

DEJEANS ELIZABETH

NOBODY'S
CHILD

Elizabeth Dejeans

Nobody's Child

«Public Domain»

Dejeans E.

Nobody's Child / E. Dejeans — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	7
III	11
IV	16
V	20
VI	22
VII	26
VIII	30
IX	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

Elizabeth Dejeans

Nobody's Child

I ANN

The quietude of winter still lay on the land, the apathetic dun of field and woodland unstirred as yet by the hint of spring that was tipping with eagerness the wings of the birds and, under their brown frost-dulled blanket, was quickening into fresh green the woody stems of arbutus. The mid-morning sun had struggled out of a gray March chill and was setting a-gleam the drops of moisture on trees and grass, drawing little rivulets from the streaks of snow which hid in the corners of the rail-fences and in the hollows of the creek. Winter was reluctantly saying farewell.

The girl, who a mile back had turned in from the old Fox-Ridge Post-Road and had come up through the pastures to the edge of the woodland, looked with smiling understanding at the slow yielding of winter. Another winter added to her sum of seventeen. Or, rather, as youth always looks forward and counts much upon the future, perhaps a joyous spring to be added to her sum of experience.

As she sat, swaying gently to the jerky motion of the creaking buggy, the reins lax in her hands, her eyes from beneath the shadow of her brown hood traveled over the reaches of pasture, the slopes of reddish soil freshly turned for oats, the trails of the snake-fences strangled by brown undergrowth, the twists and curves of the creek that divided the pasture from the upward slopes of grain-land, and, beyond, against the horizon, the red scars and dull patches of scrubby growth that marked the "Mine Banks," the ancient, worked-out, and now overgrown and abandoned iron-ore bed that a hundred and fifty years before had yielded wealth to its owners.

"Spring will make even the Mine Banks lovely," Ann Penniman was thinking.

She had come up now to the woodland, a wide half circle of tall oaks and chestnuts, which, like the bend of a huge bow, touched the Mine Banks in the distance, and behind her reached to the Post-Road. She skirted the woods for a time, the horse straining through sand, a rough road, in the winter rarely traveled, but in summer a possible short cut from the Post-Road to the Penniman farm, which was just beyond the woods.

A short distance ahead, this side of where the creek came out into the open, the road turned and led into the woods, and Ann had almost reached the turn when a streak of red, a fox running swift and low, darted across the road, slid over the corner of pasture that lay between the woods and the creek, reappeared beyond the creek, then sped up the slope of plowed ground, making for the shelter of the Mine Banks.

Ann drew up and waited a moment, until the woods awoke to the deep bay of the hounds as they picked up the scent, followed by the halloo of the huntsmen. The next moment the whole pack swept almost under her horse's nose, over and under and through the rail-fence, across the bit of pasture, checked for a moment or two and casting along the bank of the creek, then were over and off up the plowed slope, after their quarry.

The color came into the girl's cheeks and she sat taut. A bag-fox! If a game fox, he would mix up the hunt in the Mine Banks, and be off to the denser woods and rock-holes above the river, an all day's sport for the Fox-Ridge Hunt Club. The woods rang and rustled now to their approach. Some took the fence, some came out by the road, and one and all cleared the creek and galloped up the opposite slope. Here and there fluttered a woman's dark skirt, a somber note amid the cluster of men in pink.

Ann knew the meaning of it all well. The Hunt Club was just beyond the woods, half a mile or so from the Penniman farm. They had loosed the fox at the edge of the woods, given him his start, then set on the hounds. She looked with tingling wistfulness after the aristocracy of the Ridge, embarked on its Saturday of excitement and pleasure, then with lifted lip at the thin rump of the mare she was driving, and gathered up the reins. The animal had pricked its ears and quivered when the hunt swept over it; it had life enough in it for that, but that was all.

Then with a revulsion of feeling, pity for the beast commingled with self-pity, she let the reins drop. It had been a hard pull of four miles up the muddy Post-Road and through the sand of the Back Road, and the wait here was pleasanter than the return to the farm would be. The hunt had passed, leaving her behind; everything bearing the name of Penniman or belonging to a Penniman was fated to be left behind; why not sit in the sun for a time?

But it seemed she had not seen the last of the hunt, for her ear caught now the gallop of horses, even before she saw them: two horsemen who cleared the fence at the lower end of the pasture with a bird-like lift and dip that brought the light into Ann's eyes, and who now galloped up and by her, headed for the creek, two belated huntsmen come cross-country from the Post-Road and evidently intent upon joining the hunt. Ann recognized the foremost rider first from his horse, a long-necked, clean-limbed sorrel, then from the fleeting glimpse of the man's profile, dark and clear-cut, the face that for months had played with her fancy: Garvin Westmore, the most indefatigable sportsman of the Ridge. The other young man's heavier-jawed and rougher-featured face she did not know. A guest of the club, probably, out from the city for the day.

Then she saw again, with a choke of delight, the light lift and dip of the riders as they cleared the creek – stood up in her ramshackle buggy to see it... Saw one horse go down, pitching his rider over his head, and the other horseman, not Garvin Westmore, go on – wheel when well up the slope and start back; saw that the horse was struggling with nose to the ground, but that the man lay motionless.

II

THREE MEN AND A GIRL

Ann had crossed the creek and reached the prostrate man before the other horseman had time to dismount. She was bending over Garvin Westmore when the other stood over her.

"Hurt?" he asked tersely.

Ann looked up at him, meeting fairly a pair of keen eyes, grayed into coldness by an excitement that his manner did not betray.

"He doesn't move – his eyes are shut – " she answered breathlessly. Her own eyes were dark and dilated, her face a-quiver.

"Wait a minute."

He plunged down into the creek and came up with his cap filled with water, and, kneeling, dashed it over the unconscious man's face – and over Ann's hovering hands as well. "It's probably only a faint. The ground's soft – he's had the breath knocked out of him, that's all."

He appeared to be right, for Garvin Westmore stirred, and, when Ann had wiped the wet from his face, looked at the two with full consciousness; at Ann's frightened face and her companion's questioning eyes.

"He threw me – the damned brute."

"Lucky if you've broken no bones," the other returned. "See if you can stand."

Ann moved aside and he helped Garvin to his feet, watching him critically as he stretched his arms and felt his body. "All right?" he asked.

"I think so."

"You're lucky."

