrecked one home? Had she been letting memories kindle fires in her which all his faithful love had left unquickened?

The long incubating dourness had hatched from its egg and, like the young quail which runs while the shell still clings to its pin feathers, it was alive and seeking nourishment.

If such guilt existed, it called for condign punishment and as God's instrument he must mete it out. But he was a righteous man and must first be certain. Therefore, he would not let her suspect his own doubts. If she were dissembling he would dissemble, too, but to a better end. In her this deceit was a sinful hypocrisy, but in him it would be as virtuous as the care with which the prosecutor cajoles the criminal into self-conviction. So he inquired with a reserved and indulgent suavity, "Are you particularly fond of that poem, my dear?"

Conscience gazed pensively away beyond the hillside, where the heat waves played, to the cool blue of the cove. Her manner impressed him as preoccupied.

"It has beauty, I think, and in some respects a true psychology. It recognizes that even straight-forward sin may be less ugly than hypocritical virtue."

All the prejudices of the man's illiberal code arose snarling, but he stifled their expression and, abandoning the immediate subject, turned absently back to the title page. "'Stuart to Conscience,'" he read reminiscently. "This book must be quite an old keepsake."

The Virginian's name had not been recently mentioned between them. There had been no agreement, tacit or otherwise, to that effect, but the wife had inferred that this was a topic which he was willing to have drop with the lapse of time out of their conversation. If he recurred to it now it must indicate that any vestiges of animus once entertained for Farquaharson had died. That was rather pleasing and generous, she thought.

"Yes, quite old," she responded with a smile.

Tollman nodded understandingly. A short while before he had been reading his Providence newspaper and a brief paragraph, which would otherwise have escaped his eye, had caught his attention like the red lantern at a railroad crossing—because it contained the name of Stuart Farquaharson. The lines were these: "'The Longest Way Round,' a comedy in three acts, by Stuart Farquaharson, will have its première at the Garrick Theater on Monday evening. After a road engagement the piece will be presented to Broadway early in the fall. The cast includes—" But Eben had not troubled about the cast. He was speculating just now upon whether his wife had seen the item—and if so whether she would speak of it.

"I wonder what has become of him," he suggested speculatively, and Conscience shook her head as she answered, "It's been a long while since I've heard of him."

If she had read the morning paper—and she usually read it—she must be lying. This circumstance the husband duly noted in the case which he was building up against her.

"I dare say he rather dropped out, socially speaking, after his escapade with that New York woman," he volunteered. "It was a pity."

"The reports we had about his conduct," defended Conscience with a

straightforward glance, "were grossly untrue. He suffered the effects of the circumstantial out of consideration for her."

"Indeed!" Tollman's voice was one of quickened interest, seemingly of pleased surprise. He was developing an excellent facility in the actor's art. "That is gratifying news. One likes to think well of an old friend, but how did you learn?"

The woman bit her lip. She had made her assertion in so categorical a form that to withhold her authority now meant to appear absurd, and she had not wished to betray the confidence of Marian Holbury. So she fell back on the alternative of a partial explanation.

"Mrs. Holbury herself explained the matter to me. It was a chapter of accidental appearances."

Tollman was gazing at his wife with brows incredulously arched but his scepticism appeared amused—almost urbane.

"But where in the world did you and Mrs. Holbury meet? Your orbits have no points of contact."

"She was driving to Provincetown—and stopped here."

"Ah!" Tollman might have been pardoned in making further inquiries, but already his plan of proceeding cautiously had seemed to supply him with such valuable points of evidence that he meant to continue the fruitful policy, so he contented himself with the casual inquiry, "Was this recently?"

"No, it was about two years ago."

Two years ago and until now she had never mentioned it! Then she *had*, through at least one ambassador, held communication with her lover. A moment ago she had declared herself without news of him. The woman whom he had trusted was at heart unfaithful. It was just as well that he had decided to assume the rôle of the blind man. Now he would proceed further and devise a trap into which she should unwittingly walk and from which there should be no escape.

A plan presented itself with the fully formulated swiftness of an inspiration. He would arrange a meeting between his wife and Farquaharson. He, himself, seemingly unsuspicious and fatuously trustful of demeanor, would observe them. He would throw them together—and when the truth was indisputably proven he would act.

Already the terrific force of the purely circumstantial was at work; a force which has sent innocent men by scores to prison and the scaffold. To the man who was to be both prosecutor and judge the links seemed to be joining nicely. Then with the force of a climax, a climax for which even he was unprepared, Conscience said, "Will you be using the car Monday?"

"I had meant to. Why?"

"I thought I'd go to Providence for some shopping. However, I can go by train."

Providence! Monday! The place and day of Stuart Farquaharson's opening with his comedy in three acts.

Yesterday such a suspicion would have seemed impossibly absurd. To-day he realized that yesterday he had been a blind fool.

"Do you mind my going with you?" He made the suggestion in a tentative, almost indifferent fashion. "I have some business with my bank there. I sha'n't be in your way."

That should give her pause, he thought, craftily pleased with himself. It should drive her back upon self-betrayal or a plausible objection. Incidentally it should indicate to her that he suspected nothing.

"I should be glad to have you go," she declared at once. "I want your opinion on hangings and furniture for the new guest room."

For an instant Tollman was bewildered. Her acquiescence seemed spontaneous and cordial, and since she was going for a clandestine meeting with her lover it should be neither. Perhaps, however, this only showed how swiftly her brain worked in intrigue.

Although Conscience had not, in fact, read the paper and knew nothing whatever of Stuart Farquaharson's presence in Providence, it must be confessed that, to a suspicious mind the circumstances built consistently to that conclusion.

In due time Eben wrote and mailed a brief note to Mr. Stuart Farquaharson at the Garrick Theater, Providence. It said:

> "My Dear Mr. Farquaharson: My wife requests me to invite you to join us for lunch on Monday at one at the Crown Hotel. We know you will be extremely busy, but we hope that the principle of Auld Lang Syne will

prevail and that you can spare us an hour."

On Sunday evening after Conscience had gone to her room, Eben Tollman sat in his study alone, except for his reflections, which were both numerous and active.

His note should reach the man to whom it was addressed on Monday morning. What would be the emotions of the recipient? He, of course, would already have an appointment with the wife, believing the husband to be totally deluded. The unwelcome discovery that instead of a tête-à-tête there was to be a censored meeting would in itself sadly alter matters, but what other construction would Stuart put upon the development? Would he assume that Conscience, fearing discovery, had sought to cover their plans under this excusing subterfuge? Would he imagine that the husband had possessed himself of the guilty secret and meant to confront him with an accusation? At whatever conclusion the lover arrived, Eben imagined Stuart pacing his room in a confused and thwarted anxiety. That was in itself a pleasurable reflection—but it was only the beginning. When the young Lothario met him he would find a man—to all seeming—childishly innocent of the facts and fondly incapable of suspicion. He, Eben Tollman, would lead them both slowly into self-conviction by as deliberate a campaign as that which had won him his wife in the first instance.

Stuart Farquaharson came into the hotel breakfast-room that Monday morning with dark rings under his eyes and an unaccustomed throb of pain in his temples. He wore the haggard aspect of one wrestling with a deep anxiety. Already about the tables were gathered a dozen or more men and women in whose faces one might have observed the same traces of fatigue. To Stuart Farquaharson they nodded with unanimous irritability, as though they held him responsible for their condition of unstrung exhaustion.

When the Virginian had ordered he sat gazing ahead of him with such troubled eyes that had he still been under the surveillance of the Searchlight Investigation Bureau, those keenly zestful observers would doubtless have reported the harrowed emotions of a guilty conscience. Soon, however, Stuart drew from his pocket a blue-bound and much-thumbed manuscript and fell to scribbling upon it with a stubby pencil. Into this preoccupied trance broke a somewhat heavy framed man whose smoothly-shaved face bore, despite traces of equal stress, certain remnants of an inexhaustible humor.

"Did you rewrite that scene in the third act?" he demanded briskly as he dropped into a vacant chair across the table and, with a side glance over his shoulder, added in the same breath, "Waiter, a baked apple and two eggs boiled three minutes—and don't take over two minutes on the job, see?"

As the servitor departed, grinning over the difficulties of his contract, Mr. Grady sent an appraising eye about the room and proceeded drily, "All present or accounted for, it seems—and Good Lord, how they love us! It's really touching—they're just like trained rattle-snakes."

"Can't say I blame 'em much," Farquaharson stifled a yawn. "Dress Rehearsal until two this morning followed by a call for line rehearsal again at eleven. When they get through that, if they ever do, there's nothing more except the strain of a first night."

Mr. Grady grinned. "That's the gay life of trouping. It's what girls leave home for. By the way, how much sleep did you get yourself?"

"About three hours."

"You'll feel fine by to-night when the merry villagers shout 'Author! Author!'" The heavy gentleman looked at his watch and added, with the producer's note of command, "When we finish here we'd better go to my room and see how the dialogue sounds in the rewritten scene."

Later Stuart sat in the empty auditorium of the theater where the sheeted chairs stretched off into a circle of darkness. The stage, naked of setting; the actors whose haggard faces looked ghastly beyond the retrievement of make-up; the noisy and belated frenzy of carpenters and stage crew: all these were sights and sounds grown so stale that he found it hard to focus his attention on those nuances of interpretation which would make or ruin his play. He was conscious only of a yearning to find some quiet place where there was shade along a sea beach, and there to lie down and die happily.

About noon Mr. Grady, who had for some purpose gone "back," resumed his seat at the author's side and, between incisive criticism shouted through his megaphone, suggested, in the contrast of a conversational tone, "Don't you ever look in your letter box? Here's mail for you."

Absently Stuart took the envelope and when the scene ended made his way to the light of the open stage door to investigate its contents. There, seeking asylum

from the greater heat of the wings he came upon the ingenue, indulging in the luxury of exhausted tears.

Farquaharson glanced at the note carelessly at first and the signature momentarily baffled him. Eben Tollman signed his name with such marked originality that it was almost as difficult to decipher as to forge.

But that was a minor and short-lived perplexity. It was indubitably Eben Tollman who had sent this invitation and he said that he did so at the request of his wife.

The face of Stuart Farquaharson, which had a moment before seemed incapable of any expression beyond lethargic fatigue, underwent so sudden a transformation that the ingenue interrupted her weeping to watch it. There was a prefatory blankness of sheer amazement followed by an upleaping of latent fires into the eyes; fires that held hints of revived hopes and suppressed yearnings. Within the moment this fitful light died again into a pained gravity. What was the use of reopening the perilous issues?

Of course he wanted to see her. He wanted to see her so intensely that to do so would be both foolish and dangerous. He had spent these years drilling himself into a discipline which should enable him to think of Conscience as someone outside his personal world. To see her now would be to set into eruption a volcano which he had meant that the years should render extinct. No one but himself could know by what a doubtful margin he had won his fight that day on the P. and O. steamer. Could he do it again with the sight of her in his eyes and the sound of her voice in his ears?

Yet, how could he without utter gracelessness decline?

The fashion of the invitation, communicated through the husband, proved its motive. Conscience wished to show him that she could receive cordially and with no misgivings as to the outcome. She probably wished also to assure him that from all possible charges, he was now absolved. These motives were all gracious, but, he admitted with a queer smile of suffering, their result was rather akin to cruelty. He decided that he must meet her in the same spirit and allow her to feel that, through her, his life had suffered no permanent scar. It was palpably a case for gentlemanly lying.

Though Eben's note to Farquaharson had said that Conscience requested him to extend the invitation, he had not yet mentioned to her the circumstance of its sending. He wished to study an unwarned face when she met Farquaharson. If

she attempted to flash a warning of any sort; if her words cleverly shaped themselves into forms of private meaning for the lover: he would be there to note and correlate.

During the morning's shopping Conscience had not seemed, to his narrow watching, impatient to separate from him, but shortly after noon she suggested, as though blaming herself for her previous remissness, "But you had business with your banker, didn't you? Doesn't that have to be seen to early?"

"There's an abundance of time," he hastened to assure her. "I can look after that matter after lunch. I expect a telephone call regarding it at one, which can reach me in the hotel dining-room—unless you prefer being alone."

But Conscience laughed.

"Prefer being alone? Why should I? It's something to have a man along who's willing to be bored and carry parcels."

As they entered the dining-room promptly on the hour, Conscience saw in the doorway the back and shoulders of a man who seemed to be searching the place for an acquaintance. In the bearing and erectness of the figure was something so familiar that it stabbed her with a sharp vividness of memory. She started and just then the man turned and she found herself face to face with Stuart Farquaharson.

The Virginian stepped promptly forward with hand extended and a smile of greeting, but for the moment Conscience neither advanced nor lifted her hand. She stood unmoving and wide-eyed as if she had seen a ghost and her cheeks went deadly pale.

"I only got your note a little while ago," he explained easily. "I am such a new hand at this theatrical game that I haven't learned yet to expect mail in the stage-door box. I hope I'm not inexcusably late."

But the woman still stood mystified and startled. When she did speak it was to repeat blankly, "My note? What note?"

Tollman had been standing a pace to the rear and his gaze, for all its schooling, was one of tense appraisal.

Now he smilingly interposed, "Let me explain, Mr. Farquaharson, I took the liberty of couching my invitation in my wife's name because I knew she shared

my wish to have you with us—but for her I reserved the pleasure of a complete surprise."

There was for an instant an awkward tableau of embarrassment. A flush of instinctive anger rose to Farquaharson's temples. He had come because he thought Conscience wished to show him that she was happy and he forgiven. Now it appeared that her wishes had not been consulted, and she stood there with an expression almost stricken. Tollman had been impertinent—if nothing worse.

To Eben Tollman it was all quite clear. Here was a guilty pair too confounded for immediate recovery. Farquaharson, being warned, was attempting to carry it off smoothly enough for both.

But immediately the color swept back into the woman's face and cordiality came to her lips and eyes. Taking the Virginian's hand she smiled also on her husband. The very fact that Eben did not realize her reasons for dreading such an encounter was a proof of his complete trust in her, and this surprise had been planned by him in advance for her pleasure.

"This is wonderful, Eben," she declared impulsively. "I was so astonished that it took my breath away. I didn't know, Stuart, that you were on this side of the ocean."

"Such is fame," laughed Farquaharson with a mock disappointment, "with my name on every ash barrel and every alley fence in this delightful city!"

They were acquitting themselves rather adroitly, under the circumstances, thought Eben, though their assumption of innocence was, perhaps, a shade overdone.

CHAPTER XXII

As they took their seats at the table reserved for them, a conflict of emotions made difficulty of conversation for two members of the trio.

Their prefatory talk ran along those lines of commonplace question and answer in which the wide gap between their last meeting and the present was bridged.

This, reflected Eben, was a part of the play designed to create and foster the impression that they had really been as completely out of touch as they pretended.

"And so you left us, an unknown, and return a celebrity!" Conscience's voice and eyes held a hint of raillery which made Stuart say to himself: "Thank God she has not let the fog make her colorless."—"When I saw you last you were starting up the ladder of the law toward the Supreme Court—and now you reappear, crowned with literary distinction."

A thought of those days when he had closed his law books and his house in Virginia to begin looking out on the roofs and chimney pots of old Greenwich village, rose to the Virginian's mind. It had all been an effort to forget. But he smiled as he answered.

"I'm afraid it's a little early to claim celebrity. To-morrow morning I may read in the Providence papers that I'm only notorious."

"You must tell me all about the play. You feel confident, of course?" she eagerly demanded. "It seems incredible that you were having your première here to-night and that I knew nothing of it—until now."

It not only seemed incredible, mused Eben: It *was* incredible. He was speculating upon what would have happened had he really been as blind as he was choosing to appear.

"They say," smiled Stuart, "that every playwright is confident at his first opening—and never afterwards."

It was hard for him to carry on a censored conversation, sitting here at the table with his thoughts falling into an insistent refrain. He had always known

Conscience Williams and this was Conscience Tollman. He had told himself through years that he had succeeded ill in his determined effort of forgetting her; yet now he found her as truly a revelation in the vividness of her charm and the radiance of her beauty as though he had brought faint memories—or none—to the meeting. His blood was tingling in his arteries with a rediscovery which substituted for the old sense of loss a new and more poignant realization. It would have been better had he been brusque, even discourteous, replying to the morning's invitation that he was too busy to accept. But he had come and except for that first moment of astonishment Conscience had been gay and untroubled. She at least was safe from the perils which this reunion held for him. So, as he chatted, he kept before his thoughts like a standard seen fitfully through the smoke of battle the reminder, "She must feel, as she wishes to feel, that it has left me unscathed."

"But, Stuart," exclaimed Conscience suddenly, "all these night-long rehearsals and frantic sessions of rewriting must be positive deadly. You look completely fagged out."

Farquaharson nodded. His weariness, which excitement had momentarily mitigated had returned with a heavy sense of dreariness. He was being called upon now not to rehearse a company in the interpreting of his three-act comedy, but to act himself, without rehearsal, in a drama to which no last act could bring a happy ending.

"I *am* tired," he admitted. "But to-night tells the story. Whichever way it goes I'll have done all I can do about it. Then I mean to run away somewhere and rest. After all fatigue is not fatal."

But Mrs. Tollman was looking at the ringed and shadowed eyes and they challenged her ready sympathy. This was not the splendidly fit physical specimen she had known.

"Yes, you must do that," she commanded gravely, then added in a lighter voice: "I'd always thought of the first night of a new play as a time of keen exhilaration and promise for both author and star."

"Our star is probably indulging in plain and fancy hysterics at this moment," he said with a memory of the last glimpse he had had of that illustrious lady's face. "And as for the author, he is dreaming chiefly of some quiet spot where one can lie stretched on the beach whenever he isn't lying in his bed." He paused, then added irrelevently, "I was thinking this morning of the way the breakers roll in

across the bay from Chatham."

Eben had been the listener, a rôle into which he usually fell when conversation became general, but now he assumed a more active participation.

"Chatham is quite a distance from us, Mr. Farquaharson," he suggested, "but it's only about two hundred yards from our terrace to the float in the cove. However, you know that cove yourself."

Into Farquaharson's face came the light of keen remembrance. Yes, he knew that cove. He and Conscience had often been swimming there. He wondered if, on a clear day, one could still see the schools of tiny fishes twelve feet below in water translucently blue.

"Yes," he acknowledged, "I haven't forgotten the cove. It opens through a narrow channel into the lesser bay and there used to be an eel pot near the opening. Is that eel pot still there?"

Eben Tollman smiled. His manner was frankly gracious, while it escaped effusiveness.

"Well, now, Mr. Farquaharson," he suggested, "I can't say as to that, but why don't you come and investigate for yourself? You can leave by the noon train to-morrow and be with us in a little over two hours—I wish we could wait and see your play this evening, but I'm afraid I must get back to-day."

An instinctive sense of courtesy alone prevented Stuart's jaw from dropping in amazement. He remembered Eben Tollman as a dour and illiberal bigot whom the community called mean and whom no man called gracious. Had Conscience, by the sunlight of her spontaneity and love wrought this miracle of change? If so she was more wonderful than even he had admitted.

"It's good of you, Mr. Tollman," he found himself murmuring, "but I'm afraid that's hardly possible."

"Hardly possible? Nonsense!" Tollman laughed aloud this time. "Why, you've just been telling us that you were on the verge of running away somewhere to rest—and that the only undecided point was a choice of destination."

Stuart glanced hurriedly toward Conscience as if for assistance, but her averted and tranquil face told him nothing. Yet under her unruffled composure swirled a whirlpool of agitation and apprehension, greater than his own.

In a spirit of amazement, she had heard her husband tender his invitation.

Now as Stuart sat across the table, she was rediscovering many little tricks of individuality which had endeared him as a lover, or perhaps been dear because he was her lover, and in the sum of these tremendous trifles lay a terrific danger which she did not underestimate. His presence would mean comparison; contrast between drab reality and rainbow longings.

But how could she hint any of these things to the husband who, by his very invitation, was proving his complete trust, or the lover to whom she must seem the confidently happy wife?

"I'm sure Conscience joins me in insisting that you come," went on Mr. Tollman persuasively. "You can wear a flannel shirt and do as you like because we are informal folk—and you would be a member of the family."

That was rather a long speech for Eben Tollman, and as he finished Conscience felt the glances of both men upon her, awaiting her confirmation.

She smiled and Stuart detected no flaw in the seeming genuineness of her cordiality.

"We *know* he likes the place," she announced in tones of whimsical bantering, "and if he refuses it must mean that he doesn't think much of the people."

Stuart was so entirely beguiled that his reply came with instant repudiation of such a construction.

"When to-morrow's train arrives," he declared, "I will be a passenger, unless an indignant audience lynches me to-night."

They had meant to meet surreptitiously, mused Eben Tollman, and being thwarted, they had juggled their conversation into an exaggeration of innocence. Conscience's face during that first unguarded moment in the dining-room had mirrored a terror which could have had no other origin than a guilty love. His own course of conduct was clear. He must, no matter how it tried his soul, conceal every intimation of suspicion. The geniality which had astonished them both must continue with a convincing semblance of genuineness. Out of a pathetic blindness of attitude he must see, eagle-eyed.

But Conscience, as they drove homeward, was reflecting upon the frequent miscarriage of kindness. Her husband had planned for her a delightful surprise

and his well-meaning gift had been—a crisis.

Stuart sat that night in the gallery of the Garrick theater with emotions strangely confused.

Below him and about him was such an audience as characterizes those towns which are frequently used as experimental stations for the drama. It regarded itself as sophisticated in matters theatrical and was keenly alive to the fact that it sat as a jury which must not be too provincially ready of praise.

Yet the author, hiding there beyond reach of the genial Grady, and the possibility of a curtain call, was not thinking solely of his play. Stones had been rolled to-day from tombs in which he had sought to bury many ghosts of the past. With the resurrection came undeniable fears and equally undeniable flashes of instinctive elation. He was seeing Conscience, not across an interval of years but of hours—and to-morrow he was to see her again.

When the first act ended the man who had written the comedy became conscious that he had followed its progress with an incomplete absorption, and when the curtain fell, to a flattering salvo of applause, he came, with a start, back from thoughts foreign to the theater.

The conclusion of the second act, with its repeated curtain calls and its cries of "Author, Author!" assured him that his effort was not a failure, and when at last it was all over and he stood in the wings congratulating the members of his company, the wine of assured success tingled in his veins—and his thoughts were for the moment of that alone.

"They don't hate us quite so much now," said Mr. Grady as he clapped a hand on Stuart's shoulder. "The thing is a hit—and for once I've got a piece that I can take into town without tearing it to pieces and doing it over."

Yet in his room afterward he paced the floor restively for a long while before he sought his bed.

He was balancing up the sheets of his life to date. On the credit side were such successes as most men would covet, but on the debit side stood one item which offset the gratification and left a heavy balance.

This visit of to-morrow was a foolish thing. It might be wiser to telegraph Tollman that unexpected matters had developed, necessitating a change of plan.

It is a rash courage which courts disaster. From the small writing desk near his bed he took a telegraph blank, but when he had written, torn up and rewritten the message he halted and stood dubiously considering the matter. The hand which had been lifted to ring for a bell-boy fell at his side.

After all this was simply a running away from the forms of danger while the danger itself remained. Into such action Conscience must read his fear to trust himself near her—and he had undertaken to make her feel secure in her own contentment. It was too late to draw back now. He must go through with it—but he would make his stay brief and every moment must be guarded.

At noon the next day he dropped, clad in flannels, from the train at the station. It had been a hot trip, but even with a cooler temperature he might not have escaped that slight moisture which excitement and doubt had brought to his temples and his palms.

These miles of railway travel since he had reached the Cape had been so many separate reminders of the past and he had not arrived unshaken.

But there on the platform stood Conscience Tollman, with a serene smile of welcome on her lips, and as the chauffeur took his bags she led him to the waiting car.

"Come on," she said, as though there had been no lapse of years since they had stood here before, "there's just time to get into our bathing suits and have a swim before luncheon."

The main street of the village with the shade of its elms and silver oaks, and the white of tidy houses, setting among flowers, was a page out of a book long closed; a book in which had been written the most unforgettable things of life. Besides well-remembered features, there were details which had been forgotten and which now set free currents of reminiscence—such as the battered figurehead of an old schooner raised on high over a front door and a wind-mill as antique of pattern as those to which Don Quixote gave battle.

And when the winding street ran out into a sandy country road Stuart found himself amid surroundings that teemed with the spirit of the past.

But over all the bruising comparisons of past and present, the peace of the sky was like a benediction, and his weariness yielded to its calming influence. He had been away and had come back tired, and for the present, it was better to

ignore all the revolutionary changes that lay between then and now.

They talked about trivial things, along the way, with a lightness of manner, which was none the less as delicately cautious as the footsteps of a cat walking on a shelf of fragile china. Each felt the challenge and response of natures keyed to the same pitch of life's tuning fork.

"Why are all the Cape Cod wagons painted blue and all the barn doors green?" asked the man, and Conscience demanded in return, "Why does everything that man controls in New England follow a fixed color of thought?"

When the car drew up before the house which he remembered as a miser's abode, his astonishment was freshly stirred. Here was a place transformed, with a dignified beauty of residence and grounds which could scarcely be bettered.

"How did the play go?" demanded Tollman from the doorway, with an interest that seemed as surprising as that of a Trappist Abbot for a matter of worldliness. "The papers came on the train with you, so we haven't had the verdict, yet."

And then while Stuart was answering Conscience enjoined him that, if they were to swim before lunch, time was scant and these amenities must wait.

"Aren't you going in?" demanded the visitor and the host shook his head with an indulgent smile.

"No," he answered. "That's for you youngsters. I may drop down to the float later, but, barring accident, I stay out of salt water."

CHAPTER XXIII

Less in words than by a subtle though unmistakable manner, the husband made it clear to Stuart Farquaharson that his status in this establishment was to be as intimately free as if he had been the brother instead of the former lover of Conscience. It was difficult to reconcile this unqualified acceptance with every impression he had formed of Eben, and while he unpacked his bag in his bedroom a sense of perplexity lingered with him. But as he was changing into his bathing suit a solution presented itself which seemed to bear the stamp of four-square logic.

Eben Tollman was neither the ogre he had formerly seemed nor yet the utterly careless husband that his present conduct appeared to indicate. He had simply recognized in the days of Stuart's ascendancy something akin to disdain in the Virginian's attitude toward him. Now time had demonstrated which was the victor, and Tollman was permitting his pride the pardonable gratification of showing the younger man its security and confidence.

Conscience had not yet appeared when Stuart came down, and neither was Eben in evidence, so the visitor stood in the open door with the summer breeze striking gratefully against his bare arms and legs until he heard a laugh at the stair-head and wheeled to look quickly up. The picture he saw there made his heart beat fast and brought a sudden fire into his eyes.

Conscience stood above him with her arms lifted in an attitude of one about to dive and in the gay colors of her bathing dress and cap; in the untrammeled grace of slender curves she seemed the spirit of vivid allurement. With an answering laugh the man stepped to the lower landing and raised his own arms.

"Come on!" he challenged. "Jump, I'll catch you."

But as suddenly as though he had been struck, he dropped his arms at his sides, realizing the wild, almost ungovernable impulse which had swept him to take her in his arms in contempt of every consideration except the violence of his wish to do so. Moments like this were unsettling—and to be guarded against.

Then she had come down to the hall and he was on his knees, as he had been on that other day at Chatham, tying the ribbons of her bathing slippers with fingers

that were none too steady.

But while they dived in water which was almost unbelievably blue and clear, they might have been two children as irresponsibly full of sheer zest and sparkle as the bubbles that leaped brightly up from their out-thrust and dripping arms. Forty minutes later Stuart was following her up the twisting path between pines and bayberry bushes while the salt water streamed from them.

Eben Tollman had not after all found time to join them at the float, and glancing up from his chair on the terrace where he sat almost completely surrounded by a disarray of daily papers, he was now somewhat disconcerted at their early return.

He had been inwardly writhing in a tortured frame of mind which their arrival brought a necessity for masking and the things which had made him so writhe had been the reviews in these papers of "The Longest Way Round."

Eben was not an habitual reader of dramatic comment. The theater itself he regarded as an amusement designed for minds more tinctured with childish frivolity than his own.

Yet since Conscience and Stuart had left the house he had been mulling over, with the fascination of a rising gorge and a bitter resentment, paragraphs of encomium upon his hated guest. Had he ever indulged himself in the luxury of profanity it would have gushed now in torrents of curses over Stuart Farquaharson, upon whom life seemed to lavish her gifts with as reckless a prodigality as that of a licentious monarch for an unworthy favorite.

"Nothing but applause!" exclaimed Eben to himself, with a quiet madness of vituperation—entirely unconscious of any taint of falsity or injustice. "He makes no effort beyond the easy things of self-indulgence, yet because he has a supercilious charm, he parades through life seizing its prizes! Women love him—men praise him—and every step is a forward step!"

He had, indeed, been reading no ordinary words of praise, bestowed with the critic's usual guardedness. In Providence last night the unusual had occurred and the reviewers had found themselves acclaiming a new luminary in the firmament of present-day playwrights. Later the men with New York reputations would be claiming Stuart Farquaharson's discovery, and here in the Rhode Island town they had recognized him first. They had no intention of relinquishing that distinction which goes with the first clear heralding of a rising genius.

As Eben Tollman read these details in cold type, each note of their eulogium scorched a nerve of his own jealous antipathy. Of course, Conscience would take all this flattery, spread before her lover, as a mark of genuine merit—as the conqueror's cloth of gold. It seemed that he himself had succeeded in bringing Stuart on the scene only that the woman might smell the incense being burned in his honor.

But Eben regulated his features into a calm and indulgent smile as the two of them came across the clipped lawn.

They made a splendid pair with the sun shining on their wet shoulders; the woman's neck and arms gleaming softly with the tint of browned ivory; the man's tanned and strong over rippling muscles. Their drenched bathing suits emphasized the delicacy of her rounded curves, and his almost Hellenic fitness of body.

"I've been reading what the critics say, and my congratulations are ready," announced the elder man calmly with a semblance of sincerity. "It would appear that last night was a triumph."

For the next few days Stuart Farquaharson surrendered himself to the *dolce far niente* of salt air and sun and the joy of their reviving influences. All contingent dangers he was satisfied to leave to the future.

There was a new and spontaneous gayety in the woman's manner, but the Virginian did not know that it was new. Eben Tollman, however, marked the contrast and was at no loss in attributing it to its fancied cause. He gave no thought to the truth that she was splendidly striving to keep flying at the mast-head of her life the colors of artificial success.

So each in his own way, Eben and Stuart were deceived by Conscience, one believing her indubitably guilty and the other thinking her unquestionably happy.

In the elder man a ferment of bitterness was working toward the ends of deranged deviltry—and its influence was all secret so that its tincture of insanity left no mark upon his open behavior.

The difficulty of maintaining a surface guise of friendliness toward the man whom he believed to be successfully wrecking his home might have appeared insuperable. In point of the actual it was made easy—even a thing of zest—by virtue of a lapse into that moral degeneracy which was no longer sane. The

growth of craftiness for the forwarding of a single idea became uncanny in its purposeful efficiency and a morbid pleasure to its possessor. Eben seemed outwardly to have lain aside his strait-jacket of bigotry and to have become singularly humanized.

One afternoon Stuart and Conscience went for an all-day sail. The husband had promised to accompany them, but at the last moment pleaded an excuse. It was in his plan to continue his seeming of entire trustfulness—and nothing better furthered that attitude than sending them away together in the close companionship of a sail boat—while, in reality, the presence of Ira Forman, tending tiller and sheet, was as effective as the watchfulness of a duenna or the guardianship of a harem's chief eunuch.

Ira Forman rose from his task of packing the luncheon paraphernalia on the white beach near a life-saving station. He had regaled them as they picniced with narratives of shipwreck and tempest, swelling with the prideful importance of a singer of sagas. Now he bit into a plug which looked like a chunk of black cake and spat into the sand.

"See that boat over yon in the norrer channal? You wouldn't never suspicion that a one-armed man was sailin' her now, would you?"

"No!" Stuart spoke with the rising inflection of a flattering interest. "Has he only one arm?"

Ira's nod was solemnly affirmative. "He shot the other one off oncet while he was a-gunnin' and, in a manner of speakin', it was the makin' of him. Until he lost his right hand an' had to figure out methods of doin' double shift with the left, he wasn't half as smart as what he is now. In a manner of speakin' it made a man of him."

The amused glance which flashed between Conscience and her companion at this bit of philosophy was quickly stifled as they recognized the gravity which sat upon the face of its enunciator, and Stuart inquired in all seriousness, "But how does he manage it? There's mains'l and jib and tiller—not to mention center board and boom-crotch—and sometimes the reef-points."

The boatman nodded emphatically. "But he does it though. He's educated his feet an' his teeth to do things God never meant 'em to." Then in a voice of naïve emphasis he demanded, "Did either one of you ever lose anything that belonged to you? I mean somethin' that was a part of yourselves—somethin' that was just

tore out by the roots, like?"

Stuart wondered uneasily if the stiffness of his expression was not a thing which Conscience could read like print; if the simple-minded clam-digger had not quite unintentionally ripped away the mask which he had, until now, worn with a reasonable success.

But Conscience had missed the moment of self-betrayal because an identical anxiety had for the instant blinded her intuition.

"Wa'al," continued Ira complacently, "I ain't never lost a leg nor yet an arm—but, in a manner of speakin', I cal'late I know just round about what it's like. A feller's life ain't never the same ag'in. That man that's handlin' that boat now—he wasn't worth much to hisself nor nobody else a'fore he went a-gunnin', that time."

He paused, wondering vaguely why his simple recital had brought a constrained silence, where there had been laughter and voluble conversation, then feeling that the burden of talk lay with him, he resorted to repetition.

"The reason I spoke the way I did just now was I wondered if either one of you ever had anything like that happen to you. Not that I presumed you'd ever lost a limb—but there's lots of other things folks can lose that hurts as much; things that can be hauled out by the roots, like; things that don't never leave people quite the same afterwards."

Stuart smiled, though with a taint of ruefulness.

"I guess, Ira," he agreed, "almost everybody has lost something."

Ira stood nodding like a China mandarin, then suddenly he came out of his preoccupation to announce:

"I'll begin fetchin' all this plunder back to the boat now. I cal'late to catch the tide in about half an hour. You folks had better forelay to come aboard by then."

Conscience and Stuart strolled along the stretch of beach until, around a jutting elbow of sand dunes, the woman halted by a blackened fragment of a ship's skeleton. She sat for a while looking out with a reminiscent amusement in her eyes—and something more cryptic.

The man turned his gaze inward to the green of the beach-grass beyond the sand where he could make out a bit of twisting road. There was something

tantalizingly familiar about that scrap of landscape; something which stirred yet eluded a memory linked with powerful associations.

Then abruptly it all came back.

His car had been standing just at that visible stretch of road on the afternoon when Conscience had begged him not to criticize her father and he had retorted bitterly. He could see again the way in which she had flinched and hear again the voice in which she had replied, "You know why I listen to him, Stuart. You know that I didn't listen ... before his stroke. I didn't listen when I told him that if you went, I went, too, did I?"

That was long ago. Now she was studying him with a grave scrutiny as she inquired, "I've been wondering, Stuart, why you have never married. You ought to have a home."

The man averted his face quickly and pretended to be interested in the vague shape of a steamer almost lost in the mists that lay along the horizon. Those sweetly curved lips had been torturing him with their allurement. From them he wanted kisses—not dispassionate counsel—but he replied abstractedly:

"I'm a writer of fiction, Conscience. Such persons are under suspicion of being unstable—and temperamental. Matrimonially they are considered bad risks."

Her laughter rang with a teasing mockery, but, had he known it, she had caught and been startled by that absorption which had not been wholly banished from his eyes. It was not yet quite a discovery, but still it was something more than a suspicion—that he still loved her. In its breaking upon her was a strange blending of fright and elation and it directed her subsequent questions into channels that might bring revelations to her intuition.

"I've known you for some time, Stuart," she announced with a whimsical smile which made her lips the more kissable. "Much too long for you to attempt the pose of a Don Juan. I hate to shatter a romance, but the fact is, you are perfectly sane—and you could be reliably constant."

This constancy, he reflected, had already cost him the restlessness of a Salathiel, but his response was more non-committal than his thought.

"If my first reason is rejected," he said patiently, "I suppose I must give another. A writer must be absolutely unhampered—at least until his storehouse is well stocked with experience."

"Being unattached isn't being unhampered," she persisted with a spirited flash in her eyes. "It's just being—incomplete."

"Possibly I'm like Ira's one-armed man," he hazarded. "Maybe 'in a manner of speakin' I wouldn't be half as smart as what I am' if I didn't have to face that affliction."

But with her next question Conscience forced him from his defense of jocular evasiveness.

"Did you know, Stuart, that—that Mrs. Holbury came to see me?"

He feared that she had caught his flinch of surprise at that announcement but he replied evenly:

"Marian wrote to me that she had seen you. How you two happened to meet, I have never guessed."

"She came here, Stuart, to explain things which she thought put you in an unsightly light—and to say that whatever blame there was belonged to her."

"She did that?" Stuart Farquaharson's face reddened to the temples and his voice became feelingly defensive. "If Marian told you that she had been more to blame than I, she let her generosity do her a wrong. I can't accept an advantage gained at such a cost, Conscience. I think all of her mistakes grew out of an exaggerated innocence and she's paid high enough for them. Marian Holbury is a woman who needs no defense unless it's against pure slander."

"Stuart," Conscience's voice was deep with earnestness, "a woman only sets herself a task like that because she loves a man."

"Oh, no," he hastily demurred. "It may be from friendship, too."

But his companion shook her head. "With her it was love. She told me so."

"Told you so!" Farquaharson echoed the words in tones of almost militant incredulity, and Conscience went on thoughtfully:

"I was wondering if, after all, she might not make you very happy—and might not be very happy herself in doing it."

If she was deliberately hurting him it was not out of a light curiosity or any meanness of motive. Her own tranquillity was severely pressed, but she must

know the truth, and if a love for herself, which could come to no fruition, stood between him and possible happiness, she must do what she could to sweep it away. This was a new thought, but a grave one.

For a while Stuart was silent, as he studied the high colors of the sea and sky, contracting his eyes as if the glare pained them, and in his face Conscience read, clear, the truth of her suspicion.

"Conscience," he said at last, "I asked Marian to marry me two years ago—and she refused. That's all I can say."

But for the woman it was enough. She needed no explanation of why Marian had refused an offer from the lips and unseconded by the heart. She came to her feet, and her knees felt weak. She was afraid to let this conversation progress. He loved her—and if he could read the prohibited eagerness of her heart he would come breaking through barriers as a charging elephant breaks its way through light timber.

"Ira is calling," she announced lightly, "and he speaks with the voice of the tide. We must hurry or we won't make it back across the shallows."

CHAPTER XXIV

But that night it happened, as it had happened once before, that the stars seemed exaggerated in size and multiplied in number. On the breeze came riding the distant voice of the surf with its call to staring wakefulness and restlessness of spirit.

Conscience went early to her room, feeling that unless her taut nerves could have the relaxation of solitude, she must scream out. To-day's discovery had kindled anew all the fires of insurgency that burned in her, inflaming her heart to demand the mating joy which could make of marriage not a formula of duty and hard allegiance, but a splendid and rightful fulfillment.

As she sat by the window of her unlighted room, her eyes were staring tensely into the night and the pink ovals of her nails were pressed into the palms of her hands. Her gaze, as if under a spell of hypnosis, was following the glow of a cigar among the pines, where Stuart was seeking to walk off the similar unrest which made sleep impossible. "He still loves me," she kept repeating to herself with a stunned realization, "he still loves me!"

She hoped fervently that Eben was asleep. To have to talk to him while her strained mood was so full of rebellion would be hard; to have to submit to his autumnal kiss, would make that mood blaze into revulsion.

But at last she heard a footfall on the stair and in the hall and held her breath in a sort of terror as they ended just outside her threshold. She knew that Eben was trying her door—trying it first without knocking after his churlish custom. She hoped that he would pass on when darkness and silence were his answers, but after a moment came a rap and when it met with no reply it was repeated with a peremptory insistence. Conscience drew a long breath, and, shivering with distaste, she slowly lighted a candle. Then she went shudderingly to the door and opened it.