"Lucky, am I – " Garvin said through his teeth. Then his voice rose. "Look – !"

Ann looked, and caught her breath. The horse had at last struggled up and stood quivering, nostrils wide and head bent, nosing the leg that hung limp. He had essayed a step, then stopped, grown suddenly moist. There was something very human in the eyes he lifted to the two men when they came to him, and even under their handling he shifted only a little.

Then they drew back, and their voices came sharply to Ann as she stood with hand pressed to her lips and eyes wide with pity.

"Broken, Garvin – and the shoulder strained – I've seen them like that."

"He went down in that rabbit-hole, Baird!"

"Yep – poor beast."

"What's to be done?" Garvin's voice was strained.

"Nothing – he's done for."

There was silence for a moment and Ann saw that the color had flamed in Garvin's white face. He was suddenly as violently a-quiver as the suffering animal, curiously and tensely excited. He glanced behind him, then to either side, an uncertain look that passed over Ann and his surroundings, unseeing and yet furtive. Then he took a step backward, and the hand that had gone to his hip-pocket was swiftly upflung.

Ann's shriek rang out almost simultaneously with the shot, at one with the leaden fall of the horse and the sharp echo sent back from the Mine Banks and the chattering lift of the birds in the woods. A crow cawed wildly as it rose; all about was the stir of startled and scurrying things.

Baird had whirled to look at Ann, who stood bent over and with arm hiding her face, and his angry exclamation were the first words spoken: "God, Garvin, are you mad? What a thing to do – before her!"

He strode to Ann and touched her shaking shoulder. "Come away," he said with a note of shame. "The idea of his doing such a thing before a girl! His fall must have knocked the sense out of him!"

But Garvin Westmore was almost as quick as he. He also had turned, with brows raised high and eyes wild. Then on the instant his face was swept of expression. He was pale again, collected, even protective when he drew Ann from Baird's touch. "Don't be frightened, Ann," he said softly, with the air of one who knew her well. "I'm sorry. I forgot you were here. I couldn't see the animal suffer – that was all." Then meeting over Ann's head the commingling of disgust and anger and something else, the touch of aversion in Baird's eyes, he continued even more softly, his softness a little husky: "Why should anything that's done for be allowed to go on suffering a minute more than is necessary? That's what I was thinking... Wasn't I right, Ann?"

He addressed the girl, but he was answering Baird's look.

"You looked as if you enjoyed doing it," Baird retorted bluntly.

A flash of expression crossed Garvin Westmore's face, a gleam menacing and dangerous, like the momentary exposure of a dagger. It came and went. "I wanted the beast out of pain – if that is what you mean," he said with hauteur. "Ann knows me better than you do," and he bent over her. "Don't cry, Ann; the horse is better off than any one of us."

He continued to bend his height to her and to talk in low tones, until she consented to look up at him. "I don't see how you could – " she said, in a smothered way. "I – I want to go home – "

"You shall in a minute – but not like this." In her run down to the creek her hood had slipped off, and he tried now to draw it up over her fallen hair. She lifted shaking hands and began hurriedly to coil the dark mass about her head.

Baird watched them curiously. The girl was something more than pretty. The brown cape with hood attached had concealed her, but when she lifted her arms he saw that she was slim and rounded, very perfectly so, and not too tall. Her hair was noticeably black, a dense black, heavy and with a tendency to curl. As she gathered it up, Baird noticed how beautifully it grew about her low forehead – that her features were regular, and that, contrasted with black hair and brows and lashes, her skin was very white, luminously white. She was certainly very young; her cheeks and chin were as softly rounded as a baby's. And Garvin was a particularly good-looking man, of the unmistakably inbred type, tall, slender, dark, with clear-cut features, well-marked brows and fine eyes. His were the Westmore features refined into nervousness by inbreeding, the features of his great-great-grandfather, colonial aristocrat and owner of the Mine Banks.

Nickolas Baird, as noticeably but one generation removed from the ranks and of the type that carves its own fortunes, watched the two curiously.

He was not the only onlooker. A man had ridden out of the woods just as the shot was fired and had come slowly down to the creek. His horse had leaped when the report came and had sidled nervously as if eager for a run, but his rider had reined him sharply, held him to a walk, while he eyed the group in the distance. Though well mounted and in faultless riding attire, he was evidently not of the hunt; he wore no signs of haste or eagerness. He had crossed the bit of pasture deliberately, and had come to the other side of the creek. Then, as if he considered himself breakable, he had dismounted deliberately and, dropping the reins, slowly crossed the creek, selecting and testing his footing in the same careful fashion. His eyes alone, gloomy under their lowered brows, showed interest in what was passing.

He stood just behind the group before he spoke: "What's all this, Garvin?"

The three started and turned and Garvin stepped back hastily from Ann, who with hands still lifted to her hair and eyes wet with tears stared at the new-comer.

It was Garvin who answered quickly. "It's plain enough what's happened, Ed. The sorrel went down in a rabbit-hole and broke his leg – incidentally, he nearly did for me too."

"And you shot him without giving him time to say his prayers. I was in time to see that."

"He was no gift of yours – I raised him," Garvin answered, with an instant note of antagonism.

There had been stern rebuke in the elder man's remark, though so quietly spoken. But they were very evidently brothers. Their features were the same, the Westmore features; only the elder man's black hair had streaks of gray about the temples and his face was sallow and his eyes somber. Garvin at twenty-eight looked less than his age, and his brother, ten years his senior, looked full forty.

Edward Westmore made no answer. He had looked from his brother to Ann, at her wistfully moist eyes and air of distress. But if his caught breath and slowly heightening color indicated the same anger Baird had felt, he restrained himself well. He said nothing at all, simply looked at her steadily, flushing and breathing quickly. Then he turned abruptly and looked up the slope of pasture at Ann's ramshackle buggy; then, turning more slowly, he gazed an appreciable moment at the looming Mine Banks.

Possibly it was his way of gaining self-control. Possibly he was looking for an explanation of the girl's presence and discovered it in the waiting buggy. At any rate, his manner was calm and courteous when he faced them again.

"It's too bad it happened," he said, more to Baird than any one else. "But it can't be helped... You'll have to get the animal off this land, it's not ours – unless you can get permission to bury him, Garvin?"

"Not likely," his brother said in an undertone. "It's old Penniman's land. He hasn't learned to hate us any less these years you've been away."