In the stress of the moment, as she shot back the bolt, she surrendered for just an instant to her feelings; feelings which she had never before allowed expression even in the confessional of her thoughts. She knew now how Heloise had felt when she wildly told herself that she would rather be mistress of Abelarde than wife to the King.

Eben standing in the doorway, smiling, seemed to her disordered mood the figure of a Satyr.

"I've had a letter from Ebbett," Tollman commented one day at luncheon. "Like Stuart here, he's been working too hard and he wants to know if he can run down for the week-end."

When Conscience had declared her approval the host turned to Farquaharson. "I shouldn't wonder if you'd like Ebbett. We were classmates at college, and he was my best man. Aside from that, he's one of the leading exponents, in this country, of the newer psychology—a disciple of Freud and Jung, and while many of his ideas strike me as extreme they are often interesting."

The prophecy proved more than true, for with Dr. Ebbett as a guide, Farquaharson gratified that avid interest which every sincere writer must feel for explorations into new fields of thought.

One evening the two sat alone on the terrace in the communion of lighted cigars and creature comfort long after their host and hostess had gone to their beds, and Ebbett said thoughtfully, and without introduction:

"It seems to have worked out. And God knows I'm glad, because I had my misgivings."

"What has worked out?" inquired the younger man and the neurologist jerked his head toward the house.

"This marriage," he said. "When I came to the wedding, I could not escape a heavy portent of danger. There was the difference in age to start with and it was heightened by Eben's solemn and grandiose tendencies. His nature had too much shadow—not enough sunlight. The girl on the other hand had a vitality which was supernormal."

He paused and Stuart Farquaharson, restrained by a flood of personal reminiscence, said nothing. Finally the doctor went on:

"But there was more than that. I'm a Massachusetts man myself, but Eben is—or was—in type, too damned much the New Englander."

Stuart smiled to himself, but his prompting question came in the tone of commonplace.

"Just what does that mean to you, Doctor—too much the New Englander?"

Ebbett laughed. "I use the word only as a term—as descriptive of an intolerance which exists everywhere, north and south, east and west—but in Eben it was exaggerated. Fortunately, his wife's exuberance of spirit seems to have brightened it into normality."

"But what, exactly, did you fear, Doctor?"

"I'm afraid I'd have to grow tediously technical to make that clear, but if you can stand it, I'll try."

"I wish you would," the younger man assured him.

Dr. Ebbett leaned back and studied the ash of his cigar. "Have you ever noticed in your experience," he abruptly demanded, "that oftentimes the man who most craftily evades his taxes or indulges in devious business methods, cannot bring himself to sanction any of the polite and innocent lies which society accepts as conventions?"

Stuart nodded and the physician went on:

"In short we encounter, every day, the apparent hypocrite. Yet many such men are not consciously dishonest. They are merely victims of disassociation."

"I'm afraid," acknowledged Stuart, "I'm still too much the tyro to understand the term very fully."

"None of us understand it as fully as we'd like," Dr. Ebbett assured him. "But we are gradually learning. In every man's consciousness there is a stream of thought which we call the brain content. Below the surface of consciousness, there is a second stream of thought as unrecognized as a dream, but none the less potent."

The speaker paused and Farquaharson waited in silence for him to continue.

"The broader a man's habit of thought," went on the physician slowly, "the fewer impulses he is called upon to repress because he is frank. The narrower his code, the more things there are which are thrust down into his proscribed list of inhibitions. The peril lies in the fact that this stream of repressed thought is acting almost as directly on the man's life and conduct, as the one of which he is

constantly aware. He has more than one self, and since he admits but one, the others are in constant and secret intrigue, against him."

"And this makes for unconscious hypocrisy?"

"Undoubtedly. Such a man may be actively dishonest and escape all sense of guilt because he has in his mind logic-proof compartments in which certain matters are kept immured and safe from conflict with the reason that he employs for other affairs. It was this exact quirk of lopsided righteousness which enabled our grandsires to burn witches while they sang psalms."

"You think our host is of the type most susceptible to such a danger?"

"Yes, because the intolerant man always stands on the border of insanity."

"But, Doctor," Stuart put his question with a keenly edged interest, "for such a condition as you describe, is there a cure, or is it only a matter of analysis?"

"Ah," replied Ebbett gravely, "that's a large question. Usually a cure is quite possible, but it always depends upon the uncompromising frankness of the patient's confessions. He must strip his soul naked before we can help him. If we can trace back into subconsciousness and identify the disturbing influences, they resolve themselves into a sore that has been lanced. They are no longer making war from the darkness—and with light they cease to exist."

As the neurologist broke off the aged and decrepit dog for which Eben Tollman had discovered no fondness until it had been exiled to the garage, came limping around the corner of the terrace and licked wistfully at Stuart's knee.

"That dog," commented the physician, "ought to be put out of his misery. He's a hopeless cripple and he needs a merciful dose of morphine. I'll mention it to Eben."

"It would be a gracious act," assented the younger man. "Life has become a burden to the old fellow."

Dr. Ebbett rose and tossed his cigar stump outward. "We've been sitting here theorizing for hours after the better-ordered members of the household have gone to their beds," he said. "It's about time to say good night." And the two men climbed the stairs and separated toward the doors of their respective rooms.

Dr. Ebbett left just after breakfast the next day, but on the verge of his departure

he remembered and mentioned the dog.

"I've been meaning to shoot him," confessed Tollman, "but I've shrunk from playing executioner."

"Shooting is an awkward method," advised the doctor. "I have here a grain and a half of morphine in quarter-grain tablets. They will cause no suffering. They are readily soluble, won't be tasted, and will do the work."

"How much shall I give? I don't want to bungle it."

"It's simply a question of dosage. Let him have a half grain, I shouldn't care to give that much to either a dog or a man—unless a drug habitué—without expecting death—but there's the car and it's been a delightful visit."

Possibly some instinct warned the superannuated dog of his master's design. At all events he was never poisoned—he merely disappeared, and for the mystery of his fading from sight there was no solution.

The case for the prosecution was going well, thought Eben Tollman, and building upward step by step toward a conviction. But step by step, too, was growing the development of his own condition toward madness, the more grewsomely terrible because its monomania gave no outward indication.

One evening as the three sat on the terrace, it pleased Eben Tollman to regale them with music. He was not himself an instrumentalist, but in the living-room was a machine which supplied that deficiency, and this afternoon had brought a fresh consignment of records from Boston. This, too, was a night of stars, but rather of languorous than disquieting influences, and the talk had flowed along in serenity, until gradually, under the spell of the music the two younger members of the trio fell musingly silent.

Tollman had chosen a program out of which breathed a potency of passion and allurement. Voices rich with the gold of love's abandon sang the songs of composers, wholly dedicated to love's own form of expression.

Stuart Farquaharson's cigar had gone out and he sat meditative in the shadows of the terrace—himself a shadowy shape, with his eyes fixed upon Conscience, and Conscience, too, remained quiet with that unstirring stillness which bespeaks a

mood of dreams. Something in the air, subtle yet powerful, was working upon them its influence.

"Eben seems to be in a sentimental mood this evening," suggested Farquaharson at last, bringing himself with something of a wrench out of his abstraction and speaking in a matter-of-fact voice. He remembered belatedly that his cigar had gone out and as he relighted it there was a slight trembling of his fingers.

"Yes, doesn't he?" Mrs. Tollman's laugh held a trace of nervous tremor, too. "And I remember saying once that that was just as possible as the idea of Napoleon going into a monastery."

"Are we going to swim before breakfast to-morrow?" asked the man, distrusting himself just now with topics touching the past and sentiment.

"Suppose we walk down to the float and have a look at the state of the tide," she suggested. "Then as Ira would say we can 'fore-lay' for the morning."

CHAPTER XXV

AS they went together down the steep path, there was no flaw in the woman's composure and no fault in the lightness of her manner, but when they reached the float, with the dark water fall of mirrored stars she turned abruptly so that she stood face to face with the man. In the light of the crescent moon he saw that her eyes were wide and full of a deep seriousness. For a moment she did not speak and recognizing the light of fixed resolve and the attitude of steeling herself for some ordeal, he also refrained from words until she should choose her moment.

There was an ethereal quality in the beauty of her pale face, jet-crowned in the starlight, and a Jeanne d'Arc gallantry in the straightness of her slender figure. When at last she began to speak it was in a low voice, vibrant with repression, but unwavering and full of purpose.

"Stuart," she said, "I am going to call on you to help me, by being all that a friend can be—by proving your loyalty and obeying a command that's very hard to give ... by obeying it without even asking why."

"Command me," he said quietly, and for just a moment there was a threat of faltering in her manner, as though the edict were indeed too hard, but almost at once she went on in a firm voice.

"You must go away. You must go to-morrow. That's what I brought you down here to tell you."

"Of course, I have no choice but obedience," he replied simply. "But I can't go without asking questions and having them answered."

"Yes, you must."

"Why are you sending me away?"

"I hoped it would be possible," she said as her dark eyes filled with pain and conflict, "for this visit to end without these things having to be said. I hoped you'd just go away without finding out.... I've done my best and tried to play the part ... but I can't keep it up forever.... Now I'm asking your help."

"Conscience," he reminded her, and his tone held a sympathy which discounted

his stubbornness in demanding the full reasons for her decision, "I don't want to press you with questions when you ask me, in the name of friendship, not to do it ... but—" He paused a moment and continued with a shake of his head. "We must be honest with each other. Once before we let a failure to fully understand separate us. I can't make the same life-wrecking mistake twice. Don't you see that I must know why I am being banished?"

Slowly she nodded her head in reluctant assent. Her figure seemed to waver as with faintness, but when Stuart reached out his arms to catch her, she stepped back and stood with regained steadiness.

"I suppose ..." she acknowledged, "I must be fully honest with you.... I suppose I was only trying to make it easier for myself ... and that I must face it fully."

"Face just what, Conscience?"

"The facts. When you came, Stuart, I believed that you had been cured of the old heartbreak. I believed it until—the other day when we talked about Marian Holbury—then I knew—that you were still in love with me."

Farquaharson's face paled and his lips tightened.

"I had tried," he said slowly, "to let you think the things which might make you happier—but I don't seem to be a good actor."

"You were a splendid actor, Stuart, but you had a woman's intuition against you."

He remained looking across the water for a while before he replied, in a hurt tone.

"I understand. Now that you've discovered the truth ... I must go because you could entertain the friend ... but not the lover.... Even if the lover could maintain his attitude in everything but thought."

But Conscience shook her head.

"No, you don't understand yet ... must you still have the whole truth ... even if I tell you that you can serve me best by not asking it?"

"I must have it, because I am honest in believing that I can serve you best by knowing it all."

"Very well." She raised her hands in a half-despairing gesture and into her eyes

welled a flood of passion as if a dam had broken and made concealment futile. Her words came with a low thrill, and the man's brain swam with an ecstatic sense of discovery which for the moment obscured all other thought.

"You must go, Stuart, because the basis we met on has been destroyed. You must go because—because it isn't just that you love me, but that we love each other."

"Conscience!" The name broke from his lips with the ringing triumph of a bugle-call, and he had almost seized her in instinctive embrace, but she put out her own hands and pressed them, at arms length, against his breast as though to hold him off. Her eyes met the burning eagerness of his gaze with a resolved and unshakable steadiness.

"Please—" she said very quietly. "Please don't make me fight you, too—just now."

Slowly with the dying of his momentary elation into misery Farquaharson stepped back and his arms fell at his sides.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "I can't touch you—here—now—with that look in your eyes. You are right."

"I must send you away," she continued, "because I want you to stay so terribly much—because it's all a false position for us both.... Do you remember what Ira said about losing something that was pulled out ... 'by the roots, like'?... The time has come for that Stuart, dear ... the roots are taking too strong a hold ... they must be torn out."

"Do I mean as much as that to you?"

"You mean so much—that everything else in life means nothing.... You mean so much that I compare all others with you to their injustice ... so much that I follow the glow of your cigar at night when you are walking ... that I watch the light in your window before I go to bed ... that I wake up with the thought that you are in the house ... that I think of you ... want you ... in a way I have no right to think and want."

"Conscience," he began, gripping his hands at his back and schooling his syllables so sternly that, in what seemed to him his hour of Gethsemane, he spoke with a sort of unedged flatness, "your semblance of success has been splendid, magnificent. Until to-night I believed absolutely that you no longer cared for me—and that you were happy.

"From the first I had seen in this marriage a certainty of disaster ... but when I came here I found a succession of bewildering surprises. These surprises entirely blinded me to the truth. Your serene bearing had every mark of genuineness, but there were other things, too—things beyond your control. The very place was transformed. Eben Tollman himself was really another man. His manner was no longer that of the bigot. He had learned the art of smiling."

Conscience shook her head.

"That is only another reason why you must go away, Stuart. Eben has always been the soul of generosity to me. He hates from the core of his heart these changes of which you speak. He has tolerated them only because I wanted them. With you here I can't be just to him. I contrast the little characteristics in him that grate on me and annoy me with the qualities in you that set me eagerly on fire. I tell you it's all unjust and it's all my fault."

She paused and then, because her knees still felt weak and her head was swimming, she dropped wearily down and sat on the small bench at the side of the float.

Stuart's senses were keyed to concert pitch. Some tempting voice whispered to his inner realization that, should he pitch the battle on the plane of passion's attack, he could sweep her from her anchorage. To his mind she was more beautiful and desirable than Circe must have seemed to Ulysses, but like the great wanderer he battled against that voluptuous madness. If he lost it would be the defeat of a man, but if he won, by that appeal, only the victory of an animal. His voice remained almost judicially calm.

"But this changed attitude—this positive urbanity where there used to be utter intolerance—how do you account for that?"

She looked very straight into his eyes and spoke steadfastly.

"I can only account for it in one way—and it's a thing which doesn't make me feel very proud of myself, Stuart. I think that he, too, has been deluded by what you call my splendid semblance. I believe he trusts me utterly. He has seen us together and thinks I've stood the acid test—and I've got to do it."

"But why did he ask me here, if he thought there was danger?"

"Because he had the courage to trust his happiness under fire."

"That implies that until now—at least—he was in doubt."

"Grave doubt. I think he was almost ready to call it all a failure."

After a long silence Stuart Farquaharson spoke with a quiet of resolution which held more feeling than could have been voiced by vehemence.

"You have told me enough, Conscience. I will *not* go. *You* have tried it with a desperate sincerity for three years—and it's a failure. You have fought splendidly to vindicate the whole monstrous travesty, but it can't be vindicated. It was doomed by every law of nature from the start. We have now not only the right but the duty to rectify it, and to rectify it together. You must divorce him."

"Divorce him!" The woman came to her feet and her eyes were starry with a light that held a momentary flicker of scorn. "Divorce him when his whole married life has been dedicated to the single purpose of trying to make me happy ... when his only fault is that he has failed to interest me?... Divorce him because we find too late that we still love each other? If that is your only counsel, Stuart, you have nothing to offer—but treason!"

"Conscience," he reminded her as a deep flush spread over the face that had been pale, "so long as there remained a chance for you to succeed, I made no suggestion that might unsettle you. My love for you has never changed or wavered. It has incalculably grown. But, until to-night, have I in any manner assumed the guise or asked the prerogatives of a lover?"

"Until to-night," she retorted, "I've never appealed to you for help. Now I tell you of fires I'm trying to control—and you are only setting matches to them."

"I am begging you to conquer this undertow of your heredity, and to see things as they are, without any spirit of false martyrdom. I am calling upon you to rouse yourself out of this fanatic trance—and to live! By your own confession you love me in every way that a woman of flaming inner fires can love. Under all your glacial reserve and perfect propriety you have deeps of passion—and you know that *he* can never stir them. You say you will conquer this love for me. Have you overcome it in these three years? What has this travesty of a hopeless marriage given you, but a pallid existence of curbed emotions and a stifled life?"

He had begun speaking with a forced calmness that gave a monotony to his voice, but the sincerity of his plea had brought a fire into it that mingled persuasively with the soothing softness of the voice itself. Conscience felt

herself perilously swept by a torrent of thoughts that were all of the senses; the stifled senses of which he had just spoken, straining hard for release from their curbing. His splendid physical fitness; the almost gladiatorial alertness of his body; the glowing eagerness of his face were all arguing for him with an urgency greater than his words. This was the man who should have been her mate.

Perhaps it would be better to end the interview; to tell him that she could no longer listen to assaults upon her beliefs and her marriage—but she had come out here with the militant determination to fight the matter out, and it was not yet fought out. She must let him make his attacks and meet them without flinching. Into the tones with which she began her reply came the softness and calmness of a dedication to that purpose. Stuart recognized the tone with something like despair. Against this antagonism of the martyr spirit he might break all his darts of argument, to no avail.

"Do you suppose you have to tell me," she asked, "what is lacking in my life or how hungry I am for it? I knew years ago what it was to love you ... and I've dreamed of it ever since. But all your appeal is to passion, Stuart—none of it to the sense of fair play. I'm neither sexless nor nerveless. When I held you off a little while ago, my hands on your breast could feel the beat of your heart—and the arms that kept us apart were aching to go round your neck. I've sat back there in the window of my room night after night and watched you walking in the pines, and I've wanted to go out and comfort you.... I've been hungry for the touch of your hand on mine ... for everything that love can give."

It was difficult for him to stand there under the curb of self-restraint and listen, but as yet he achieved it. And in the same quiet, yet thrilling voice she continued: "Your coming here brought a transformation. The fog lifted and I've been living the life of a lotus-eater—but now I've got to go back into the fog. Every argument you've made is an argument I've made to myself—and I know it's just temptation."

"Don't you see, dearest, that you are utterly deluding yourself?" The fervency of combat came with his words. "Don't you see that all that is finest and most vital in you, is that part that's in protest? Don't you see that you are just reacting in every crisis to the cramped puritanism you once denounced?"

"Puritanism!" she exclaimed, and the gentle manner of her speech stiffened suddenly into a timbre more militant.

"Call it what you like. Yes, I *am* a puritan woman, Stuart, and I thank God for

the heritage—if I am always to have to fight these battles against passionate rebellion. I know puritanism now for what it is. I guess Christ might have been called a puritan, when Satan took him up on the high mountain and offered him the world." She paused only a moment, then swept on with the fervor of an ultimatum. "And since you choose to put it that way," she looked at him with eyes full of challenge, "I mean to stay the puritan woman. You've come with your southern fire and the voluptuous voice of your southern pleading, to unsettle me and make me surrender my code. You can't do it, Stuart. I love you, but I can still fight you! If that's the difference between us—the difference between puritan and cavalier—there's still a line that mustn't be crossed. To cross it means war. If you fire on Fort Sumpter, Fort Sumpter can still fire back."

"How am I firing on Fort Sumpter?" he asked and she quickly responded. "You're assailing my powers of endurance. You're trying to make me take the easy course of putting desire above duty. You're trying to make me forget the ideals of the men at Valley Forge—the things that your ancestors and mine fought for when they went to war to build a nation: before they fought each other to disrupt one—loyalty and steadfastness!"

"Conscience," he said with the momentary ghost of a smile, "you are speaking from your father's pulpit. That is all an excellent New England sermon—and about as logical."

"At least it's sincere," she retorted, "and I think sincerity is what I need most just now."

The kindled glow of the woman turned fighter gave an enhanced beauty to the face into which the Virginian looked.

"Now certainly," he declared, "I shall not go. You say I have fired on Fort Sumpter—very well, I'll fight it out. You accuse me of assaulting your duty, but I'm trying to rouse you to a bigger conception of duty. I see in this idea to which you are sacrificing yourself as distorted a sense of honor as the suttee's, who ascends her husband's funeral pyre and wraps herself in a blanket of fire. I see in it, too, the dishonor of a woman's giving her body to one man while her heart belongs to another. By your own confession you are part Eben Tollman's and part mine. He holds only a pallid and empty allegiance: I hold, and held first, your heart, a splendid, vital heart.... I can offer you life ... and you belong to me!"

"Then you mean—that I must fight you, too—as well as myself?"

"I mean that you must, if that's the only way you can find yourself. I've asked you to divorce him—and let me be your husband. You refuse, but I have the right to take back what has been stolen from me, and I mean to do it. From this moment on I am avowedly and openly your lover—with all that that means. You have challenged me to attack. I mean to attack."

Conscience drew back a step and her hands came up to her bosom as she regarded him, at first with unbelief, and then with an anger that made her seem an incarnation of warring principle.