Edward Westmore's brows contracted sharply. "I'll take her to her buggy, and come back," he said, and turned hastily to Ann, who was clambering down into the creek.

Garvin looked after him in surprise. Then, conscious of his brother's backward glance, he turned away. Nevertheless, he listened intently to Edward's low-toned courtesy.

"Let me help you – the bank is slippery."

Both he and Baird could hear distinctly Ann's soft rejoinder, the slurred syllables that marked her a southern child, but without the nasal twang usual with the country-folk of the Ridge. "Don't you come, suh – I can get up easily." She was more embarrassed than distressed now; her face was rosy red under her hood and her eyes were lowered.

But Edward went on with her, up the stretch of pasture. They saw him help her into the buggy and stand for a time, evidently talking to her. And, finally, when she drove off, he bowed to her, as deeply as he would to any lady on the Ridge, standing and looking after her as she drove into the woods.

Baird had observed the whole proceeding with interest. The Westmore family interested him. Ann interested him also, perhaps because he "couldn't place her," as he himself would have expressed it. During his two weeks' stay on the Ridge he had assimilated its class distinctions. There were three classes on the Ridge: the aristocracy, depleted and poverty ridden as a rule, clinging tenaciously to bygone glory while casting a half-contemptuous and at the same time envious eye on the sheer power of money; the second somewhat heterogeneous class developed during the forty years since the "war," and that, on the Ridge, had as its distinctive element the small farmer who, in most cases, though not so well-born, possessed wide family ramifications and an inbreeding and a narrow jealous pride quite on a par with that of the descendants of governors and revolutionary generals; and the third class, the class that had always been, the "poor-white-trash."

In which social division did Ann belong? Certainly not to the latter, and not to the first, either, Baird judged, for he had watched Garvin's manner to the girl closely. And he had also noted Garvin's look of surprise when Edward had followed her. He saw that while Garvin was audibly considering the best means of getting rid of the dead horse, his real attention was given to the two at the edge of the woods.

Baird asked his question a little abruptly. "Who is she, Garvin?"

Perhaps Garvin expected the question. "Ann Penniman," he said, without looking up from the horse.

"One of your people?" Baird asked, conscious that he was expressing himself awkwardly.

Garvin caught his meaning at once. "Heavens, no! Her people are farmers. She's old Penniman's grand-daughter. His farm runs down through the woods there, and this field is part of it – up to the Mine Banks. They're ours, worse luck – just waste ground. I wish the sorrel was up there in one of the old ore-pits."

Baird felt that Garvin wanted to lead off from the subject. "She's the prettiest girl I've seen in a year," he declared.

"Ann is pretty, but I don't see what good it's going to do her," Garvin answered carelessly. "She'll marry some one of the Penniman tribe – they're all inter-married – and go on working like an ox. Old Penniman would take a shotgun to any man who came around who wasn't a cousin, or a Penniman of some sort. Ann's just a farm girl and has been brought up like all of them about here." Garvin nodded in the direction of the disappearing buggy. "She's back now from taking butter and eggs to the village in exchange for a few doled-out groceries – they're hard up, the Pennimans." He looked down then at the horse, bent and stroked its tawny mane. "Poor old Nimrod!" he muttered. "You had a short life of it – though between us we sometimes had a merry one." His voice had changed completely, deepened into genuine feeling. "I raised him from a colt," he remarked to Baird, with face averted.

In the light of what had happened, Baird found it difficult to explain the man's present emotion. Baird had had a good deal of western experience which had taught him to regard thoughtfully any man who was as quick with his pistol as Garvin Westmore had been.

But Baird's real interest was elsewhere. He asked no more questions. In his own mind he decided that the dormered roof, crisscrossed by naked branches, which he could see from his window at the Hunt Club, covered the Penniman house. And he also reflected that he had plenty of spare time in which to reconnoiter.

III

PENNIMAN AND WESTMORE

Ann drove on through the woods, with the color still warm in her cheeks. She could not have told just why she was still trembling and felt inclined to cry. As Garvin Westmore had said, it was best to put the sorrel out of pain at once. She did not feel, as the young man Garvin had called Baird had felt, that it was an outrageous thing for Garvin to have shot the horse while she was there, for Ann had never been shown any particular consideration by anybody; she was well acquainted with the hard side of life.

But Garvin's look had been so strange. It had shocked and puzzled her... And then Edward Westmore's manner to her? He had been so "nice" to her, a protective, considerate niceness. He had asked her about her family and about herself. He had been away from the Ridge for many years; he had never brought his foreign wife to Westmore. But, now that she and his father were gone, he had returned to Westmore with the fortune she had left him and was head of the family. And yet he remembered them all, her grandfather and her Aunt Sue and her father, who had been away from the Ridge as long as Ann could remember, and her mother, whom Ann had never seen. Edward Westmore had not referred to the life-long enmity that had existed between his father and her grandfather, and yet he had made her feel that he did not share in it; that it was a bygone thing and should be buried. Ann had liked him, as suddenly and as uncontrollably as she had liked Garvin.

For Garvin Westmore had also been "nice" to her, though in a different way. Back in the days when she used to disobey her grandfather and steal off to the Westmore Mine Banks for fascinating visits to its caves and ore-pits, the tall boy who galloped recklessly up hill and down, always with several hounds at his horse's heels, was one of Ann's terrors. Then there had been the vague period when she had been "growing up" and had seen him only very occasionally and had not thought of him at all.

But ever since the day, a few weeks ago, when he had met her and had ridden up the Post-Road beside her buggy, he had become a vivid entity. Under his smiling regard she had quickly lost the Penniman antagonism to any one bearing the name of Westmore. His had been an astonishing and exhilarating "niceness" to which Ann's suddenly aroused femininity had instantly responded. Ann had learned that day, for the first time, that she was pretty and that it was possible for her to arouse admiration. And during the last two weeks... It was not merely pity for the sorrel that had set her cheeks aflame and made her eyes moist; it was excitement, the stir of commingled emotions and impressions. Her nerves were always keyed high, vibrant to every impression. And during the last weeks she had been hiding from every one something of graver import than her usual thoughts and feelings. Those she had always kept to herself, partly because she was inclined to be secretive, partly because of native independence.

Ann had reached the end of the woods now and stopped to compose herself. Her grandfather would not notice that she had been crying, but her Aunt Sue would. She would have to tell of the tragedy in the Mine Banks field; news of that sort had a way of traveling. She would have to say that she had seen what had happened, but not a word of Edward Westmore's talk with her or of Garvin – not even to her Aunt Sue. Sue, in her quiet way, hated the Westmores as bitterly as her grandfather did. Ann's swift liking for these two men who had, each in his own fashion, been nice to her, and her swift determination to be nice in return, was a thing to be carefully concealed. As she had come through the woods, she had looked at the dead chestnut tree in the split crotch of which there had once been a flicker's nest. Garvin had not said so, he would not with the other man standing by, but it probably held a message for her. This was not the best time to get it, however. Some one might see her and wonder.

Ann took off her hood and smoothed her hair and pressed her hands to her hot eyes; sat still then and let the wind cool the ache in them, her face settling into its usual wistful expression, eyes dark under drooping lids, lips full but smileless, cheeks and chin so rounded and infantile that they were appealing. Life might make hers a voluptuous face, there was more than a hint of the probability in the desirous mouth and full white throat. It was the straight nose with its slightly disdainful nostrils and the arched and clearly penciled brows that gave her face its real beauty – a nobler promise than was suggested by lips and chin.

Through the few intervening trees Ann could see the Penniman barn, a low wide structure with a basement for housing cattle, an arrangement that the sharply sloping ground made possible. The house, a little to the left and beyond, even in winter was obscured by trees. Two tall Lombardy poplars guarded the kitchen entrance and the woodshed, towering high above a steep-pitched roof and the alanthus and locust trees that in summer shaded it. The woods through which Ann had just passed semicircled the upward sloping field that lay between her and the farm buildings. To the right, the slope was crested by an orchard, and to the left, stretching from the house like a long line of melancholy sentinels, was a double row of magnificent cedars, guarding the road that led straight across open country, past the Hunt Club and to the Post-Road. That was the way by which Ann should have come had not the hint of spring tempted her to take the Back Road, through the pastures and the woods.

There was no one in sight. In the bit of marsh made by a spread of the creek several pigs were wallowing, as if glad to find the ground soft, and in the enclosure behind the barn a horse and three cows stood in the sun amid a clutter of chickens. Beyond the marsh, under a group of weeping-willows, was the spring and the usual accompaniment, a spring-house. Ann had expected to see her aunt's red shawl either at the spring or on the path that led up between the double row of grapevines, a full three hundred yards of upward toil to the kitchen door, for it was the hour for carrying the day's supply of water. But there was no one in view, not even her grandfather moving feebly about the barn.

Ann took up the reins with a sigh, and drove on. She always sighed when she approached her home, and tingled with the sensation of embarking on an adventure when she left it, for Ann possessed in abundance the attributes of youth: faith, hope, imagination and the capacity to enjoy intensely. Home meant work, work, work, and few smiles to sweeten the grind. But for her Aunt Sue, the smoldering rebellion the farm had bred in Ann would have flared dangerously. As long as she had been too young to understand, and had had the fields and the woods, it had not mattered so much. In a vague way, Ann had always felt that she was nobody's child, a nonentity to her grandfather except when her high spirits, tinged always by coquetry, and her inflammable temper aroused in him a sullen anger. And Ann knew that to her aunt she was more a duty than a joy; Sue Penniman appeared to have an enormous capacity for duty and a small capacity for affection. But, with the necessity to cling to something, Ann clung to her aunt. For Sue she worked uncomplainingly. For Sue's sake she hid her resentment at being a nonentity.

For in the last year of rapid awakening Ann had realized that she had never been permitted an actual share in the narrow grinding interests of the family, though, of necessity, she was tied fast to the monotonous round and, together with her grandfather and aunt, lay between the upper and nether millstones. The clannish pride that lay in every Penniman lay in her also, and yet, Ann had felt, vaguely as a child and poignantly as she grew older, that she was of them and yet not of them. Her grandfather, even her aunt had made her feel it – and above all the father who had forsaken her when she was barely old enough to remember him. Ann never thought of her father without an ache in her throat that made it impossible for her to talk of him.

At the barn Ann hitched the horse. Her grandfather might want the buggy; it was best not to unharness until she knew. She took the bundles of groceries and went on to the house, past the basement door, to the stairs that led up to the kitchen, for the house, like the barn, was built on

the slope, its front resting on the crown of the slope, its rear a story from the ground, permitting a basement room and a forward cellar that burrowed deep into the ground.

Ann had glanced into the basement, but her aunt was not there. The kitchen, an ancient-looking room, whitewashed and with small square-paned windows, was also empty. Ann put down her parcels and went into the living-room. It and the kitchen and the two rooms above were all that remained of the colonial house that antedated even Westmore. It was low-ceilinged, thick-walled, and casement-windowed, and had a fireplace spacious enough to seat a family. Built of English brick brought to the colony two centuries before, the old chimney had withstood time and gaped deep and wide and soot-blackened. This room had been one wing of the colonial mansion, and, because of the solid masonry that enclosed the cellar beneath it, had not fallen into decay like the rest of the house.

But it had not been built by a Penniman. A hundred years before, a Penniman, "a man of no family, but with money in his pocket," had bought the house and the land "appertaining" from an encumbered Westmore, and had become father of the Pennimans now scattered through three counties. The first Penniman and his son's son after him had been tobacco growers on a small scale and slave owners, but they had never been of the aristocracy.

It was Ann's grandfather who, some thirty years before, ten years after the war, had torn down the other two wings of the old house and had built the porch and plain two-storied front that now sat chin on the crown of the slope and looked out over terraces whose antiquity scorned its brief thirty years; looked over and beyond them, to miles of rolling country. The narrow, back-breaking stairs that led from the living-room to the rooms above, a back-stairs in colonial days, was now the main stairway. The mansion had become a farmhouse, for the first Penniman had been the only Penniman "with money in his pocket."

There was no one in the living-room, and Ann paused to listen, then climbed the stairs, coming up into a narrow passageway, at one end of which were three steps. They led to the front bedrooms, her grandfather's addition to the old house. One room was his, the other had been Coats Penniman's room, Ann's father's room. Like many of the Pennimans, Ann's mother had married her first cousin, a boy who had grown up in her father's house.