"I sought the wrong ally," was all she said, but she said it with such a cold ring of contempt that the man's answer broke out almost fiercely.

"You don't know it, Conscience, but you are still the deluded daughter of men who burned witches in the name of God; people who could sing psalms through their noses, but couldn't see beyond them; men who exalted a dreary bigotry above all else. I inherited traditions as well as you. My fathers have committed homicide on the field of honor and put woman on a pedestal. They made of her a being, half-angel and half-toy, but I refuse to be bound by their outworn ideas.

"Nowadays we prate less priggishly about honor because it is no longer a word with a single meaning." He paused a moment, then went on in a climax of vehemence. "From this moment on your New England code and my inherited chivalry may be hanged on the same gibbet! This revered temple of your marriage is just as sacred to me as a joss house—and I mean to invade it—and break its false idols—if I can!"

Conscience stood for a brief space with her hands clenched on the rail that guarded the edge of the float. She was almost hypnotically conscious of his eyes burning with a sort of wildness into her own, but when she spoke it was in a manner regally unafraid—even disdainful.

"You are quite welcome to break them if you can," she declared, and the next moment he saw her going with a superbly firm carriage up the path—and found himself alone and tremendously shaken.

CHAPTER XXVI

For the best part of an hour Stuart sat confusedly looking out across the cove. Then with the wish for some stimulating fillip he stripped and plunged into the sobering coolness of the water. Even after that he did not return to the house, but struck out aimlessly across the hills with little realization of direction and small selection of course. Once or twice a blackberry trailer caught his foot and he lurched heavily, recovering himself with difficulty.

Led by the fox-fire of restlessness, he must have tramped far, for the moon went down and curtains of fog began to draw in, obscuring hills and woods in a wet and blinding thickness. From the saturated foliage came a steady dripping as though there had been heavy rain, and far away, from the life-saving station, wailed the hoarse, Cassandra voices of the sirens. At last physical fatigue began to assert itself with a clearing of the brain and he turned his steps back toward his starting point. He was trusting now to his instinctive sense of direction, because the woods and thickets were fog-choked and his course was groping and uncertain. A half mile from the house he set his foot on a treacherously shelving rock, and found himself rolling down a sharp embankment, with briars tearing his face and hands. Throwing out his right arm, in defense of his eyes, he felt his hand bend back at the wrist with so violent a pain that a wave of nausea swept over him and for a moment he was content to lie where he had fallen, listening to the sobbing drip of the pines. When he rose and started on again his right hand hung with fingers that he could not move and the fever of swollen pain in its wrist. But when he drew near the house he saw that there was still a light in the window of Conscience's room and that she herself sat, framed against, the yellow candle glow, in an almost trance-like attitude of stress. She was silhouetted there, no longer self-confident and defiant but a figure of wistful unhappiness. From the raw wetness, her bare shoulders and arms were unprotected. Her hair fell in heavy braids over the sheer silk of her night dress and her bosom was undefended against the bite of the fog's chill.

At breakfast the next morning Eben Tollman, who was usually the least talkative at table, found that the burden of conversation fell chiefly upon himself.

Conscience was pale and under her eyes were dark smudges of sleeplessness while Farquaharson kept his right hand in his lap and developed an

unaccustomed taciturnity. But Eben appeared to notice nothing and stirred himself into an admirable and hospitable vivacity.

His concert of last night had borne fruit, he thought.

If his knowledge of actual occurrences was sketchy his imagination had filled all the blank spaces with colorful substitutes for fact.

"Stuart," he demanded suddenly, "what's happened to you? You've hurt your right hand and you're trying to conceal it."

"It's nothing much," explained Farquaharson lamely. "I went for a walk last night and when the fog came up I strayed over an embankment—and had a rather nasty fall."

"My dear boy!" exclaimed Eben Tollman in a tone of instant solicitude. "We must call the doctor at once. But you must have been out all night. The fog didn't gather until two o'clock this morning."

Farquaharson only nodded with an uncommunicative smile, and Conscience spoke in quiet authority.

"If it's a sprain, I can do as much for it as a doctor could. Wait for me on the terrace, Stuart, I'll be out in a few minutes with hot water and bandages."

A half hour later, grumbling remonstrances which were silently overruled, the Virginian found himself in efficient hands.

The fog had not lasted long and this morning the hills sparkled with a renewed freshness. A row of hollyhocks along the stone wall nodded brightly, and the sun's clarity was a wash of transparent gold.

Stuart Farquaharson studied the profile of the woman who was busying herself with bandages and liniments.

The exquisite curve of her cheek and throat; the play of an escaped curl over her pale temple and the sweet wistfulness of her lips: none of these things escaped him.

"It's not necessary, after all, that you should go away, Stuart," she announced with a calm abruptness to Farquaharson's complete mystification. "Last night I was in the grip of something like hysteria, I think. Perhaps I'm still young enough to be influenced by such things as music and moonlight."

"And this morning?"

"This morning," she spoke in a matter-of-fact voice as she measured and cut a strip of bandage, "I am heartily ashamed of my moment of panic. This morning I'm not afraid of you. Whether you go or stay, I sha'n't give way again."

"Conscience," protested the man with an earnestness that drew his brow into furrows of concentration, "last night I said many things that were pure excitement. After years of struggling to put you out of my life and years of failure to do it, after believing absolutely that it had become a one-sided love, I learned suddenly that you loved me, too. The summed-up spell of all those hungry times was on me last night. Can't you make allowances for me?"

"I have made allowances," she assured him steadily. "I've made so many—that I'm no longer angry with you. You see I spent most of last night thinking of it. We were both moon mad. Only now—we can't go on pretending to be Platonic friends any more. When war has been declared comradeships between enemies have to end."

"You are both very fair and very unfair, Conscience," suggested Stuart Farquaharson thoughtfully. "I said some wild things—out there in the moonlight—with my senses all electrified by the discovery of your love—and yet—"

He broke off, and Conscience, rising from her finished task, stood gazing out with musing eyes over the slopes of the hills. Suddenly she said:

"I realize now that if you'd gone away just because I asked it, we would always have felt that nothing was settled; that instead of winning my battle I'd just begged off from facing it."

"Among all the unconsidered things I said last night, Conscience," Stuart began again, "there were some that I must still say. It was like the illogical thread of a dream which is only the distortion of a waking thought-flow. The essence of my contention was sound."

"A soundness which advises me to divorce my husband and marry you," she demurred with no more anger than she might have felt for a misguided child, "though he and I both made vows—and he has broken none of them."

"You made those vows," he reminded her, "under the coercion of fears for your father. You distorted your life under what you yourself once called a tyranny of weakness."

"And to remedy all that you counsel an anarchy of passion." She seemed to be speaking from a distance and to be looking through rather than at the horizon.

"I believe that even now my father knows—and that he's no more willing to have me surrender my convictions—than when he was on earth."

"And I believe," the response came reverently but promptly, "that where he is now his eyes are no longer blinded by any scales of mistake. If he looks down on us from the Beyond, he must see life with a universal breadth of wisdom."

For an instant tears misted her eyes and then she asked in a rather bewildered voice, "Stuart, stripped of all its casuistry, what is your argument except a plea for infidelity?"

"Revolt against that most powerful and vicious of all autocracies," he confidently declared, "the tyranny of weakness over strength!"

But Conscience Tollman only shook her head and smiled her unconverted scepticism.

"Was it being true to such an ideal as that which made a certain king in Israel send a certain captain into the front of the battle, because he loved that captain's wife? I have listened to all this argument, because I wanted you to feel sure that I wasn't afraid to hear it. But it can never persuade me. And what have you to say of the trust of a husband who accepts you in his house as a member of his family —without suspicion?"

"I say that he has had his chance in all fairness and has failed. I say that during the years of this ill-starred experiment you have fought valiantly to make him win. I have, at least, not interfered by act or a word. If he had not arranged this meeting I should never have done so—and since he is responsible for our being brought together now he must face the consequences."

"Then your attitude of last night was not just moon madness, after all?"

"I mean to penetrate your life as far as I can and to recognize no inner sanctum from which I am barred. He is the usurper and my love is not tame enough to submit. I am your lover because, though your words deny me, your heart invites me. I'm coming to stay."

This time the woman's eyes did not kindle into furious or contemptuous fires, but her voice was so calmly resolute that Stuart felt his own had been a blustering

thing.

"Then, Stuart, I'm still the puritan woman. I'm asking no quarter—and I have no fears. Attack as soon and as often and as furiously as you wish. I'm ready."

Eben Tollman noted that under the steady normality and evenness of his wife's demeanor there stirred an indefinable current of nervousness, since the evening of the tryst at the float and that the whole manner of the visitor toward himself was tinctured with a new brusqueness, as though the requirement of maintaining a cordial pretense were becoming over tedious.

These were mere bits of chaff in a light breeze and he flattered himself that it had taken his own perspicacity to detect them. A less capable diagnostician might have passed them by unobserved. But to him they marked a boundary.

Alone in his study, the husband ruminated upon these topics. Here he had sanctuary and the necessity of a hateful dissimulation was relaxed. He could then throw aside that mantle of urbanity which he must yet endure for a while before other eyes. He formed the habit of gazing up at the portrait of the ancestor who had died in the revolution and almost fancied that between his own eyes and those painted on the canvas there was an interchange of understanding.

He was in truth a man who had already parted company with reason while still invested in its perfect masquerade. His bitter and unfounded suspicions, denied all outer expression, had undermined his sanity—and any one who had seen him in these moments of sequestered brooding would have recognized the mad glitter in his eyes.

"The pair of them are as guilty as perdition," he murmured to himself, "and I am God's instrument to punish." Punish—but how? That was a detail which he had never quite thought out, but at the proper time the Providence which commanded him would also show him a way. But before punishment there must be an overt act—an episode which clinched, beyond peradventure, the sin of these two hypocrites before his hand could fall in vengeance.

These reflections were interrupted one afternoon by a rap on the study door to which, for the space of several seconds, Eben Tollman did not respond.

He was meanwhile doing what an actor does before his dressing-room mirror. Eben Tollman alone with his monomania and Eben Tollman in the company of others were separate personalities and to pass from one to the other called for making up; for schooling of expression and the recovery of a suave exterior. In this process, however, he had from habit acquired celerity, so the delay was not a marked one before, with a decorous face, unstamped of either passion or brooding, he opened the door, to find Conscience waiting at the threshold.

"Come in, my dear," he invited. "I must have inadvertently snapped the catch. I didn't know it was locked."

"There's a man named Hagan here who wants to see you, Eben," announced Conscience. "He didn't seem inclined to tell me his business beyond saying that it was important."

"Hagan, Hagan?" repeated the master of the house with brows drawn in well-simulated perplexity. "I don't seem to recognize the name. Do you know him?"

"I never saw him before. Shall I send him in?"

"I suppose it might be as well. Some business promoter, I fancy."

But as Conscience left, Tollman's scowl returned.

"Hagan," he repeated with a soft but wrathful voice to himself. "The blackmailer!"

His face bore a somewhat frigid welcome, when almost immediately the manager of the Searchlight Investigation Bureau presented himself.

Mr. Hagan had the appearance of one into whose lap the horn of plenty has not been recently or generously tilted, and the clothes he wore, though sprucely tailored, were of another season's fashion.

But his manner had lost none of its pristine assurance and he began his interview by laying a hand on the door-knob and suggesting: "The business I want to take up with you, Mr. Tollman, had best be discussed out of hearing of others."

Tollman remained unhospitably rigid and his eyes narrowed into an immediate hostility.

"Whatever business we may have had, Mr. Hagan," he suggested, "has for some time been concluded, I think."

But on this point the visitor seemed to hold a variant opinion. Momentarily his face abandoned its suavity and the lower jaw thrust itself forward with a marked hint of belligerency.

"So?" he questioned. "Nonetheless there is business that can be done at the present time in this house. It's for you to say whether I do it with you—or others."

Tollman's scowl deepened and the thought presented itself that he had been unwise in ever giving such a dishonest fellow the hold upon him of a prior employment. But he controlled himself and invited curtly, "Very well. Sit down."

Mr. Hagan did so, and this time it was Mr. Tollman himself who somewhat hastily closed and latched the door which protected their privacy of interview, while the guest broached his topic.

"The best way to start is with the recital of a brief story. You may already have read some of it in the newspapers but the portion that concerns us most directly wasn't published. It's what is technically called the 'inside story.'"

"The best way to start, Mr. Hagan," amended Tollman with some severity of manner, "is that which will most quickly bring you to the point and the conclusion. I'm a very busy man and can spare you only a short time."

But despite that warning the detective sat for a moment with his legs crossed and gave his attention to the deliberate kindling of a cigar. That rite being accomplished to his satisfaction, he settled back and sent a cloud of wreathed smoke toward the ceiling before he picked up again his thread of conversation.

CHAPTER XXVII

Even when he had comfortably settled himself Mr. Hagan's initial comment was irrelevant.

"Your place is decidedly changed, Mr. Tollman. Improved I should call it."

"Thank you. Please state your business."

"On one of the cross streets in the forties in New York City there's a hotel called the Van Styne with a reputation none too savory and downtown there's a sort of mission organization in which a minister, name of Sam Haymond, takes an interest. He's a live-wire reform worker."

"Indeed?" Eben Tollman's monosyllabic rejoinder conveyed the impression of an interest unawakened, but Mr. Hagan was not so soon discouraged.

"Doesn't interest you yet? Maybe it will later. Recently a girl by the name of Minnie Ray fell out of a window at the hotel I'm speaking of—the Van Styne. It killed her."

"Yes?"

"I thought likely you'd read the item in the papers. The coroner's verdict was accident."

"Yes?" These brief, interrogatory replies might have proved dampening to some narrators. Not so with Mr. Hagan. He nodded his head, then he asserted briefly. "But as a matter of fact the Ray woman committed suicide."

"You disagree, it appears, with the coroner."

"I have the facts—and it was seen to that the coroner didn't."

"What bearing has this deplorable episode on our alleged business, Mr. Hagan?" asked Tollman, and the detective raised an index finger.

"That's what I'm coming to. The Ray woman is only incidental—like others that get adrift in New York and end up in places like the Van Styne. Anyhow I'm not starting out to harrow you with any heart-interest stories.... I'm here to talk

business, but you know how it sometimes is, Mr. Tollman. A share or two of stock worth par or less may swing the control of a corporation ... and a piece of human drift like Minnie might turn out to be a human share of stock."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, sir."

"Don't let that trouble you. You will. Minnie Ray didn't have much education when she came on east from Indiana and I expect she didn't have a very heroic character either. But until she went to the Van Styne, she seems to have been straight."

"There is always an 'until' in these cases," observed Mr. Tollman dryly and the head of the "Searchlight" nodded his acquiescence.

"Sure there is. She was young and what the rounders call a good-looking chicken. At first she was inclined to be haughty and upstage when men she worked for got fresh with her which didn't help her to get jobs—or hold them. So she hit the toboggan. She spent what little money she brought with her and after that it was the old story. So far as Minnie could figure prospects there wasn't a thing she had or a thing she could do that would bring in money—except the one asset that wasn't on the market: her virtue. As I said I didn't start out to tell a sob story, but in this business we see quite a few cases like that. It's usually just a question of how long these girls can hold out before they sell the one thing that's saleable. Maybe you can't blame them at that. If virtue is measured that way—and it's a practical way—the 'until,' as you call it, came to Minnie at the end of quite a siege."

Mr. Tollman's impatience grew into actual fretfulness as his visitor delayed coming to the point of his proposition.

"It seems to have been a case," went on the detective unhurriedly, "of dropping down the scale for her until she was up against the question of diving into East River—or hypothecating the one asset."

"How about this mission that you speak of? Didn't it help her?"

"All it could—but that wasn't enough. It got her one or two temporary jobs—but there were hundreds on its lists and it had to spread charity thin. So for the time being they were trying down there to keep her courage up, and that was about all they could do."

"I will take the address of this mission and send a contribution," announced Mr.

Tollman benignly. "I suppose your business here is soliciting that—is it not?"

"Yes—it is not," exploded Mr. Hagan emphatically with a smile that savored of a snarl, "though I don't doubt they'd appreciate it. Well, there was a cold-blooded party laying siege to Minnie. He was one of the rat-faces that you can see any time you stroll along Broadway, and up to date she'd been refusing to play with him. But he had the chance to put money in her way—and all he asked was that she'd 'be nice to him.'"

"You put things very bluntly—I might almost say, vulgarly, Mr. Hagan," objected Eben Tollman with a fastidious shiver and his visitor flashed his answer back in a manner of menacing aggressiveness.

"It strikes you that way, does it? Perhaps you know a way to talk about things like this that isn't vulgar. Personally, I don't. Well, the long and the short of it is this, after so many weeks of fighting this thing out with herself Minnie Ray reached the point where she fell for a dinner with the rat-faced gentleman at the Van Styne, and after he'd opened some wine—" The raconteur shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you see she wasn't accustomed to drinking bubbles and topping it off with brandy and benedictine."

"The climax of your story lacks the full force of surprise," Eben reminded his guest. "You forecast the result at the commencement."

"No, I haven't, gotten to the result yet. This is only one stage of it. It happened that the Rev. Sam Haymond heard of a job as a lingerie model in a department store, that would fit Minnie nicely, and he rushed around to her room to carry the glad tidings. The landlady said that Minnie had gone to the Van Styne with a gentleman friend—so the dominie took a taxi and went there, too. You see he didn't know until he got into the lobby and saw all them red lights and heard some little of the conversation there, that it wasn't a *regular* hotel. But there he was—so he had her paged."

"Did he find her?"

"He did not. The clerk didn't mention that she was in the house and of course 'Jim Smith and wife' on a register didn't mean much to him.... So the Rev. Haymond didn't connect with Minnie—and Minnie didn't connect with the job. But the rat-faced gentleman who had left her there after a pleasant evening and was on his way out heard her real name paged. He beat it back to inquire what in the Sam Hill Haymond wanted with her? He found her in the sort of despair that

would come to a girl like that at a time like that. What you call the 'until' Minnie probably called the 'too-late.' Maybe she guessed what the minister had cone for and what she had just missed. Anyhow her 'gentleman-friend' warned her that there had been a raid on a place nearby and that downstairs they were having a scare— He said that he himself was leaving and she'd better be careful. Well, she went clear out of her head—and she jumped out of the window. It was the fifth floor, you see."

Mr. Tollman's face was gravely serious as he put a question which might have seemed less near the kernel of the matter than several others, "Why did they fear a raid?"

"They sometimes happen, you know. The police get periodically active. The Van Styne has been pinched before." Mr. Hagan rose from his seat and added with the solicitude of one wishing to make the *amende honorable*, "However, Mr. Tollman, I believe that was before you owned the place."

The anxious anticipations of the host during the course of the story had not quite prepared him against the bluntness of this announcement, and his surprise vented itself in a sudden start. But immediately recovering his poise, he spoke coldly. He even smiled.

"Now that your story is ended, what is the real matter that brought you here?"

"I represent others," Mr. Hagan informed him evenly, "who, to quote your own words on a previous occasion, prefer remaining unnamed. If that hotel should happen to be raided and its record should be published—together with the name of the owner—it might prove an embarrassment to you. I'm authorized—under certain conditions—to offer you immunity against that unpleasant chance."

Eben Tollman rose from his seat. He stood for a moment gazing into the eyes of the portrait above the mantel and then he spoke with a measured dignity:

"Mr. Hagan, your proposition is just about what I fancied it would be—an attempt at blackmail. But it's abortive. I do own the property of which you speak, but in understanding so precisely the sort of business done there, you have the advantage of me. This renting has all been conducted through agents whom I seem to have trusted unduly. You *have* done me a service in acquainting me with the facts and I thank you for your information which, I take it is authentic. I shall at once rid myself of such a despicable property. I shall also place in the hands of the District Attorney of New York, the facts you have given me, and suggest that

he call upon you to ratify them." The speaker paused impressively and then swept virtuously into his peroration:

"To the anonymous gentlemen who offer me immunity against a raid—for a consideration—you may say that I will conduct the matter through the District Attorney's office. As for yourself, Mr. Hagan, permit me to add that I regard you as a most extraordinary scoundrel with whom I could have nothing in common."

The detective, who had been thus conclusively defeated, continued to sit with an attitude of composure, and spoke without chagrin:

"Hard words ain't going to kill me, and as for the balance of it I don't most generally lay all my cards on the table at once. You say you'll rid yourself of this property and that you didn't know how it was being used. All right, but why didn't you know? You could of known, couldn't you, if you hadn't taken damned good care *not* to know? Do you think that story will stand scrutiny with the public or with your wife?"

"Be good enough," cautioned Tollman ominously, "to leave my wife's name out of this talk. It's hardly an appropriate combination."

"No," assented Hagan with readiness, "and it's going to be less so before I finish. How do you expect to rid yourself of the Van Styne? By selling it, at a profit, to somebody else that'll go on getting rich on other Minnie Rays? And when you've done that are you going to carry the same policy of high-minded reform through the rest of your property in New York find Boston? I've got a list of the lot."

"I'm through answering questions," asserted Tollman with finality. "You've made your bluff and it has failed."

"Just as you say." The detective rose and stretched himself luxuriously. "By the way as I came in, I passed your wife on the porch, and I happened to notice that Mr. Farquaharson was visiting you."

Eben Tollman had started toward the door, but this remark gave him pause.

"He didn't recognize me of course," mused Mr. Hagan, "but then in a way we are old acquaintances, I suppose—I shadowed that bird some time."

"What do you mean?"

Mr. Hagan's manner underwent an abrupt transformation. He wheeled and faced

his host with a dangerous glint in his eye.

"This is what I mean! You called me a blackmailer and a scoundrel just now. Sure I'm a crook! We're both of us crooks, but I admit it and you don't. So to my thinking, I'm honester than you. I came to you first. Next I'm going to Stuart Farquaharson out there and to your wife.... Mr. Farquaharson might be interested to know that you hired me once to try to frame him. Your wife might be interested to know that you hired me to send her those scandal magazines that roasted him. They both might be interested to know where you got your money from. Now it's just a question of who I do business with, but before I leave here I do business with *somebody*."

As Mr. Hagan declared himself his lower jaw came more protuberantly forward and his eyes blazed with an increasing truculence. And in the exact degree of his growing aggression, Mr. Tollman quailed and became clammily moist of brow.

"Perhaps, Mr. Hagan," he tentatively suggested, "you had better sit down again. Possibly we aren't quite through yet after all."

The detective reseated himself and his composure returned.

"Frankness is always best," he vouchsafed complacently. "I thought when we once came to understand each other, we'd get along."

While Eben Tollman was entertaining his unwelcome guest in the study his wife and Stuart Farquaharson were having tea on the terrace. Upon the recent combat of their wills there seemed to have succeeded a calmness of aftermath. If Stuart had as Conscience expressed it "fired on Fort Sumpter" his subsequent conduct had in a fashion belied his vehemence of pronunciamento. Now his artillery of resource was silent. Perhaps the weariness and heightened pallor of the woman's face, which gave it an ethereal quality, made an appeal upon the chivalry his postulates denied.

This afternoon the entire landscape carried a tuneful message and a brilliant sparkle and play of colors. It was a day for peace and laughter, rather than for heart-bruising discussion—and they were still young enough to seize upon and avail themselves of such respites.

Farquaharson laid aside the manuscript of an unfinished novel, with which Conscience had been assisting him as critic and amanuensis, and let his eyes dwell on her face.

She was wearing a smock of rose-colored silk which fell like drapery, rather than mere clothing, about her and seemed to kindle a delicate echo of its pinkness in the ivory of her cheeks. For a little while the author forgot his work.

"Dearest," he said suddenly, and though he couched his words in form and voice of the whimsical they held the essence of entire sincerity, "I hate to seem unduly impressionable or sentimental—but there's something rather marvelous about you. You'd make a man—even a hardened one—want to go down on his knees before you in worship and at the same time you'd make a timid one want to dare hellfire to take you in his arms. In short, you're a secret and a riddle: an enticement and a sobering inspiration."

The woman's cheeks momentarily reflected more warmly the rosy color of her smock and to her eyes came a mischievous riffle.

"Or to say all that more briefly, Stuart," she replied in a disconcertingly matter-of-fact voice, "I'm a woman—and incidentally you mustn't drop into the habit of calling me dearest."

The old boyhood smoldering blazed briefly in the man's face, but cleared at once into a smile.

"You were criticizing the woman psychology of my heroine, I believe," he said calmly, lifting the neglected manuscript in his one good hand. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's mid-Victorian. She's not modern," ruled the critic. "Her virtue is just a sugary saintliness that doesn't ring true. Any real woman in her circumstances would feel more disgraced by her marriage than by a divorce."

Farquaharson raised his brows, then his laugh rang out with a somewhat satirical merriment.

"And this from you! You admit in fiction the exact truths that you deny in life."

"But your lady was tricked into marriage in the first place," responded Conscience with spirit. "You show me half the reason that woman had and I'll start my lawyer filing a petition the same day. I'll go further than that." Her eyes

were twinkling since she meant to treat all these allusions so lightly as to disarm his own seriousness. "As a self-inflicted penalty I'll marry you."

"I wonder if you would."

"On my word of honor, and meanwhile our tea is getting cold. One lump, isn't it?"

He nodded; then, as he watched the deftness with which her hands made a pretty ceremony of pouring tea, he inquired: "Have I seen that ring before—the opal with diamonds?"

"I don't believe you have. Eben gave it to me last Christmas."

"And you're not afraid of the opal's ill-luck?"

"I love them enough to take the chance. Haven't I ever shown you my others—there's quite a collection of them."

"No."

"They're in the safe. I'll get Eben to open it as soon as Mr. Hagan leaves."

Teasingly the man inquired, "Doesn't your husband trust you with the combination?"

Conscience flushed. Her companion had touched a sensitive nerve. This was one of the details that went into the summary of Eben's excluding her from his business life, and it had hurt her.

"I can't ever master it somehow," she evaded, and as she spoke Eben Tollman ushered Mr. Hagan out upon the terrace.

As stranger and host passed out Stuart fancied that he detected in Tollman's manner a certain eagerness to speed the parting guest and when the visitor had gone, Eben withdrew at once to his sanctum, declining a cup of tea. The bad half hour had shaken him and sent his thoughts coursing in channels of apprehension. The past was refusing to lie dead and he found himself thinking of what might occur if two wisely intercepted letters should ever fall into the wrong hands.

They lay securely immured in the safe, but he had overheard the teasing reference to his withholding, from his wife, the combination—and it vexed his anxiety. He treasured these trophies of his acumen and victory, but palpably the

time had arrived for their sacrifice.

He reconsidered an impulse to lock himself in. Once to-day he had apologized for inadvertently throwing on the catch and a repetition would seem pointed. The letters were in an envelope inscribed "S. F. & C. W." and there would be no difficulty in finding them.

So Eben Tollman opened the safe, and unlocked a certain strong box filled to overflowing with papers of divers sorts.

As he stood holding the tin dispatch case with its cover raised he heard Stuart's voice beyond the threshold and it was a voice couched in a tone of annoying and unthinking levity.

"Don't forget! If I prove a case as strong as my heroine's you will act as you say she should act."

"It's a bargain," came the quick and laughing response. "I'm ready to prove my faith by my works." Then as the pair appeared framed in the door, Conscience explained, "Eben, I want to show Stuart my opals."

To Tollman it seemed a most untimely interruption. Possibly that was why the fingers that held the box trembled, as he came around to his chair at the desk and said shortly, "They're in the larger drawer at the left."

As Conscience came over to the safe Stuart followed her until he stood across the width of the desk from his host whom he regarded absently. Then something quite unaccountable occurred. Mrs. Tollman, in putting down the somewhat heavy metal tray containing her trinkets, let it slip, so that it spilled its rings, and pins and necklaces on the desk top—and as if responsive to her clumsiness in handling her treasures, though really because of nervous tension, Eben started violently, and the box which he held fell from his quaking hands, scattering papers in a confused litter about the floor.

Instantly Tollman was on all fours retrieving, and the undignified posture had the advantage of serving to conceal the wild terror of his face; a terror such as may stamp itself upon the features of a man who cannot swim and who has twice gone down.

As he searched in a feverish panic, pretending an impartial interest in the generality of scattered documents, Eben was tortured by the knowledge that Stuart and Conscience were searching, too, and a conviction that if either of

them found that envelope first, the legend "S. F. & C. W." would prove sufficiently illuminating to require an accounting.

Finally the elder man straightened up, and stood panting. The vital package was still unfound. Stuart Farquaharson tossed a sheaf of ancient bill receipts across the desk with the casual comment, "Well, that seems to be the crop."

Over the harrowed visage of the host swept an almost felicitous wave of relief and then, as abruptly, his cheeks changed color again, fading to an ashen pallor tinged with greenish sickliness. In his eyes the light appeared to die. He licked his lips and a palsy shook him like a violent chill. The Virginian's eyes were still searching the floor, but his left hand,—the uninjured one—rested lightly on the table, and as Mr. Tollman looked he saw that the fingers were spread upon a yellowed envelope, of which the exposed surface bore the clearly legible inscription "S. F. & C. W."

And while the victim of terror stood, transfixed with his premonition of crisis, Farquaharson also glanced down and, seeing the envelope, added: "No—here's one more. It must have been lying here all the time."

CHAPTER XXVIII

To Tollman's eyes familiar with content and superscription, it was all glaringly conspicuous. The initials seemed to stand out like headlines, but Farquaharson was without suspicion and he saw only one more paper in which his interest was most perfunctory. The whole issue had narrowed now, Eben realized with a tension of fear which brought out sweat beads on the pasty white of his face, to the hairbreadth narrowness of one question. Would Stuart see the initials or would they escape his notice?

But the Virginian was not yet broken to the habit of being a cripple. He could not remember that he must avoid the effort to use the right hand which he had always used. Now he reached down and picked up the envelope—still with the lettered surface turned up to sight—and rapping still swollen knuckles on the desk top, he let the envelope fall just as he raised it.

But this time it fell face down—and the perilous letters lay hidden.

Eben grabbed forward with such precipitate haste that Farquaharson looked up in astonishment and for the first time recognized something of the agitation which shook the other: the spasmodic panting of his breath and the outstanding arteries on his temples. "Why, you are ill, man!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter with you?"

Tollman made a supreme effort to rally his powers of self-control. The envelope lay between them—but out of his own reach and that spelled the wavering balance of suspense.

"This stooping after papers seems to have brought on a touch of vertigo," he explained and he had the sense, costly in self-restraint, to let his eagerly outstretched hand drop at his side, "Conscience, I think I'll have a little brandy."

After his wife had gone he spoke again.

"Didn't you—have another paper, Stuart?" The question came casually from the chair into which he had collapsed. "I might as well put it with the rest while I'm waiting for the brandy."

"Yes, I'd forgotten it. Here it is," and the younger man handed back the envelope

—this time using his left hand.

Once more Tollman's luck had held good.

Later in the analysis of retrospect Stuart began to wonder at his host's strange behavior until of idle speculation suspicion was born, but as to that circumstance he held his counsel.

The last summer month brings to the Cape the August twister and the August tide. The twister seems to be a simultaneous rushing in of tornado-like winds from every quarter and a whirling bluster of elements gone mad. And in that month the high tide is the highest in the year.

For the household of Eben Tollman as well as for the weather the season seemed charged with the unquiet influences of equinox.

In the older man himself the currents of hatred and jealousy were rising to a danger line of unbalanced deviltry and as for the two who still responded to the nameless yet invincible clarion of youth, the elements of passion and insurgency were awake, ready for an August twister and an August tide.

Then there befell the household a series of coincidental labor problems that left them all at once without servants. The chauffeur, who hated his employer, was summarily discharged for drunken insolence. The cook was taken dangerously ill and her sister, the housemaid, went with her to her home at Provincetown. The gardener and outside man alone remained on duty and since both of these came and went from a distance, Conscience and Stuart found themselves promoted to kitchen and pantry.

A day of bluster and storm had ended in a sunset of brilliant color, which dyed the cloud-ramparted west with a victorious pageantry of crimson and gold. The night would be different, for in the east the moon, just climbing over the horizon, was a disc of pale tranquillity dominating a symphony of blue and silver.

In the pantry, with windows giving to the east and west, Conscience was washing dishes and Stuart, whose right hand was once more usable, stood nearby drying them. Pausing, with her eyes first on the changing fires of the west and then on the soft nocturne of the east, the woman spoke softly:

"The sun and the moon are the same size, and the same distance above the horizon. How differently they paint their pictures of the world."

Her companion only nodded.

While Eben Tollman contributed his part to the program of housekeeping without servants, by manipulating the phonograph from the living-room, Stuart had been studying the aproned figure at the sink.

Her face, in repose, held a pallid unrest of tried endurance, and occasionally she paused in her task to listen, with unexpressed nervousness, to the voluptuous swell of the music.

As he reached out for a rinsed plate their hands touched and she started.

"Conscience," said the man thoughtfully, "you've been very studiously avoiding me of late. I mean avoiding me when I could talk to you alone. For all your boasts of self-confidence, you're afraid of me. Isn't that true?"

"No," she said, "I'm only avoiding unnecessary battles." Suddenly her voice became almost querulous. "That phonograph is getting on my nerves. Aren't you sick of it?"

"Jack London wrote a story once," he replied calmly, "of a Klondike prospector and his dog. Between them there was a feud of long-treasured hatred."

Conscience glanced at him questioningly.

"What has that to do with Eben and the phonograph?" she inquired.

"The dog couldn't endure music. When a violin string spoke, he howled his misery. It was as if the bow were being drawn across the rawness of his own taut nerves.... That dish is ready for me, isn't it?"

She handed it to him, and he went on imperturbably: "The man would let the violin strings cry out until the beast's howls of sheer agony mingled with their strains. There came a time when the dog squared accounts. Eben's music reminded me of the story."

Conscience turned off a water faucet and faced her companion indignantly. She was inwardly trembling, with a nameless disquiet and anxiety.

"Stuart," she exclaimed, "this campaign of vague accusation isn't a very brave

device and, in theory at least, you've always stood for fairness."

"I've ceased to believe in *his* fairness," he told her promptly. "I believe that what he thinks isn't fit to print and he's trying to drive you, whether or no, into vindicating his rotten implications."

A piece of chinaware slipped from his hands and crashed on the floor and so tense were the woman's nerves that a low scream escaped her lips.

The mail wagon passed the tin box down by the edge of the pine thicket twice a day and the latest of these visits was between eight and nine o'clock in the evening.

The household duties were finished before that and the three were sitting on the terrace with a world of silver light and cobalt shadows about them. That is to say, two of them sat there in silence while the third came and went about his duties of changing records and needles and the winding of the machine—for he still dedicated himself to minstrelsy.

And in Conscience the germ of an idea which seemed trivial and foolish was beginning to grow into a sort of obsession. Her nerves like those of the dog in the story tightened into such rebellion under this music, singing always of love, that she, too, wanted to cry out. Her head was swimming with the untrustworthy sense of some cord of control snapped; of a power or reason become unfocused; of a hitherto staunch morale breaking.

At last, with the feeling that she could sit there no longer, she rose abruptly from her chair. "I'm going down to get the mail," she announced.

Both men rose, offering her escort, but she shook her head in determined negation.

"No, thank you both, I don't need either of you."

Stuart watched her figure following the twisting thread of the path among the apple trees, whose gnarled trunks made fantastic shapes in the moonlight. Then he glanced at the stolid and seated figure of her husband and his face darkened. When Eben essayed comment his visitor vouchsafed replies in monosyllables so that conversation languished. At last the younger man rose from his chair.

"I think, after all, I'll go down and walk back with her," he said and Eben Tollman only nodded.

Leaving the house behind him, Stuart had silence except for the occasional call of a whippoorwill, and as he drew nearer to the sleepy darkness at the pines a clear and fragrant scent of honeysuckle came to his nostrils.

He guessed that in this sudden withdrawal to the isolation of the firs, Conscience had followed the same instinct that takes a wounded animal off, to be alone with its pain. So he approached with a noiseless caution abetted by the sound-deadening carpet of pine needles, searching the shadows for her unannounced and at first vainly.

In the sea of moonlit brightness this strip of trees afforded a margin of soft, almost sooty obscurity, save where here and there darts of light fell through the raggedness of the foliage.

Finally he saw her. She was seated on a rounded bowlder and both her hands were pressed tightly against her face. Her pose was rigid and unmoving; an attitude of distress and high-keyed misery of spirit.

Her thoughts were her own and safe from penetration, but their tenor was as obvious as though, instead of sitting alone in a stunned silence, she were proclaiming her crisis in Hamlet's resonant soliloquy.

There was a droop of surrender in her usually gallant shoulders and a limpness in her whole body which even the darkness did not entirely conceal. Within herself she admitted that her resolution had come to the condition of a stronghold so long besieged that it is no longer strong: where only the grim spirit of holding out against odds is left to keep the colors flying.

But perhaps if she could have a half hour of relief from the pitiful counterfeit of strength she might develop a fresh power of resistance. In all sieges there must be moments like that: moments when, if the enemy only knew, a quick assault would end the fight. If the enemy did not discover them, they passed without defeat.

Her young and splendid body seemed to her a temple out of which she had driven the love god, the deity of motherhood and the glowing lights of wholesome sex ... and where she had set up instead a pale allegiance of soulless form. Her life seemed a thing of quenched torches and unlit lamps.

Conscience Tollman was in a dangerous mood, and some of her belligerency of spirit Stuart Farquaharson saw as he came quietly to her side and spoke her

name, gently, as one might speak to a sleep walker.

"Why did you come?" She looked at him a little wildly and her voice shook. "I wanted to be alone."

"I was troubled about you," he said very gently. "You had been away so long."

Her courage was almost prostrate, but it still had that resilient power which rises from exhaustion for one effort more. There was in her the spirit of the Phœnix, and realizing how clearly he would read defeat in the limp droop of her shoulders, she straightened them, not abruptly, but as one who has been sitting at ease draws up into a less careless attitude upon the arrival of another. She even smiled and spoke with a voice no longer tremulous.

"Yes, I did stay longer than necessary. The music bored me and down here it was very quiet—and inviting."

"Conscience," he said seriously, "you were more than bored, you were distracted."

But at that, she laughed almost convincingly. "Must one be distracted to enjoy an occasional moment of solitude? It's the favorite recipe of philosophers."

"Your attitude wasn't that of enjoying solitude. It was that of despair."

"I was a little fagged. I'm all right now."

As if in demonstration of her assertion she rose with a dryad lightness and stepped forward for inspection into a spot of moonlight, where she stood illuminated—and smiling.

"Do I look like a victim of despair?" she challenged and the man, with a quick, almost gasping intake of his breath, leaned toward her and declared in a voice of passionate fervor, "To me you look like the incarnation of heart's desire."

Now, her mirth was less convincing, but for a time she fenced gallantly, adroitly, though with a waning remnant of resistance. It was a sword play of wills, but the man attacked with a saber of tempestuous love, and the woman defended herself with a weakening rapier of finesse. She was desperately tired and her heart was not in the fight, so she grew less lightning-like of thrust and less sure of parry as the play went on.

CHAPTER XXIX

When they had talked for ten minutes Stuart abruptly exclaimed, "Dearest, it was not far from this spot that you once told me you loved me in every way you knew how to love: that you wanted to be, to me, all that a woman could be to a man. Have you forgotten? I told you that my love was always yours ... have you forgotten that?"

Her hands went spasmodically to her breast and her eyes glowed with the fire of struggle. Suddenly the physical impulses, which she could not control, deserted the rallying strength of her mind, and she trembled visibly.

"The two men who say they love me," she broke out vehemently, "are succeeding between them in driving me mad."

"Because," he as emphatically answered, "you are trying to reconcile a true and a false allegiance—because—"

"This isn't a time," she broke in on him desperately, "for preaching theories to me. I'm hardly sane enough just now to stand that."

"I'm not preaching," he protested. "I'm asserting that no amount of bigotry can white-wash a living sepulcher."

"I told you I wanted to be alone.... I told you—" Her voice broke. "I told you that I *must* be alone."

"You defied me to attack when and where and how I chose," came his instant rejoinder. "I'm fighting for your salvation from the undertow."

His eyes met hers and held them under a spell like hypnosis, and hers were wide and futile of concealment so that her heart and its secrets were at last defenseless.