The stir Ann had heard was in this room, which, except when it had accommodated an occasional visiting Penniman, had been closed for fourteen years. The door stood wide now, the windows were open, and her aunt was making the bed.

Ann stopped on the threshold, held by surprise. She had not known of any expected visitor. For the last six years they had been too poor and too proud to entertain even a Penniman. And there was something in her aunt's manner and appearance that arrested Ann's attention. Sue Penniman was always pale, Ann could easily remember the few times when she had seen color in her aunt's cheeks, and, though she always worked steadily, it was without energy or enthusiasm. But there was color in her cheeks now, and eagerness in her movements. She was thin and her shoulders a little rounded from hard work, but now, when she lifted to look at Ann, she stood very erect and the unwonted color in her face and the brightness in her blue eyes made her almost pretty.

"Is some one comin', Aunt Sue?" Ann asked.

Her aunt did not answer at once. She looked at Ann steadily, long enough for a quiver of feeling to cross her face. Then she came around the bed, came close enough to Ann to put her hands on Ann's shoulders.

"Cousin Coats is comin', Ann," she said, her nasal drawl softened almost to huskiness.

Her *father* coming! The color of sudden and intense emotion swept into Ann's face, widening her eyes and parting her lips, a lift of joy and of craving combined that stifled her. It was a full moment before Ann could speak. Then she asked, "When – ?"

"Sunday – to-morrow."

"When did you know?" Ann was quite white now.

"Last night – Ben Brokaw brought the letter."

"And you-all kept it to yourselves!" All the hurt and isolation of Ann's seventeen years spoke in her face and in her voice.

Sue was surprised by the passion of anger and pain. It was a tribute to Ann's power of concealment; she had not suspected this pent feeling.

"I didn't know you'd care so much," Sue said in a troubled way. "It seemed like you didn't care about anything, you're always so – gay. An' Coats has been away since you were a baby. I didn't think you'd care so much. I wanted to tell you, but your grandpa didn't want I should till we'd talked it over. And I was worried about your grandpa too – he was so excited."

"Grandpa hates me! And father must hate me, too, or he wouldn't have left me when I was a baby and never even have written to me!" Ann exclaimed passionately, restraint thrown to the winds.

"Ann! What's come over you to talk like that! Your grandpa doesn't hate you! If you only knew!.. You see, Ann, you've got a gay, I-don't-care way with you, and it worries your grandpa. He's seen a terrible lot of trouble. And since the stroke he had four years ago he's felt he was no good for work any more, and what was going to become of the place. It's all those things has worried him."

Ann said nothing. She simply stood, quivering under her aunt's hands.

Sue's voice lost its warmth, dropped into huskiness again. "You don't understand, Ann, so don't you be thinking things that isn't so." She drew Ann to the bed. "Sit down a minute till I tell you something... It's always seemed to me foolishness to talk about things that are past, so I never told you, but now Coats is comin' you ought to know: your mother died when you were born, Ann, and it almost killed Coats. He loved your mother dearer than I've ever known any man love a woman. Every time he looked at you it brought it back to him. We went through a lot of trouble, Ann – dreadful trouble. It was too much for Coats to bear, an' he just went away from it, out west. But he wasn't forsakin' us – it wasn't like that. Why, all these years his thoughts have been here, and he's sent us money right along – we couldn't have got on if he hadn't." Sue's voice rose. "There's no better man in all the world than Coats Penniman, Ann!.. And I *know*. He was your mother's own cousin and mine – we grew up with him, right here in this house – and I know like no one else does how fine Coats is!" Sue was shaken as Ann had never seen her, flushed and quivering and bright-eyed.

Ann's eyes were brimming. "But I wasn't to blame."

"Of course you weren't to blame," Sue said pityingly. "I'm just telling you because I want you to understand and be patient if Coats seems like a stranger. Don't you feel hard to him. Just you remember that you're a Penniman and that the Pennimans always stand together and that there never was a better Penniman walked than Coats... Just you do your duty and be patient, Ann, and your reward will come. I've lived on that belief for many years, and whether I get my reward or not, I'll know that I've done the thing that's *right*, and that's something worth living for."

Sue had struck a responsive cord when she called upon the family pride. Ann's shoulders lifted. And hope, an ineradicable part of Ann, had also lifted. She looked up at Sue. "Perhaps father will get to love me," she said wistfully.

Sue drew an uneven breath. Then she said steadily, "Perhaps he will, Ann... Just you do right, like I tell you – that's your part." She got up then. "We won't talk any more now – I've got too much to do. An' there's something I want you should do, an' that's to talk to Ben Brokaw. He says he's goin'. He's sitting down in the basement glum as a bear. When your grandpa tol' him Coats was comin' he up an' said he'd go – there was goin' to be too many men about the place. I couldn't do anything with him. But he's got to stay – anyway till Coats gets some one else. You see if you can persuade him."

"Yes, I'll try – " Ann promised absently, for she was thinking of something else. "Aunt Sue, does father hate the Westmores too?"

Sue's start was perceptible. She stared at the girl. "Why are you askin'?" she demanded sharply.

Ann grew crimson, and there was a touch of defiance in her answer. "You and grandpa hate them – I wondered if he did."

"Have any of them spoken to you?" Sue asked. In all her knowledge of Sue, Ann had never heard her speak so sharply.

It frightened her, though it did not alter the sense of injustice to the Westmores which Ann had been cherishing. She gave her version of what had happened that morning, and Sue listened intently. When Ann had finished, she bent suddenly and smoothed the bed, averting her face.

"Just like him!" she said in a voice that was not steady. "Just like every Westmore I've ever known. 'Do-as-I-please' and 'what-do-I-care!' They've heart neither for woman nor beast. It's brought them to what they are. Edward Westmore may think his wife's money'll build up the family, but it won't. Coats will do more with his little twenty thousand than Edward with his big fortune." She lifted and brushed the fallen hair from her face, a gesture expressive of exasperation. "And to think they dare ride over our land!" She looked at Ann as Ann had never seen her look before. "The next time a Westmore tries to break his neck, just you drive on, and if any one of them ever speaks to you, turn your back on him."

"But what have they done to us?" Ann persisted.

Sue quieted, a drop to her usual patient manner. "Never mind what they have done," she said wearily. "There never was a Westmore who was friend to a Penniman. But I don't want to think about them – least of all to-day... Just you go on and talk to Ben – that'll be helping me, Ann. There's a world of things to be done before to-morrow... And go quietly – your grandpa's lying down in the parlor."