"I—I will go back to the house," she said, and for the first time her voice openly betrayed her broken self-confidence.

"*Can* you go?" he challenged with a new and fiery assurance of tone. "Don't you know that I can hold you here, without a word, without a touch? Don't you

realize that I can stretch out my arms and force you, of your own accord, to come into them?"

She seemed striving to break some spell of lethargy, but she only succeeded in swaying a little as she stood pallid and wraith-like in the moonlight. Her lips moved, but she failed to speak.

"I will never leave you again." Farquaharson's voice leaped suddenly with the elation of certain triumph. "Because you are mine and I am yours. I said once with a boy's assurance that they might surround you with regiments of soldiers but that I would come and claim you. Now I've come. There is no more doubt. Husband or lover—you may decide—but you are mine."

Her knees weakened and as she tried to retreat before his advance she tottered, reaching out her hands with a groping uncertainty. It was then that he caught her in his arms and crushed her close to him, conscious of the wild flutter that went through her soft body; intoxicated by the fragrant softness of the dark hair which he was kissing—and at first oblivious to her struggle for freedom from his embrace.

"Stuart ... Stuart...!" she pleaded in the wildly agitated whisper of a half-recovered voice. "Don't—for God's sake, don't!"

But as she turned up her face to make her final plea, he smothered the words with his own lips upon hers.

For years she had dwelt for him on the most remote borderland of unattainable dreams. Now her heart was throbbing against his own and he knew exultantly that whatever her mind might say in protest, her heart was at home there. In his brain pealed a crescendo of passion that drowned out whispers of remonstrance as pounding surf drowns the cry of a gull.

But at last her lips were free again and her panting protests came to him, low but insistent. "Let me go—don't you see?... It's my last chance.... The tide is taking me." Then feebly and in postscript, "I'll call for help." But the man laughed. "Call, dearest," he dared her. "Then I can break silence and be honest again. Do you think I'm not willing to fight for you?"

The moment had come which she had faithfully and long sought to avoid: the moment which nature must dominate. Even as she struggled, with an ebbing strength of body and will she realized that in the wild moment of his triumph she

was a sharer. If he were to release her now she would crumple down inertly at his feet. Almost fainting under the sweep of emotion, her muscles grew inert, her struggles ended. The tide had taken her.

Slowly, as if in obedience to a command from beyond her own initiative, she reached up the arms that had failed to hold him off and clasped her hands behind his head and when again their lips met hers were no longer unresponsive. Slowly she said in a voice of complete surrender, "Take me—my last gun is fired. I tried—but I lost—Now I can't even make terms."

"You have won," he contradicted joyously. "You've conquered the undertow. 'The idols are broken in the Temple of Baal.'"

She was still dependent upon the support of his arms: still too storm-tossed and unnerved to stand alone and her words came faintly.

"I surrender. I am at your mercy.... There is in all the world nothing you can ask that I can refuse you."

"You have chosen—finally?" he demanded and he spoke gravely, unwilling that she should fail to understand. "There will be no turning back?"

"You have chosen—not I," she replied, her eyes looking up into his. "But I accept ... your choice ... there will be no turning back."

"You are ready to repudiate, for all time this life ... Eben Tollman ... the undertow? You will be big enough and strong enough to break these shackles?"

"I am ready—" she said falteringly.

"And you will not feel that you have proven a traitor—to the memory of your father?"

That was a hard question to ask, but it must be asked. He felt a shiver run through her body and *he* saw in her eyes a fleeting expression of torture.

"I am ready," she repeated dully. Somehow he remembered with a shudder hearing a newspaper acquaintance describe an execution. The poor wretch who was the law's victim went to the chair echoing in a colorless monotony words prompted into his ear by the priest at his side. Then he heard her voice again.

"Are you through questioning me, Stuart? Because if you are ... I have something to say."

"I am listening, dearest."

"You see you must understand. You have conquered. I have surrendered—unconditionally. But it's not a victory to be very proud of or a surrender to be proud of. Once I could have given you everything—with a glory of pride—but not now." He had to bend his ear to catch her words so faintly were they breathed. "I'm overwhelmed, but not convinced. I'm ready to choose because your will has proven the stronger—but I know that it's only a triumph of passion over right. Some day we may both realize that—and hate each other."

"But you have chosen! You've risen above the bigotry of your blood!"

"No. I'm just conquered—whipped into submission. I told you you might attack when you liked.... I thought I was strong ... and I wasn't. It isn't a victory over my strength—but over my weakness. To-night I was utterly helpless."

She seemed stronger now, and in a sudden bewilderment the man released her and she stood before him pale but no longer inert.

"Then—then," he spoke with a new note of misgiving, "your decision is not final after all?"

That word "helpless" was ringing like a knell over his late triumph. It tinged victory with a hideous color of rapacity and brutality.

"Yes—it's final." She spoke slowly and laboriously. "It's final because I've confessed my helplessness. If I rallied and resisted you to-night ... I know now ... that I'd surrender again to-morrow. There's only one way I can be saved now."

"Saved—but you've saved yourself. What do you mean?"

"No, I've lost myself. You've won me ... but that's over. I can't fight any more.... I tell you I'm helpless." After a moment she added with a ghost of new-born hopefulness: "unless you can do my fighting for me."

"What would you have me do?" His words came flatly and with no trace of their recent elation.

"It is for you to say, Stuart. I'm yours.... I have no right to ask mercy ... when I lost ... when I love you so that ... that I can't resist you."

"So, the code of your fathers still holds you," he said miserably. "The undertow."

"I believe in what I've always believed," she told him. "Only I can't go on fighting for it any longer. It's for you to decide now ... but you inherited a code, too ... a code that has honor for its cornerstone, and that might be able to put generosity above victory.... I wonder if it could ... or if I'm worth the effort."

"Honor!" he exclaimed with deep bitterness. "A word with a thousand meanings and no single meaning! A tyrant that smugly rides down thought and tramps on happiness!"

"Honor has a single meaning for a woman." She laid both hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes. Her own held a mute appeal stronger than words, and her voice was infinitely tender.

"Stuart, whatever you do, I love you. I love you in every way that I know how to love ... but in the name of my God and yours and of my love for you and your love for me ... I ask you—if you can—take me back to the house—and don't enforce your victory."

The man straightened up and stood for a while, very drawn of feature and pallid. He lifted a hand vaguely and the arm dropped again like dead weight at his side. Without seeing them, he looked at the mirrored stars in the fresh-water lake across the way and twice his lips moved, but succeeded in forming no words.

At last his head came up with a sudden jerk and his utterance was difficult.

"So you put it up to me, in the name of your God: to me who acknowledge no God. You ask it in the name of generosity."

"No," she corrected him. "I'm not in a position to ask anything.... I only suggest it. I'm too helpless even to plead."

She moved over a few paces and leaned for support against the gnarled trunk of a scrub pine, watching him with a fascinated gaze as he stood bracing himself against the inward storm under which his own world and hers seemed rocking.

With the heavy and dolorous insistence of a muffled drum two thoughts were hammering at his brain: her helplessness: his honor.

But he had never put honor underfoot, he argued against that voice; only an arbitrary and little conception of honor.... Yet she could not rid herself of that conception ... and she was helpless. If he took her now into the possession of his life, he must take her, not with triumph but as he might pick up a fallen dove,

fluttering and wounded at his feet—as an exquisitely fashioned vase which his hand had shattered.

He remembered their first meeting in Virginia and his wrath when she had laughed at his narrative of the Newmarket cadets.

The Newmarket cadets!

His father had been one of them at fifteen. There came again to his ears, across the interval of years, the voice of the old gentleman, so long dead, telling that story in a house where traditions were strong and hallowed.

Across a wheat field lay a Union battery which must be stormed and taken at the bayonet's point. Wave after wave of infantry had gone forward and broken under its belching of death. The line wavered. There must be a steady—an unflinching—unit upon which to guide. The situation called for a morale which could rise to heroism. General Breckenridge was told that only the cadets from the Virginia Military Institute could do the trick: the smooth-faced boys with their young ardor and their letter-perfect training of the parade grounds. Appalled at the thought of this sacrifice of children, the Commander was said to have exclaimed with tears in his eyes, "Let them go then—and may God forgive me!"

And they had gone! Gone because there burned in their boyish hearts this absurd idea that honor is a word of a single meaning: a meaning of sacrifice. They had gone in the even unwavering alignment of a competitive drill, closing-up, as those who fell left ugly gaps in their formation, until those who did not fall had taken the gun which the veterans had not been able to take.

That had been the honor of his fathers, the honor which he had been declaring himself too advanced to accept blindly. Suddenly his boyhood ideals and his mature ideas fell into the parallel of contrast—and beside that which he had inherited, his acquired thought seemed tawdry. Of course, charging a field gun was an easy and uncomplicated thing in comparison with his own problem, but his father would have met the larger demand, too, with the same obedience to simple ideas of honor.

His own contention had been right and Conscience's wrong. That he still believed. So the spirit of the French Revolution had been perhaps a forward-moving colossus of humanity: a triumph of right over aristocratic decadence. And yet the picture of a slender queen going to the guillotine in a cart, with her chin held high under the jeers of the rabble, made the big thing seem small, and

her own adherence to code magnificent.

Slowly Stuart went back and spoke in tones of level resolution.

"To make war on you when you defied me was one thing ... to fight you when you are helpless is another.... I wasn't fighting you then but the rock-bound bigotries of your ancestors." He paused, finding it hard to choose words because of the chaotic things in his mind.

She had confronted him with a splendid Amazonian spirit of war and a declaration of strength which he could never break, and the cause for which she had stood was the cause of a cramped standard which he repudiated. Now she no longer seemed a militant incarnation, but a woman, softly vibrant: a woman whom he loved and who was helpless.

He added shortly:

"You win, Conscience. I can't accept what you can't freely give."

"Stuart—" she exclaimed, and this time the ring of revived hope thrilled in her voice, but he lifted a hand, very wearily to stop her.

"I've complained that when the crisis comes we react to the undertow. If you are the exponent of your code, that code is good enough for me. I bow to a thing bigger than myself.... Your God shall be mine, too ... to-morrow I leave, and I won't come back."

"Now, Stuart, my love," she declared, "you can say it truly: 'The idols are broken in the Temple of Baal.'"

But the renewed life of her voice faltered with the sudden realization of the other thing: of the bleakness of her future when he had gone, and suddenly she broke out in undisguised terror.

"But even until you go, Stuart ... even until to-morrow, protect me against myself, because ... I am totally helpless, and I love you rather madly."

Instinctively her arms came out and her eyes burst once more into the fires of passion, but she made an effort and drew back, and as she did so the stress of the fight prevailed and, had he not caught her, she would have fallen. She had fainted.

Farquaharson picked her up in his arms, and, distrusting himself to remain there,

started to the house, carrying her like a sleeping child.

The sight of the man going up the path with the woman in his arms was the only portion of the entire interview which Eben Tollman saw, but it served his imagination adequately as an index to the rest. He had, after a long wait on the terrace, followed them to the pines, but had not announced himself. His arrival had been too tardy to give him a view of their first—and only—embrace, and his distance had been too great to let him hear any of their words. When, after a circuitous return, he reached the terrace, his wife was sitting, pale, but with recovered consciousness, in a chair, and he himself went direct to his study.

CHAPTER XXX

It was a sleepless night for every one in the house of Eben Tollman. Conscience still felt that her long fight had ended in a total defeat and that she had been saved from worse than defeat only because her victor had risen to her plea for magnanimity. Now she lay staring at the ceiling with eyes that burned in their sockets. Self-pity warred with self-accusation.

She could not forget that moment of ecstasy in her lover's arms nor banish her wish for its repetition. With him the home of her dreams might have been a reality where men and women who made splendid successes and splendid failures came and talked of their deeds and their frustrations, and where children who were the children of love raised rose-bud lips to be kissed.

Ahead lay an indefinite future, of Stygian murk, peopled with melancholy shades.

Stuart himself did not attempt to sleep. He sat in a chair at his window and stared out. Once or twice he lighted a pipe, only to let it die to ashes between his teeth. He must not tarry here, beyond to-morrow. He had taken either a high and chivalrous ground or a sentimentally weak one. In either case it was an attitude to which he stood pledged, and one to which Conscience attached the importance of salvation. How long could he hold it?

But of the three minds prickled with insomniac activity, the operations of the elderly husband's were the strangest and most weirdly interesting. They had thrown off the halter of sanity and ranged into the imaginative unrestraint of fantastic deviltry.

Sitting alone in the study, Eben sipped brandy and indulged his abnormality. For him, weaving certainties out of the tenuous threads of hallucination, there developed the spaciousness and might of epic tragedies.

The brandy itself was a symptom of his quiet madness. Until recently he would as readily have fondled a viper as toyed with a bottle.

Now he had formed the habit of lifting a secret glass, as a rite and a toast to the portrait of the ancestor, with whose spirit he seemed to commune.

The things that had festered in the unclean soreness of his brain had tinctured every thought with their poison of monomania, leaving him without a suspicion of his own miserable deceit. He believed that he held the imperative commission of the Deity to act as a vicegerent and an avenger. God had designated him as a prosecutor, and to-night he was summing up the case against the transgressors.

"A sinful and an adulterous generation!" he breathed with curling lips.

Item by item he went over the evidence, and it fitted and jibed in every detail. From the first interrupted assignation at Providence to this evening when he had seen, silhouetted against a starry sky, the man carrying close to his breast the wife of another, no link failed to join into a perfect chain of guilt.

But above all he must remain just—as just as the Divinity whose commission he served. This essence of absolute and impersonal righteousness demanded an overt act of unquestionable guilt. "So saith the Lord."

When that deciding proof was established there should fall upon the sinning pair the wrath of an outraged heaven, and he, Eben Tollman, in whom every feeling of the heart had turned to the gall of hatred, would hurl the bolt.

But when he appeared at the breakfast table the next morning he brought the only untroubled face to be seen there.

"I am going to New York this afternoon," announced Stuart somewhat bluntly, and Eben looked quickly up, frankly surprised.

"Running down for a day or two? You'll be back, of course?" he inquired, and the guest shook his head.

"No. I sha'n't be back at all."

"But your Broadway opening doesn't take place until October? Didn't you tell us that?"

"Perhaps. I'm not going on that account."

"Then why not finish out your vacation?"

"I have finished it."

The host looked at his guest and read in his eyes a defiant dislike and a repressed ferocity, but he chose to ignore it. The long-fostered urbanity of his make-

believe must last a little longer. But at that moment Stuart's eyes met those of Conscience and he acknowledged a sense of chagrin.

After all, he was leaving to-day and whatever his feelings, he had so far been outwardly the beneficiary of Tollman's hospitality. Nothing was to be gained, except a sort of churlish satisfaction, by assuming at the eleventh hour a blunt and open hostility of manner.

"I'm sorry," suggested Tollman evenly. "I had hoped that we might have you with us longer. You have brought a certain animation to the uneventfulness of our life here."

Stuart changed his manner with an effort.

"Thank you," he replied. "But I've already over-stayed the time I had allowed myself for a vacation. There are many neglected things to be taken up and finished."

"You hadn't spoken of leaving us before." The regret in Tollman's voice was sincere, because it was the regret of a trapper who sees game slipping away from the snare, and it made him perhaps a shade over insistent. "Do you really regard it as so important?"

For just an instant a gleam of anger showed in the visitor's eyes under this questioning, and his glance, leveled straight at his host, was that of a man who would prefer open combat to veiled hostility.

"Not only important," he corrected, "but vital."

"Of course, in that event," murmured Mr. Tollman, "there is nothing more to say."

But an hour later as Conscience and Farquaharson sat on the terrace, somewhat silent and constrained, Eben joined them with a deeply troubled face.

"I've just come from the telephone," he announced with the air of a man in quandary. "It was an imperative call from Boston—and it puts me in a most awkward position."

Farquaharson, sitting with the drawn brow of preoccupation, simulated for his host's assertion no interest and offered no response, but Conscience asked, "What is it, Eben?"

"It's a business matter but one that involves a duty to my associates. I don't see how I can ignore it or decline to go."

"But why shouldn't you go?" inquired his wife, and immediately Eben replied.

"Ordinarily I should, but Stuart says he must leave for New York to-day and there are no servants on the place. You can't stay here absolutely alone."

"I shall be all right," she declared, but her husband raised his hands in a gesture of reasonable protest.

"I couldn't think of it," he insisted. "Why, it's a half-mile to the nearest house. It wouldn't do."

Then with an urgency of manner he turned to Farquaharson.

"Stuart, I dislike greatly to ask you to change your plans—but you realize the situation. Can't you put off leaving until to-morrow?"

The younger man turned slowly and his gaze was disconcertingly piercing, as he asked, "Don't you regard that as a somewhat unconventional suggestion—leaving Conscience here with no one but me? What of Dame Grundy?"

Eben only laughed and arched his brows in amusement.

"Why, my dear boy, you're a member of the family, aren't you? Such a question is the height of absurdity."

"Your faith is touching," retorted the visitor dryly, then he added: "I'm sorry, but I must go this afternoon."

Before him rose the true proportions of the ordeal to which his host so casually invited him, and from facing them he flinched with the honesty of genuine apprehension.

After last night each hour spent here meant trusting under fire a resolution attained only in a moment of something like exaltation. Such an experiment seemed the rashness of sheer irresponsibility, and to underestimate its danger was only recklessness.

Then he saw Conscience's eyes fixed musingly upon him and in them brooded a confidence which he could not analyze or comprehend.

"I wouldn't urge it," went on Eben persistently, "if there were any other solution

—but there doesn't seem to be. So in spite of your objections I believe you'll do as I ask, Stuart, even at the cost of some inconvenience to yourself. In a way you can't refuse, my boy, because until this morning you gave us no warning of this sudden flight."

And with a complacency which the younger man found as galling as an insult, the host turned and went into the house with an air of one who takes for granted compliance with his expressed wish.

Indeed, his line of reasoning admitted no doubt or shadow of doubt. He had construed Stuart's first refusal as a mere trick of intrigue, cloaking under the appearance of protest a situation eagerly welcomed. Refuse an uninterrupted opportunity to take to his embraces the woman he adored with a guilty passion! Eben laughed to himself at the thought. Does a hungry lion scorn striking down its prey? Does a thief repudiate an unwatched treasury?

But when he had gone, Stuart turned indignantly to Conscience.

"You see, don't you, that it's impossible?"

"Why?" she asked, and in his bewilderment he found himself answering excitedly:

"Why? Do you mean that, after last night, you would trust yourself here ... with me ... and no one else? Didn't we both admit that it was too much for us—unless we separated?"

"After last night," she responded, and the fearlessness of her voice utterly confounded him, "I would trust myself with you anywhere."

"God in Heaven!" he burst out. "Don't you realize that all strength is relative? Don't you know that any boiler ever made will explode if you give it enough pressure?"

"It's not a test I welcome either," she declared seriously. "But I do believe in you now—and there's another side to it." After a moment's hesitation she went on slowly: "After going through last night—and after trying to face the future ... there's comfort in feeling that he trusts me like that. I don't deserve it, but I'd like to ... and when he comes back to-morrow, if there's one day more of fight left in you, Stuart dear—I can."

His expression changed and he said dubiously: "It's going to be hard."

"Yes, but how can we tell him that?"

He nodded acknowledgment of the point. "There *is* something in being trusted," he told her resolutely. "If you can feel secure with me one day more—I'll go through with it."

So Eben had his way and put his own damaging construction on the result.

"Good!" he announced when the visitor finally acceded; "I felt sure you wouldn't leave me in the lurch. I'll drive the buggy to the train and leave it at the livery stable until I get back—since we have no chauffeur."

When Tollman had gone Stuart came to Conscience on the terrace. "You'll be all right here for a while, won't you?" he asked. "I think I'll go for a tramp."

She said nothing, but her eyes were questioning, and the man answered their interrogation almost gruffly.

"We've got to walk close to the edge," he said with the quiet of restrained passion. "You trust me, you say, and even before you said it I read it in your eyes. I want that same trust to be in them to-morrow.... I don't know how you feel, but I'm like the reforming drunkard—tortured by his thirst." He paused, then added, "I think it's just as well to walk off my restiveness if I can."