Ann went, still flushed and unconvinced. What was the sense of hating like that, just because one's father hated before you? And it was plain that her father shared in the family enmity.

Then defiance slipped from Ann. Her father was coming! Would he be nice to her? It was not natural for a father to be cold to his child. And she was grown up now, and pretty. This recently discovered asset of hers meant a great deal to Ann. And if her father was bringing money with him to the farm everything would be changed. To Ann, anticipation was one of the wonderful things in life.

IV BUT IF HE FAILED HER?

Ann had learned early that with every one except her grandfather smiles won far more for her than argument. When she put her head into Ben Brokaw's room she was smiling, though her eyes were observant enough. The basement was the "wash-room" and the "churning-room," with one corner partitioned off for the combination of boarder and hired man that, for the last four years, her grandfather's disabilities had made necessary. As was customary on the Ridge, the negroes lived in their cabins, "taking out" their rent in work. Ann had tiptoed in and studied Ben and his surroundings through the half-open door.

There was no furniture in the little room. Ben's bed was a canvas hammock, and the decorations of the place were of his own design: several dozen mole-skins neatly tacked to the walls; coon-skins and opossum-skins, a fox-skin and a beautifully striped wild-cat-skin were all stretched in the same fashion. A gun, a pistol and fishing tackle hung above the hammock, sharing the space with a wide-winged, dried bat. The hide of a Jersey cow, its soft yellow stained by marks of muddy feet, carpeted the floor, so much of it as was not occupied by traps, bird's nests and other woodland litter, and the entire place smelled of animals.

On the hammock, feet firmly planted on the floor, sat a phenomenally long-armed, broad-chested, squat man who rolled his huge head and shoulders gently from side to side, while his hands deftly whittled the figure-four intended for the box-trap at his feet. His heavy face, circled by a shock of rough brown hair, suggested the hereditary drunkard, it was so reddened and ridged and snout-nosed. It was his appearance that had earned him the sobriquet, "Bear Brokaw." He rolled like an inebriate when he walked, yet never in his forty years on the Ridge had Bear Brokaw been known to "take a drink." He knew and was known by every soul on the Ridge, and by many in the adjoining counties, for he had worked, in intermittent fashion, on almost every farm and estate on the Ridge, more that he might be free to shoot and snare than for the wages he earned. Ben knew the intimate habits of every wild thing, and the family secrets of mankind as well, and plied a thrifty trade in skins. He was adored by the children on the Ridge, and in spite of his queer personality was respected by their elders.

"What are you doin', Ben?" Ann asked.

The small brown eyes he raised to Ann were as bright as a squirrel's and at the same time shrewdly intelligent. Just now they were reddened by an angry light and he looked as morose as the lumbering animal he resembled.

"Fixin' this here trap." His voice was a growling base; his manner indicated that he wished to be let alone.

Ann selected the cleanest spot on the cowhide and seated herself with arms embracing her knees. Ever since she could remember Ann had conversed with Bear Brokaw seated in this fashion, at his feet, and many had been the secrets each had told the other. For Ben had worked on the Penniman farm, or, rather, had shot and trapped there, as the desire took him, for thirty years. He and Ann were fast friends; both were of the open country.

Ann had cast about in her mind for a topic that would be arresting. "Ben, Garvin Westmore's sorrel is dead," she announced dramatically.

Ben stopped both his work and his rolling motion. "What you sayin'?"

"He broke his leg, Ben."

"Whee – ee – " he whistled, through his teeth. "How, now?"

Ann told him the story, as she had told it to Sue.

"An' Garvin up an' shot him – I can jest see him at it," Ben muttered, more to himself than to Ann.

"It was better than having the poor thing suffer," Ann declared with some warmth.

Ben shook his head in a non-committal way. But he did not take up his work. He looked down, still shaking his head.

Bear Brokaw had solved many problems for Ann; he had reasons for most things. She changed her tone. "Why did he do like that, Ben? I wondered why?"

"'Cause he couldn't help it."

"You don't mean – because he liked doing it?" Ann asked; Baird's remark had clung to her memory.

Ben looked up quickly. "Why you askin' that, Ann?"

Ann was silenced. She would have to tell too much if she explained. She was usually quick-witted. "Why, you spoke like that."

"Don't you be seein' meanings where there ain't none," he growled.

Ann knew that he did not mean to explain. But she had succeeded in drawing him from his grievance, and that had been her first object. He did not take up the figure-four again; instead, he was meditative.

"That there sorrel was the best hunter in the county," he said regretfully. "He was great grandson to ole Colonel Westmo's white Nimrod. That was one horse, Ann! A regular fightin' devil! He jest naturally loved the smell o' powder. The colonel took him to the war when he was a colt, an' fifteen years after the colonel was still ridin' ole Nimrod – ridin' him to the hounds, too. The colonel jest lived on his back, an' Nimrod were faithfuller than a dog. When there weren't no huntin', the colonel were in the habit of takin' in every half-way house fo' miles, an' Nimrod always there to tote him back to Westmo', whether the colonel was laid acrost his back like a sack o' oats, or sittin' shoulders square like he always did when not soaked through an' through. Nimrod knew when to go careful... I mind one night – that was the year I was huntin' on Westmo' an' helpin' Miss Judith run the place – I was bringin' Miss Judith back up the Post-Road from the station, an' where the Westmo' Road cuts into the Mine Banks we come plumb on a white objec'. I don't take no stock in ghosts, all I've ever seen has turned out to be a human or a animal or a branch wavin' in the wind. But that bit of road has got a bad name. Them convicts the Westmo's worked to death over a hundred years ago, over there in the Mine Banks, is said to come out an' stand clost to the Post-Road, waitin' for a Westmo' to do for him. 'Twas in that cut the colonel's grandfather was shot down from his horse, an' nobody never did find out who done it. An' it was there the Ku-Klux used to gather – guess the colonel had his share in that, though... Well, there was that white thing, an' our horse give a snort an' stopped, an' my heart come up in my mouth. But Miss Judith, she stood straight up in the buggy.

"'Who's there?' she called out, quick an' clear.

"An' the Banks called back, sharp, like they do, 'Who's there?' but it was Nimrod whinnied... It was the colonel gone to bed in the road, an' Nimrod standin' stock-still by his side, like he always did, till some one passin' would lay his master acrost his back again.

"Miss Judith sat down when we knew, an' she sat straight as a rod; there's all the pride of all the Westmo's in Miss Judith, and was then, though she weren't no older than you. 'Some gentleman has met with an accident,' she says, very steady. 'Help him to his horse, Ben,' an' I did.

"But the colonel weren't too far gone not to recognize a petticoat – he had a' instinc' for anything feminine an' his manners couldn't be beat. I'd put his hat on his head, but he swep' it off.

"'My grateful thanks to you, Madame,' he says in his fine voice. 'I met with a little accident. I shall hope to thank you in person to-morrow.' He were too far gone to know his own daughter, but he hadn't forgot his Westmo' manners.

"An' Miss Judith sat straight as ever, an' all she says was, 'Drive on, Ben.'... That's Westmo' for you!" Ben concluded, with deep admiration.

Ann had heard the story before, and always it had brought the color to her cheeks, for it stirred her imagination, but she had never flushed more deeply than now. "You like Garvin, don't you, Ben?" she asked softly.

Ben eyed her in his shrewd way, "Yes, he's got feelin' for the woods – a born hunter. Trouble is, everything's game to Garvin, Ann."

Ann was afraid to say anything more. "It was a bag-fox they had this morning," she remarked for diversion.

"Shame!" Ben said curtly. Then, irrelevantly, "I reckon I'll choose Westmo' fo' my nex' shootin'. I mean to tote my traps over there to-night."

Ann was recalled to her errand. "You mean you'd go away from us, Ben?" she asked in well-simulated surprise.

Ben's eyes twinkled. "I'm tellin' you news now, ain't I! What did you come down here for?"

Ann laughed; she knew it was no use to pretend. "You're so smart, Ben – you know what's in people's heads ... Aunt Sue told me. She's just heart-broken, an' I said I'd come an' beg you. How could we have got on without you this winter, and how are we going to get on without you now? Don't you go, Ben!"

"Reckon Coats can run this place without me," Ben said determinedly.

"I don't believe he can," Ann persisted. "I know he'll want you."

"Not he. I know Coats Penniman."

"Of course you know him better than I do," Ann said wistfully. "Don't you like my father, Ben?"

Ben moved restlessly. "He's a Penniman an' awful set in his ways – Coats Penniman's a fearful steady, determined man – though that's not sayin' anything against him."

"Aunt Sue says he is the best man who ever walked," Ann said earnestly.

"She's reason to think that way... I reckon I don't like too much goodness, Ann – not the kind that's unhuman good. That's because I'm jest 'Bear' Brokaw, though... No, I'm goin'."

Ann could not puzzle out just what he meant. She let it drop, for thinking of it made her unhappy. She moved nearer and put her hand on Ben's great hairy paw, stroking it as she would have stroked the collie. "You stay, Ben?" she pleaded softly. "Just stay a while and see how it will be. Stay 'cause I want you to. What'll I do without you to talk to – if my father doesn't care about me?.. An' maybe he won't, you know – I can't tell... You think he will, though, don't you, Ben?" It was the anxiety uppermost in Ann and must out.

Ben's little animal eyes were very bright as he looked down at her, and, whatever his thoughts, his expression was not unkindly.

"You reckon if you smiled at the spring the water would run up hill to you?" he asked. "You sure could bring the birds down from the trees, Ann." This was certainly one way of avoiding her question.

Ann knew Bear Brokaw as well as he knew her. She knew she had won. "And we'll make the swimmin'-pool down in the woods – soon as it's warm," she coaxed. "We'll have fun this spring, Ben." This was a project that lay close to Ben's heart. His room might be redolent of animal skins, but Ben himself was not; he had a beaver's love for the water.

"Um!" he growled, his eyes twinkling.

It was complete surrender, and Ann sprang up. "I've got to help Aunt Sue now," she announced brightly. "And, Ben, I didn't put the horse out."

"Want I should, I reckon."

Ann only laughed as she pirouetted out and danced up the stairs to the kitchen.

She did not go back to Sue, however; not immediately. She caught up her cape and a bucket and, as soon as Ben was on his way to the barn, started for the spring. But it was evidently not her ultimate destination, for she dropped the bucket there and, after a cautious study of the barn and the house, sped like a rabbit across the field and into the woods.

From their shelter she again studied her surroundings, then darted for the dead chestnut tree. She climbed as agilely as she had run, and quickly gained the split crotch. The flicker's hole was bored deep in the dead wood, and Ann brought up from its depth a folded slip of paper. She curled up in the crotch and read it:

"Dear Ann:

"You are the sweetest and the most beautiful thing I know. Did you mean what you said when you promised to be friends? I hope you did. I've been living on that hope for the last two weeks. Will you come to the Crest Cave at the Banks on Sunday afternoon, at four, and tell me again that our great-grandfathers' quarrels don't matter to us? Please come, dear! Please!

"Garvin."

Though the color came warmly in Ann's cheeks and a smile lifted the corners of her mouth, she looked grave enough when she sat thinking over what she had read. So far her meetings with Garvin Westmore had had the excuse of chance; he knew on what days she drove to the village, and the chestnut tree had treasured only notes expressive of pleasure over the meeting of the day before. But this was different.

Sue Penniman had done her duty; Ann was not altogether ignorant; less ignorant and far more imaginative; more eager for life and at the same time more certain of herself than most of the girls on the Ridge. Beneath her coquetry, the new and intoxicating realization of her allure, was the craving for the certain something that distinguished the Westmores from the Pennimans; a "niceness" Ann called it, for want of a clearer understanding. She had been immediately at home with Garvin, and with his brother also. They were not beyond her intelligence. Something in her had arisen and met, on a footing of equality, the thing in them that delighted her.

In her ignorance of much that would have been clearer to a more sophisticated girl, Ann was not nearly so self-conscious or so afraid of this more plainly revealed attitude of the lover, and of the sanction she would be giving to secrecy, as she was doubtful of her duty to the Penniman cause. It was that troubled her most. She felt no great sense of duty to her grandfather, and Sue's blind clinging to the family quarrel seemed senseless. But there was her father? Ann wanted his love more than she wanted anything else in the world; the tenderness that would cherish her, against which she could nestle and that would caress her in return. She longed for it, and would joyfully give implicit obedience in return.