It was five o'clock when he returned, hot and weary from fast tramping in the blistering heat, but when he presented himself, as dusty as a miller to Conscience, who received him among the flowers of her garden, the woman recognized, from his face and the smile of self-victory in his eyes, that he had come back a dependable ally and not a dangerous enemy. In his voice as he hailed her was the old ring of comradeship—and it was almost cheerful. "Hurry into your bathing suit," he invited tersely. "The water is bluer than water ever was before."

Her eyes met his dubiously. She had not, like himself, burned out her wretchedness of spirit in muscular fatigue.

"I feel rather tired, Stuart," she demurred. But he answered decisively, "That's exactly why you need a plunge. You'll go in the tired housekeeper and come out

Aphrodite rising from the foam."

"To-morrow perhaps—" she began, but he shook his head.

"If I'm any judge of weather the furies are brewing something in the line of a tempest. To-morrow will probably be a day of storm."

Under his forced lightness of speech, she realized the tenderness of solicitude—and acquiesced, because he wished it.

From her window as she changed into bathing things she saw the cove, blue as the Bay of Naples. After to-morrow, she thought, she would hate that cove. After to-morrow she must begin making her life over, and it would be like poverty's task of turning thread-bare seams.

In a little while Stuart, waiting for her in the hall below, heard, as he had heard on the day of his arrival, a laugh at the stairhead and looked up to see her there, standing once more in the attitude of one about to dive.

Her bare arms were raised and her dark hair fell heavily about her face, for she had not yet gathered and bound it under her bathing cap.

Through the emptiness of after years, he knew that picture would haunt him with the ache of inexpressible allurement, but now he forced a laugh and, stretching up his own arms, said challengingly, "Jump; I'll catch you."

Each detail of that swimming excursion was a reminder; an emphasis of thought upon these little things which association had made unaccountably dear, and which must be relinquished, yet the physical stimulus of the cooling water and the rhythmic companionship of the long swim across the cove and back had their effect, too, and were healing.

As he followed her up the twisting path ... between pine and bayberry ... for the last time ... the sun shone on her until she sparkled as if the clinging silk of her dripping bathing dress were sea weed, and in his heart he cursed Eben Tollman.

When they sat alone at table, where shams refuse to survive, a silence of constraint fell upon them and each fresh effort at talk broke down in pitiful failure.

Later as the last plate was stored in the cupboard and Farquaharson hung his dish towel on its rack, he said whimsically, "And to-morrow your butler leaves your

service. Are you going to give him references?"

With a sudden break in her voice she wheeled on him.

"Please, Stuart," she begged, "don't try to make jokes about it. It's ghastly."

Early in the evening Farquaharson's prophecy fulfilled itself and the storm broke with a premature ferocity of shrieking winds, and endless play of lightning and torrents of rain. Against the French windows of the living-room, where they sat, came a pelting like shot against the glass.

"Conscience," said Stuart gravely, when the talk had for a time run in uneven fits and starts, "I know your views by now, and you know mine. But I want you to realize this: it's not your cause that I obey or love—it's *you*."

He paused for a moment, then went on: "You told me last night that you were helpless. I want you to recognize that you have been splendidly victorious—all through: because you are splendid yourself. It's a victory that's costing us all the happiness out of life, perhaps, but it oughtn't to leave you any room for self-reproach. You stood a long siege and it was left for me to make the hardest and most cruel onslaught of all on your overtaxed courage. I am sorry—and I capitulate—and I love you."

The clock in the hall struck nine and Conscience rose from her chair. Her eyes filled with uncontrollable tears and her lips trembled at their corners. The man bent forward, but, catching himself, he drew back and waited.

"Stuart, Stuart," she told him, "it's all so bleak—ahead! There are things that I must say to you, too, but I can't say them now. We can't sit here talking like this. It's like talking over the body of our dead happiness."

"I know," he replied in a strained voice. "It's just like that."

"I'm going to my room," she declared. "Perhaps I can write it all more easily than I can say it. Do you mind?"

"No." He shook his head. "I think it's better—but you must sleep to-night. Have you anything to take?"

"I have trional—but maybe I won't need it."

He closed the windows and shot the bolt of the front door; then, at the head of the stairs, they both paused.

"I would like to kiss you good-night," he said with a queer smile, "but—"

"But what?" she asked, and with their eyes meeting in full honesty he answered: "But—I don't dare."

Conscience's own room was at the front and right of the house, overlooking the cove and the road. Stuart's was at the back and left, separated by the length of the hall and by several rooms now empty.

For a long while after she had switched on her lights the woman sat in an attitude of limp and tearless distress. She could not yet attack the task of that letter which was to explain so much.

But finally she made a beginning.

> "Dearest," she wrote, "(because it would only be dishonest to call you anything else), I am trying to write the things I couldn't say to you. You know and I know that if we acknowledged loving each other, when I have no right to love you, at least it has been a love that has been innocent in everything except its existence. When we look back on it, and try, as we must, to forget it, there will be no ghosts of guilty remembrance to haunt us. We loved each other in childhood, almost, and we loved each other until we let a misunderstanding separate us. I'm afraid, dear, I shall always love you, and yet I shall be more proud than ashamed when I look back on this time here together. Perhaps I should be ashamed of loving you at all, while I am the wife of a man who is good and who trusts me. But I am proud that you proved big enough to help me when I needed you. I shall be proud that when I was too weak to fight for myself you fought for me. I am proud that there was never a moment which Eben might not have seen, or one which he would have resented.
>
> "I am trying to think, and when one reaches the point of utter honesty with oneself, one sees things more clearly. I told you that I thought Eben himself had come to believe this marriage a failure. But now I see why more clearly.
>
> "It was my fault. I have been absolutely true to him in act, but perhaps, if I had let myself, I could after all have been true in a larger sense: in the sense of a better understanding. Perhaps I can still—and I mean to try.
>
> "I know that you distrust him, but since last night I have been thinking of

his great generosity, and of what unfaltering trust he has had in me. A trust like that ought to have brought him an allegiance not only of form but of the heart itself.

"Had he been a mean or suspicious man there were many circumstantial things that might have aroused his jealousy, but he has always been above jealousy.

"We know that there has been no taint of guilt—that our love has been, by ordinary standards, entirely innocent. But to him it has all been giving—and receiving nothing.

"From first to last he has trusted me. Leaving me here with you is a final demonstration of that trust—and he loves me.

"I am writing about Eben because I want you, who are at heart so just, to be fair in your thought of him. In our decision to separate for all time—"

There the pen faltered and Conscience had to rest for a moment.

"—you would not think the more of me, if you did not believe that I meant to carry the effort through to the end. I am going to begin over with what you call the hopeless experiment—and even now I think I have a chance ... a fighting chance of winning. If I have, I owe it to you."

CHAPTER XXXI

In Boston Eben would have been safely housed against the storm, but Eben was not in Boston. He had driven to the village and put his horse and buggy in the livery stable. At the station he had bought a ticket for Boston, but when the express made its first stop he had dropped off to buy a paper and had intentionally allowed his train to go on without him.

To several acquaintances whom he met he confided the circumstance of his clumsy mistake, and one of them remembered in the light of after events that though he spoke with his ordinary reserve of manner his eyes had held a "queer glitter." Tollman told these persons that he would take the later train to his destination, but what he actually did was to board the afternoon local going in the direction of his home. As chance ordained, he paid his fare to a new conductor, who did not know him, and sat in the day coach unaccosted and unrecognized.

He did not remain on the local until it reached his own town of Tanner, but dropped off at West Tanner, one station short of the full distance, from which point he had a walk of four miles by a road sandy and little frequented, to his own house.

Even now Eben did not hurry, but when he had left the limits of the village he walked slowly and even paused occasionally to rest and reflect, consulting his watch on these halts as though his object was not so much the saving of time, as its killing.

In short, the Eben Tollman of this evening was not the same man that he had ever been before. To a superficial eye he was, as usual, sedately quiet, yet there was a new quality in his mood. This was the sort of quiet that might brood at the bottom of an ocean whose surface is being lashed into the destructive turmoil of tempest. Only since Eben Tollman was a madman—not a noisy and raving maniac but a homicidally dangerous and crafty one—his situation was inverted. It was the surface that was calm with him and the deeps that were frenzied.

To be sure, all these seeming vicissitudes of his journey were parts of a plan symmetrically ordered from the crazed compulsion of suspicion and jealousy and now ripe for its fruition, which was to be murder.

Of course the motive which actuated him, locked in its logic-proof compartment, would not have been, by him, called murder but obedience to a divine mandate. None-the-less it contemplated human sacrifice.

Just as the storm broke with its cannonading of winds and its fulmination of lightning he stopped at the edge of a small lake where an ice-house, now exhausted of supply, had been left accommodatingly unlocked.

He felt no hesitancy to taking refuge there because the place belonged to him. Quite recently he had foreclosed, the mortgage which gave him title to the small farm upon which it stood.

Eben's plan contemplated neither a premature nor an over-tardy arrival at his own house. The two malefactors who were, he felt absolutely certain, using his roof for their lustful assignation, had the night before them. They would avail themselves of it with that sybarite deliberateness which had characterized their epicurean guile and deceit from the beginning.

He consulted his watch. He judged that a quarter after nine, or perhaps nine-thirty, would be about the psychological time for his entry upon the scene, with his contribution of an unforeseen climax to the drama.

It was not yet seven, and it would be as well to wait here while the storm, which made the old ice-house tremble about his head, rode out its initial fury.

His judgment proved good for before it was necessary to start, the main violence of wind and rain had abated into gusts and desultory showers. Along the way he encountered evidences of its force, in fallen branches and broken trees; and in one place, as he crossed a road, he ran into a hanging strand of telephone wire pulled down by broken timber.

As he drew near his own house his wrath mounted to the cold and inflexible bitterness of arctic destruction, but his mind seemed to clarify into a preternatural alertness such as the absinthe-drinker fancies gives a razor edge to his thought functions. Like the keenness of absinthe it was hallucination. The tremendous thrill of a madness that had been cumulative through months and had finally reached the fulfillment of action, was vitalizing him.

When the walls of his house bulked at last before his eyes, he paused and began to take an accounting. One detail somewhat dismayed him. The entire lower floor was dark, and since it was yet early he had not expected that to be the case.

The sudden fear attacked him that he was too late.

He made a complete and careful circuit of the grounds, noting with the fancied shrewdness of his mood every circumstance upon which a meaning might be placed.

The blankness of the first floor was merely indicative—but when he noted also the dark sash of Farquaharson's window indicativeness assumed a more sinister emphasis. It was reasonable to infer that unlighted rooms were unoccupied rooms and conversely, it was ominously significant that the wide window of his wife's bedroom gave the single frame of illumination that broke the darkness of the four walls.

For a better survey, he retreated to a bit of high ground at the right of the house which afforded a narrow glimpse into Conscience's room, though at an unsatisfactory range.

From this natural watch-tower he could make out the seated figure of his wife at her desk and from time co time she turned her head, as one might, who speaks to, or listens to, a companion within the same walls, though out of sight of a man who commands a circumscribed field of vision. Shortly he left that position and lurked for a time among the flowers and shrubbery that lined the stone wall of the yard.

From here he saw Conscience move into the zone of light framed by the window. Her hair had been loosened from its coils and fell in a heavy cascade of darkness over shoulders that were bare.

She seemed to wear a dainty negligée of ribboned silk, and as he watched she began slowly braiding her hair into two dusky ropes. After a little time she disappeared again from view.

The lunatic, now thoroughly frenzied, and imbued with the phantasy of suspicion, went back again to the higher ground and, after a time, saw her open the door of her room and disappear into the hall. That hall was the road that led to Stuart Farquaharson's room—and perdition!

Once more he, too, went to the rear of the house. There lay the best chance of viewing the next and most ominous scene of this drama of infamy and unfaithfulness.

But the hall at that angle was dark and told him nothing. Something else

however told him everything—at least he so believed. The window of Stuart Farquaharson's room was no longer black but a frame of light.

Eben stood for a space with breath that came in hurried and panting excitement while the madness mounted in his veins and burned fiercely in his eyes.

Then, against the illuminated background he saw Stuart, the man whom God meant him to kill.

He was wrapped in a bathrobe and was calmly raising a match to his pipe-bowl.

The averted face was looking, Eben bitterly told himself, at the door which he could not see; was watching it open to admit Conscience Tollman.

Now was the appointed time! Now were the judgments loosened! Hastening his steps into an awkward trot, Tollman went around to the front door, his fingers trembling so that he had to stop and make an effort at calming himself before he could manage the key in the lock.

When at last it was fitted and stealthily turned with an attempt at noiselessness, the door refused to yield. That, he told himself furiously, he might have expected. For all their seeming sense of security they had reënforced it by shooting the bolt on the inside so that no one could enter without sending an alarm ahead of his coming. It was only one proof more of guilty concealment within. But it was far past time for needing such corroboration. He had seen enough and the problem raised by the present discovery was quite another. He went about the place trying side doors and windows, but everywhere his house was closed against him—and that meant a complete revision of plan, and the relinquishment of the tremendous force of climax to be gained by slipping in unannounced and holding over confounded evil-doers the irrefutable proof of demonstration.

He must knock on his door, and give them time to slip back into their disguise of hypocrisy. It meant that, in the principal feature, his whole carefully laid plan had failed, but at least now he knew the truth and was ready to let the avenging bolt fall. They would meet him with smiles of innocence: they with sinful kisses yet warm on their lips. They, fresh from their interrupted love, would talk casually. Very well, for a little while yet he could smile and be casual, too, meeting their guile with counter dissembling—until he was ready.

If Stuart Farquaharson had been sitting most of that evening in a darkened room, it was because his misery was so great that the light seemed to make clearer the wretchedness of his future. For a time he had tried to read; even to write, but that was before Eben had come. In all those efforts he had failed and now for more than an hour he had been gazing dejectedly out of the window, listening to the wind as it buffeted itself out and died in an exhausted moaning among the pines. He had heard the wailing of the harbor sirens but his eyes had been unseeing—at least unrecognizing.

And Conscience had been writing the letter which she meant to leave under the door of Stuart's room. He would find it there in the morning, and when he said good-by, he would understand the things which she had left unsaid before they parted in the hall.

She *had* gone and left the letter at the door: had even listened there a moment, unknown to the room's occupant, and it was that crossing of her threshold which her husband saw.

Then Stuart had switched on his light, and thrown off his clothes. If he seemed calm as he lighted his pipe, it was a calm of spent emotion, and not the complacency of a man who awaits a tryst.

Through the stillness of the house the hammering of the brass knocker sounded loudly. Stuart Farquaharson in his room and Conscience in hers, both heard it, with a sense of astonishment. The man opened his door and hurried to the stairhead, where he found Conscience, arrived in advance of him.

But as he had crossed his threshold Farquaharson had seen an envelope lying in the light that flooded through, and he recognized Conscience's hand in the address as he picked it up. Remembering what she had said about writing to him he was not surprised, and wishing to save the missive until he should be alone again, he thrust it into the pocket of his bath robe.

"I wonder who it can be—on such a night?" murmured the woman, and the man suggested:

"Perhaps you had better let me investigate. I imagine some motorist has come to grief in the storm."

When he threw open the door, Eben Tollman stepped in.

The elder man stood for a moment glancing from his guest to his wife, and in

that instant of scrutiny whatever of the inquisitorial might have lurked in his eyes left them for a bland suavity. Conscience had hastened forward and her lips were smiling. Farquaharson's eyes dared to meet his own with a level straightforwardness.

But Tollman read into both the smile and the straight-gazing eyes a hypocrisy which superlatively embittered the blood in his veins.

Conscience was standing before him with the exquisite clarity of her complexion unclouded; with the dark pools of her eyes unvexed by the weight of hideous perfidy that should be stifling her heart.

This capping off of infamy with an angelic pretext of innocence was the supreme insult not only to Eben Tollman, outraged husband and man, but to the Righteousness he served, the Righteousness which he now seemed to hear calling trumpet-tongued for the reprisal which was at hand.

"What in the world has happened to you?" he heard his wife exclaiming in an astonished voice, and he laughed as he responded:

"I came back. Haven't you a kiss for me, my dear?" Then when she raised her lips to his an inner voice, which spoke only madness, whispered viciously, "The Judas woman! The unspeakable infamy!"

He explained that he had missed his train, and that when he telephoned to Boston, he learned that the matter could after all be deferred. A man from Chicago had also failed to arrive.

"But the train has been in for hours," Farquaharson reminded him with a puzzled tinge in his voice. "It can't have taken you this long to drive from Tanner."

"No, I didn't drive. The idea struck me of getting off at West Tanner and walking over. The old mare went lame and I didn't want to give her any more work to-night.... Then the storm broke and I took refuge in an empty ice-house."

Conscience said suddenly: "But, Eben, you are soaked—and if you've been wandering about like that, you can't have had any supper."

"No," he shook his head. "I haven't and I'm starving."

Including them both, he suggested with a frank seeming of pleasure. "However, I'm glad to be back. Did I wake you both up? You seem to have made a short

evening of it."

"I haven't been asleep," answered Stuart, and Conscience added: "Nor I."

"I noticed," went on the husband evenly, "that the lower floor was dark, as I came up ... your window, too, Stuart, when I first saw it."

"You must have come very slowly," replied the younger man with a calmness that struck the other as the acme of effrontery. "My light has been burning for ten minutes ... but I don't make out how you saw my window if you came from the front of the house."

Eben winced a little, but his smile only became more urbane.

"Quite true, my boy. You see I tried my latch key first, and finding the house dark, I sought to avoid disturbing the sleepers. I went to the back door and the side door. Finally I knocked. Since neither of you was asleep it's all right."

"Perhaps after being in the fog so long," Conscience suggested, "a little brandy might be advisable," but Eben Tollman laughed.

"My dear, for some unaccountable reason, I feel as if I'd been away from home as long as Enoch Arden—and I'm much happier to be back. I am in the mood for celebration. There's a bottle of old Madeira in the pantry. I don't think a little of it will harm any of us ... and I'm going to dissipate even farther. I'm going to smoke a cigar." Smoking a cigar was with Eben a rite which occurred with the frequency of a Christmas or a Thanksgiving dinner.

Something youthful had come into his manner, and Farquaharson, in spite of his misery, laughed.

"I'm afraid I'm hardly dressed for a party," he demurred, but Eben answered in a tone of aggrieved hospitality.

"My dear fellow, you are much more fully dressed than when you go bathing; both of you—and how can I celebrate alone?" So Stuart smilingly asserted:

"All right. We'll have a toast in your excellent Madeira to the return of Enoch Arden."

Possibly his voice held a meaning less light than his words. Perhaps he was thinking of it as a toast to his own departure into exile, but to Eben it had the ring of a sneer, as though the words "too late" had been added.

Conscience disappeared to return shortly with a tray containing cold meat and bread, and to her husband she said: "Eben, I can't find the famous Madeira. Where is it?"

He rose, and announced that he would bring it at once, disappearing beyond the swinging door of the pantry.

While he was absent, Conscience turned to the man in the bath robe. A smile half of amusement and half of self-accusation tilted the corners of her lips.

"You see," she said thoughtfully, "I've just let myself think of him as elderly until, to me, he's become elderly. Yet to-night he's younger than either of us, isn't he?"

"To-night neither one of us is very young, dear," he replied with a wry smile.

In the pantry Eben Tollman poured three glasses of Madeira, and placed them on a tray carefully noting their relative positions. With fingers that trembled violently for a moment Eben grew as abruptly steady; he drew from his waistcoat pocket a small envelope such as druggists use, and into two of the glasses he divided its supply of small tablets.

"Ebbett said they were tasteless and readily soluble," he reminded himself. "And that the amount should be enough for a dog or a man."

Then he patted his breast pocket, where lay an envelope yellowed with age, bearing the legend "S. F. & C. W."

Of that he meant also to make use later.

CHAPTER XXXII

The living-room held a glow of mellow light, but as Eben returned with the three brimming glasses, Conscience touched a button which darkened the wall sconces and left only the large lamp on the table, where she had placed her tray.

"Inasmuch as two members of this party are more or less gauzily appareled," she suggested, "it doesn't seem to be necessary to make an illumination of it."

Tollman, with a seeming of absent-mindedness set down his light burden on a small side table, somewhat remote, but it was with no want of certainty that he marked the relative positions of its contents. One glass was alone at the edge of the silver platter. Two others were closer together at the center.

Now he came over, empty-handed, and as he regarded the larger tray of food, he rubbed his palms appreciatively with a convincing relish.

"You have prepared a feast for the traveler on very short notice," he smilingly attested while inwardly and more grimly he added in apposition—"'a table in the presence of mine enemies!'"

His wife modestly disclaimed credit. "You are easy to please, Eben. There's only beef sandwiches and fruit and a little cake. Would you like me to make you some coffee?"

Eben raised his hand with a gesture of refusal. "No, indeed, I am more than satisfied—unless you want it yourself."

But she shook her head, "It would keep me awake. I haven't been sleeping well of late." This announcement of insomnia—twin sister to a troubled conscience, he thought—was a somewhat bold skirting of admission, but his words were reassuring.

"The Madeira is well timed then. A glass before bedtime should be soothing." Still standing, he bit into one of the beef sandwiches, and observed with an approach to the whimsy of gayety: "I've never been quite clear in my own mind as to what was meant by the stalled ox of scriptural fame and I've always subscribed to the text 'better a dinner of herbs where love is'—but I'm bound to say, it's very gratifying to have the stalled ox and the love as well."

For Farquaharson his air of celebration held an irony which accentuated his own exclusion and made participation difficult. He was the exile at the feast.

Eben who, alone of the three, had not seated himself wandered about with the restless volubility of a peripatetic philosopher, though his humor was genial beyond its custom. At last with the air of one too engaged with his own conversation to heed details of courtesy he took up his glass and sipped from it thoughtfully.

"Even if this is my own wine," he commented, "I can't withhold commendation. I sometimes think that only the very abstemious man can truly appreciate a good vintage. For him it is an undulled pleasure of the palate."

Stuart Farquaharson at last found it possible to laugh.

"I for one can't dispute the statement," he confessed. "I haven't tasted it yet—though I understood that both Conscience and I were invited."

"A thousand pardons!" exclaimed the host, shamefacedly. "I am a poor sort of Ganymede—drinking alone and leaving my guests unserved!"

He set down his own glass, and with tardy solicitude proffered to them the remaining two.

"Here's to the homecoming," he proposed with a jauntiness which sat upon him like foreign raiment as he took up his own wine again and Stuart, with a dolorous smile, suggested: "Why not include me in the toast, Eben? The arrival—and the departure."

"Ah," demurred the elder man easily. "But that's not to be celebrated, my boy. For us that is a misfortune."

The two men emptied and put down their glasses—and lighted cigars while Conscience sat thoughtfully, making slower work of her Madeira.

"And now shall we have a little music?" inquired the husband, while the younger man's face darkened, and Conscience said rather hastily:

"Not this evening, please, Eben. We've rather overworked the phonograph of late."

"Not even 'The Beautiful Night of Love'?" The inquiry held an insistent shade of regret.

But Eben, as his glance went shiftily to the face of the clock, was as steady and as cool as one may become under the temporary keying of a repressed and brain-wrecking excitement. To this inflexible composure he must hold until a certain moment arrived, and he must time himself to its coming with a perfection of nicety.

"At last, Eben," Farquaharson testified when a brief silence had fallen on the trio, "I am ready to praise your wine. I feel the glow in my veins and the glow is insidiously grateful."

"I was just thinking so, too," agreed Conscience. "It takes only a taste to go to my head." She was still holding between her fingers the stem of a glass half-full. "I was very tired and already I feel wonderfully restored."

Indeed the shadow had left her eyes and in them was a quiet glow as she smiled upon her husband whose nerves were as tautly strung as those of a sprinter crouched upon his mark and straining to be away at the pistol's crack. "The traitoress has the infamy to smile at me—whom she has betrayed," was the thought in his heart. "It will soon be time!"

These final minutes of necessary waiting and dissembling were the most unendurable of all—this damming back of a madman's thirst for vengeance. Ebbett had said that there is a prefatory period of excitation followed shortly by languor. They must realize their fate, otherwise punishment would be empty, but when he should launch his bolt, the power of the drug must have laid upon them both the beginnings of helplessness: the weight of its inertia. Now he said, acknowledging the praise of his wine:

"The glow comes first, and then the sedative influence—like the touch of velvet."

"You are almost poetic to-night, Eben," smiled Conscience, and he laughed. But abruptly he shivered, and became prosaic again.

"It seems chilly to me here—Perhaps I've taken cold. The day was hot enough, heaven knows, but the night has turned raw—Do you mind if I light the fire?"

Receiving permission, Eben turned his back and stooped to touch a match to the logs on the hearth. In a moment the flames were leaping and the man who had straightened up stood for a brief space watching them spread and broaden.

It was while he was so engaged that Conscience raised her hand and held out her

glass, still not quite emptied, for Stuart to set down. She did so silently and the man rose from his chair and took it from her, but in the simple operation their fingers met and a sudden surging of emotions came to each in the moment of contact.

Without a word, save as his lips formed mutely the two syllables—"To you"—Stuart lifted the glass toward her and then drained it.

Then as he replaced it together with his own on the table Eben Tollman turned, and noted, with satisfaction, the emptiness of the miniature goblets.

The light of animation had died slowly from the dark eyes of the woman, until to the watching husband they seemed inky pools of languor. The leaping flames held her attention and her lips were parted in an inscrutable half-smile. Already her thoughts were becoming pleasantly languid, dwelling on such inconsequential things as how blue the water had been—and that after all to-morrow does not come—until to-morrow.

Shadows leaped and danced fantastically against the color of the crackling logs and in her hair shimmered a glow that ranged between the glint of darkened mahogany and jet. It was of this that Stuart thought, as, for a half hour, they listened to Tollman's talk, content with brief replies or none at all. Some magic had lulled him, too, into a quietened mood from which had been smoothed the saw-edged raggedness of despair. With a vague wonderment he recognized this metamorphosis. No such soothing potency lay in any wine ever pressed from the grapes of Funchal; but it was inexplicably pleasant, and surrender grew beyond any power of its questioning or combatting. Gradually, agreeably the two of them were sinking below the surface of consciousness. Soon they would be submerged.

Then in a moment of partial realization, Conscience said: "I think I had better go upstairs. I was almost napping in my chair." But she made no actual effort to move and her husband raised a smiling demurrer to the suggestion.

"It would be a pity to go just now. The fire has only begun to be cheerful and as for myself I am still chilly."

It was unaccountably pleasant there, with this strange, almost magical blurring of realities into a velvety ease ... with visions of blue water and contented thoughts hovering near in a waking and seductive sort of sleep.

A long silence fell upon the three—realized by only one.

The point where they drifted into the nebulous territory of dreams was undefined. The actual was dropping away into an impalpable mistiness as the earth drops from under a rising aëroplane.

Both Conscience and Stuart sought futilely to rouse themselves because the dream had now ceased to be pleasant, and yet it was only an ugly picture projected against a beautiful background deepening into a purple velvet stupor.

They knew the picture itself was not real because, in it, Eben's usually calm face was distorted into a demoniac frenzy and his voice quavered and ranted into a high-pitched incoherence.

The dream in spite of its fantastic wildness must have held some attribute of the comic for they smiled as if in confidential understanding. Eben seemed to be waving before their eyes an envelope and to be talking about intercepted letters which was all absurdly, impalpably funny.

There was also some grotesque eloquence about the vengeance of a Most High God, visited upon adulterers.

But the voice dropped sometimes to an inaudible pitch and rose sometimes like a scream because it came from an incalculable distance and the figure, distorted with meaningless gyrations of gesture, appeared and disappeared like a shade in a farce.

Eben Tollman stood declaiming on his hearth with his clenched hands stretched high above his head while his victims drowsed peacefully.

Mania raced and burned through him as a current travels through wire. The dam of repression which had only collected and stored up the elements of flood had burst into torrents and chaos. The wreck of his brain swirled furiously in a single whirlpool of idea, the monomania that he was called to be God's avenger.

But he had lost his audience and his victims had escaped him. Upon the lips of the two unspeakable malefactors dwelt a smile of obtuse tranquillity.

He raised his eyes, as if to heaven, and his voice in fulminating anathema.

"'Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication and going after strange flesh ... are set forth for an

example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.... Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh ... despise dominion and speak evil of dignities.'"

The madman paused, but only for a moment, then again he thundered out his rabid and distorted prayer. "'Their throat is an open sepulcher: they flatter with their tongue.... Destroy them, O God: let them perish through their own imaginations.'"...

When Tollman's delirium had burned him into a temporary exhaustion he collapsed into a chair and at his feet, forgotten now, fell the envelope which he had flaunted vainly before the eyes of the transgressors. They had escaped, not scourged or harrowed according to their deserts, but smiling like sleepy children, through the door of unconsciousness and oblivion. Gropingly his fingers went again into his pocket and came out holding the envelope out of which he had taken the death tablets. They, too, had betrayed him. Instead of torture they had brought the peace of Nirvana.

From the limp fingers of the demented creature who sat gazing at his two victims, the envelope fluttered down. Except for the mad embers of the eyes, one might have said that the room held three dead bodies.

At least he had sent them on to a judgment from which they could not escape with iniquitous smiles.

Then a sudden doubt assailed him. Were they, after all, dead?

He came to his foot, moving with the spasmodic jerkiness of his condition, but with all the augmented strength of a madman's power.

To his crazed investigation their wrists betrayed no pulse and their lips, no breath. Then they were dead!

With an inarticulate exclamation, like the oath of a man devoid of speech, he ripped the sheer and ribboned silk from his wife's breast, as savagely as though he were tearing the flesh itself, and laid his hand upon the bared bosom. There, too, was the unfluttering stillness of a lifeless heart.

Then straightening up, he gazed down on her, loathing all the beauty which had once allured him and which now dedicated itself, in death, to the benediction of a smile turned toward her lover.

Already mad, his lunacy became a perversion of deviltry. He lifted the unstirring body and posed it in a relaxed attitude of ease upon the broad couch that stood at one side of the hearth. Back of the bared shoulders, he heaped cushions, so that she seemed the voluptuous figure of a woman who abandons herself to as irresponsible a gratification of sense as a purring tigress. The fire, playing on the ivory of her cheeks and the bosom more softly white than the checks, seemed to awaken a ghost of flickering mockery about her smiling lips.

Then, drawing upon his unwonted strength of the hour, Eben Tollman moved the other figure until what had been Stuart Farquaharson sat beside what had been Conscience Tollman in lover-like proximity.

As he staged this ghastly pantomime, he gloated wildly. That was the scene which a bolted door had prevented him from surprising! That was the inexpressible and iniquitous devotion which they had hidden in innocent smiles! Their eyes were closed, but each face was turned toward the other, and in death the woman's seemed to take on a deeper tenderness.

Tollman lifted one of her arms, from which the drapery fell back, and laid it across the shoulder of the man at her side, and about him the world rocked in the quake of mania.

He stood off and contemplated them from a greater distance—and having, in his madman's saturnalia, burned out even the augmented forces of his fever, a feeling of weakness overcame him. Then it was that his eyes caught the corner of an envelope protruding from the pocket of Stuart Farquaharson's bath robe. Hurriedly he tore it out and ripped off the end. It was in Conscience's hand—doubtless another proof of iniquity.

But as he read, the fires of his brain were swept back, under the quenching force of undeniable conviction. This letter had not been meant for his eyes. It could hold no motive of deceiving him.

Only treatment in confinement could ever again set up the fallen and shattered sanity of this man, but like rents in a curtain there came to him flashes of the rational. They came fitfully under the tremendously sobering effect of what he read. What Stuart Farquaharson had never read.

"It was my fault.... I have been absolutely true to him in act ... but perhaps ... I could ... have been true in a larger sense. I have been thinking of his great

generosity and of what unfaltering trust he has in me ... he has always been above jealousy. We know that there has been no taint of guilt. Even now I think I have a fighting chance of winning. If I have I owe it to you...." These words spelled out a document which could not be doubted, which even the perversion of a jealousy gone mad could no longer doubt.

He, Eben Tollman, the righteous, had built the whole horrible structure of abomination—out of jealous fabrications! He had made the hideous mistake and capped it with murder!

A nausea of brain and soul swept him. Then again the half-sane interval darkened luridly into hallucination, but now it was a new hallucination.

The figure of the woman on the couch seemed to move. Instead of the filmy draperies torn by his own hand, she wore the habiliments of poverty and looked at him out of a face of plebeian prettiness; a face of dimly confused features. The apparition rose and stood waveringly upright. "You murdered me, too!" it said in a voice of vague simplicity. Eben Tollman tried to scream and could not.

He covered his eyes with his palms, but failed to shut out the image because it lay deeper than the retina's curtain.

"I'm one of the others you murdered," went on the voice. "I'm Minnie Ray."

Tollman straightened suddenly up. The vagary had passed—but on the couch the two immovable figures remained.

Tollman had never been a handsome man, but his face and carriage had held a certain stiff semblance of dignity. Now his cheeks flamed with the temperature which must, without the immediate administration of a powerful sedative, burn out his life with its crisping and charring virulence. His eyes were no longer human, but transformed into that kinship with those of wild beasts or red embers that comes with acute mania.

As the shadows wavered in the room which he had made a place of murder, there rose out of them taunting, accusing figures. He seemed to see Hagan, the detective, grotesquely converted into an executioner clad in red and Sam Haymond launching against him the anathema of the Church. There were shapes of strange things neither human, animal nor reptile—but wholly monstrous—emerging greedily from filthy lairs and creeping toward him with sinuous movements through a sea of slime.

For the furies that haunted Orestes, because of his classic crime, had come back to pursue Eben Tollman.

He laughed as maniacs laugh and screamed as maniacs scream, until the strange medley of insensate sounds went rocketing and skittering through the house and came back in echo, as the retort of the furies.

One human sense was left: the sense of flight: the impulse to leave the place where Death held dominion and Death's avengers came in unclean and rapacious hordes.

Turning, he fled with a speed born of his dementia, hurling himself through the door with a crash of shattered glass and a trail of incoherent ravings.

Without sense of direction or objective he raced here and there, doubling like a frightened rabbit, taking no account of paths or obstructions, seeing nothing but hordes of pursuing furies urged on by a parson and a hangman who led the chase.

The storm had begun anew, and out here in the darkness the cannonading of thunder and wind swelled the chorus of pursuit. When the refugee fell, he clawed and bit at the vines which had tripped him, in a fancied battle of Laocoön, until at last he saw the coolness of water ahead of him, and, dashing down the slope, hurled himself, shrieking, into its stillness.

There his outcry ended. His spread fingers clutched at a liquid emptiness and his fevered eyes showed once or twice briefly—and were quenched.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The logs on the hearth leaped and crackled, spurting tongues of blue flame, and after they had roared up to their fullest they slowly subsided, until the shadows about the walls spread and encroached from their corners toward the center of the room. The polish of furniture and the bright angles of silver and bric-à-brac stood out with diminishing high-lights. Hour by hour and minute by minute the faces of two unmoving figures seated on a low and heavily cushioned couch grew less clear and merged into the growing darkness.

Then the logs glowed only as embers against their bed of white ashes and the table lamp burned on in single steadfastness.

Silence held the place, abandoned now by the furies, to the smile on two unstirring faces. The gray of the east had begun to brighten into the rose that comes ahead of the sun, when slowly, as if struggling under a weight of pyramids the heavy lids of one of the faces fluttered. They fluttered with no recognition as yet of the difference between death and life, realizing only the burden of an immeasurable inertia.

Almost imperceptibly the currents of submerged vitality began to steal back into the veins of Conscience Tollman.

For ages she seemed struggling through the heavy shades of coma, and even after she was able to see her surroundings, it was without a realization of their significance.

She sat studying with an impersonal gaze the quiet figure at her side, looking even at her own hand resting upon its shoulder with the same absence of interest that she might have felt for another hand and another shoulder.

But about the time that the sun came over the eastern skyline, dissipating the mistiness of dawn into the birth of a new day, she crossed the line between the palpable and impalpable, and her brain began to awaken to the need of battle with this lethargy.

The unmoving figure at her side was no longer simply an object upon which her eyes dwelt without recognition, but the man she loved and was sending away,

and the hand which rested on his shoulder must no longer lie there idle.

Then with all its complicated features of phenomena, the bewilderment of the situation burst on her, and she struggled to her feet, reeling under the assaults of dizziness and weakness and wonderment.

How had they come to be sitting there in that unaccountable fashion together and alone, while the first brightness of morning stole in at the French windows and the lamp burned on with its sickly mingling of day and night and the fresh breeze swept in through a broken and flapping door?

Where was Eben?

Conscience raised her voice—still weak from the drug—and called wildly, but there was little sound and no answer. Undefined but strong, the realization struck in upon her that tragedy in some monstrous shape had entered the place and left its impress.

She stood, still groping with amazement, and her hands rose with a fumbling uncertainty until the touch of their fingers fell upon the bosom from which the drapery had been torn, and instinctively gathered it again over her breast and throat.

But whatever the riddle might portend it could await construction. One primary fact proclaimed itself in terms so clear and unmistakable that all else was lost.

Stuart seemed lifeless. She herself had the feeling of one who had been tangled in the fringes of death: who had struggled out of the meshes of a fatal web.

He had saved her, when she was too weak to fight—it all seemed very long ago.... She loved him.... She must save him now.

She knelt at his side, chafing his wrists and trying his heart with ear and touch—her eyes wide with almost hopeless forebodings.

At last she rose and pressed her hands tight to her throbbing temples.

"Thank God," she whispered, for a faint flutter of life had rewarded her investigation. In a bewildered voice she murmured: "I must think. I must remember! We were all sitting here—we were talking."

Again she called, feebly at first, then with a growing strength, for her husband, and when no answer came except the echo of her own voice, she left the room

and went gropingly, supporting herself against furniture and wall, to the telephone—but the telephone, too, was dead. The storm had done that.

Confused now with a torrent of alarms and a sense of futility, she came back to the man whose life seemed so tenuously suspended, having no plan beyond a Valkyrie passion of resolution to bring him back from the border of death by the sheer force of invincible will. She succeeded, after many attempts, in shifting him from his sitting posture to a greater ease. Between his still lips she forced brandy.

After ages of suspense and vigil, with his head on her lap and her fingers wildly working at his wrists, she vacillated terribly between the hope that life was returning and the fear that it was waning. After other ages she saw his lids flicker almost imperceptibly and then, when anxiety had taken a heavy toll, his eyes looked up in uncomprehending life. Conscience bent her face close to his and there was breath on his lips and nostrils. Eben had been a Machiavelli in spirit only. In effect he had bungled.

Mystery still hung over the house of Eben Tollman an hour or two later, but the two figures that had sat with the quietness of unaccomplished death were again sensate and restored to full consciousness.

Conscience had been able to go to her own room, and Stuart, now dressed, came slowly and as yet somewhat haltingly down the stairs, holding carefully to the rail. He was setting out to search for Eben Tollman, and to call in medical help. But in the hall he paused, and then, turning on impulse, went slowly into the living-room.

There he stood looking about as a man who has dropped from his own planet to one wholly unfamiliar may seek to take his bearings.

His eyes fell as he paused on two patches of white which showed against the dark richness of the rugs and laboriously he picked them up. One was a yellow envelope inscribed "S. F. & C. W."

As a sudden blow may bring back a lost identity to the victim of amnesia the discovery electrified the man and he straightened into an abrupt erectness. His features lost their sleep-walking indefiniteness and his jaw stiffened.

As the significance of his discovery dawned on him, a pallor quite separate from that of his condition came over his face and a murder light broke in his eyes. He would go on with his search for Eben, but when he found him now—! He wheeled suddenly and began looking at the table, and across the confused screen of his brain flashed a complete picture and an understanding.

Then he studied the other and smaller envelope—and recognized it as the one which Dr. Ebbett had given Eben Tollman when they talked of a merciful release for the dog that had outlived his enjoyment of life.

"I don't believe I'll ever find him—alive," he said very slowly, under his breath; "I think I understand."

Then after a moment of grave reflection he added:

"I don't see why she need know it all," and he dropped the two letters and the small envelope upon the dead logs and touched a match to their edges. Then he carried three wine glasses out to the pantry, and carefully washed them, pouring again a few drops of clear wine, like residue, into their bottoms. "Coroners are inquisitive," he told himself musingly.

After that he opened the door and went out into the morning, which, succeeding the storm, was a morning of sunlight.

THE END

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