Ann thought the matter out as she sat there. When she put the note in the bosom of her dress and climbed soberly down from her perch, she had decided: if her father loved her – and she would know instantly if there was about him the something that had always held her apart from her grandfather and even from her Aunt Sue – she would not meet Garvin Westmore. She would tell her father every circumstance, and if he willed that it must be so, his quarrel would be hers.

But if he failed her? Ann's full lips set and she put her hand over the note in her bosom.

V IN COLONIAL FASHION

The Westmores were giving a dinner after the hunt, as had been customary in the days when Westmore was noted for lavish hospitality. It was by no means a Hunt Club dinner, however, for, according to Westmore standards, the Hunt Club had become a lax institution. In order to exist it had taken in members, excellent people, of course, who, because of their money or because of prominence acquired during the last few years, had partially compelled their way into Ridge society. The men affiliated fairly well, their clan spirit rarely stood in the way of sociability, perhaps because many of them had been forced into the city, into business relations with the newcomers.

But the feminine aristocracy of the Ridge still clung to traditional usage. Changed conditions had partly demolished traditional barriers; they were forced to countenance, in a formal way, women who were not of "the family connection," but as every member of the old Fox-Ridge aristocracy was related to every other member, Fox-Ridge society was quite sufficient unto itself.

And the newcomers on the Ridge bore their partial exclusion from the intimate circle with equanimity. As a general thing they possessed more money than the old Ridge families and had numerous friends in the city whom they entertained at their Ridge homes. They were the gayest element on the Ridge, nearly all of them merely summer residents; in the winter appearing only at the Hunt Club meets.

Nickolas Baird, who had been "put up" at the Hunt Club by a city member, and who, for reasons of his own, meant to remain where he was for some time, was decidedly gratified by his invitation to the Westmore dinner. He had formed a casual friendship with Garvin Westmore which had been furthered by his purchase of a Westmore horse. Then he had met Judith Westmore, and from that moment had been welcome at Westmore.

"It will be just a family gathering," Judith had explained to him the week before, as she stood on the top step of the entrance to Westmore, whipping her riding-skirt lightly with her gold-handled crop. "You, of course, will find it endlessly dull, Mr. Baird – still we want you."

Baird had assured her that no gathering of which she was a part would be dull; that he was beyond measure pleased.

"You are to bring your dress clothes strapped to your saddle, in true colonial fashion, and spend the night here," Judith had continued. "Be sure to bring your dancing shoes," and, with a lithe turn and a smiling nod, had vanished into Westmore.

Baird had cantered off down the two miles of impossible road that led across Westmore to the Post-Road, smiling to himself, or, rather, at himself. How old was Judith Westmore, anyway? Certainly in the thirties. "Bo'n sho'tly after de war," the old negro who curried his horse at the Hunt Club had told him, for Baird had his own methods of making discoveries. She looked possibly – twenty-eight; slim, with the bust of a young Venus and the hips of a Diana. She certainly carried her head like a goddess. Baird had never seen a more graceful creature on horseback. And she walked as she rode, gracefully, spiritedly. Hers were the Westmore features at their best: a face not too long to be beautiful; arched brows, straight nose, a very perfectly molded chin, eyes a dark hazel and thickly lashed, a dainty head bound about by ink-black hair. Time had barely touched her. She was vivacious, yes ... but a little cold?

Baird was not certain. He thought, with slightly heightened color, of that quick turn at the door that had drawn her riding-skirt taut over the curves of hip and leg; and of her easily dilated eyes. Hers was not a warm mouth, too perfectly chiseled for that, but her hand was a live warm thing. Why in heaven's name hadn't she married?

Baird was twenty-six. He had reached the age when youth's first missteps lay in retrospect; the turning point, when analysis enters into the pursuit of the feminine. That he would endeavor to capture masterfully and in headlong fashion was legibly scrolled upon him. Whether faithfulness was any part of his composition was not so easy to determine. Certainly there was far more admiration than desire in his thoughts of Judith Westmore. What imagination he possessed had been busied with her for the last three weeks. She was wonderful! A belle that would have swayed three states – in colonial days. She had told him that the gold handle of her riding-whip had been presented to her grandmother by Henry Clay, and that the comb which sometimes topped her black coronet had frequently courtesied to General Washington. She had simply not had her grandmother's opportunities.

It amused Baird that his hard sense had been captured by the glamour of it. Backgrounded by Chicago or Wyoming the thing would have been ridiculous. But where people rode to the hounds and talked easily of governors and generals, their great-grandfathers, it was quite a natural thing.

"In true colonial fashion," Baird quoted, on the afternoon of the hunt, as he prepared to strap his Gladstone bag to the back of his saddle. "The damned thing'll bounce about like hell and I'll have a runaway if I'm not careful. Wonder how Mistress Judith's ancestors managed it? Saddle-bags, of course... Hey, Sam?" he called to the old negro who was leading two of the returned hunters up to the stable, "haven't got any colonial saddle-bags about the place, have you?"

"Yes, suh, suttently, suh," Sam assented promptly. He came up with face beaming. Baird's joking, accompanied as it was by shining half-dollars, delighted every negro on the place.

"Let's have them, then."

"Yes, suh – dey sho' is about de place, suh – tho' I don't 'zactly knows where."

Baird laughed. "Of course... Take in those horses and bring me a piece of rope – I don't trust these straps."

Sam came back with a hitching-strap and between them they did their best to make the bag fast.

"Where does that road between the cedars come out?" Baird asked when he had mounted. "Can't I get to Westmore if I go that way?"

Sam looked dubious. "Yes, suh – hit comes out to de County Road, an' from there am de road thro' de woods to Westmo'. Hit's the shortest way, but hit goes thro' de Penniman place."

"I thought it did – I'll go that way."

"But ole Mr. Penniman, he done built a gate by his house, suh, an' put on a padlock an' set up a sign. He don't 'low Hunt Club folks ridin' thro'."

"But he wouldn't mind my going through, would he?"

Sam looked grave. "I dunno, suh. He done had Mr. Garvin 'rested 'cos he rode thro'. He had him up to co't – yes, suh."

"Fined him, did he?" Baird asked with interest.

"Yes, *suh*! He done fin' him, an' when Mr. Garvin paid, Mr. Penniman, he refuse' to take de money. He give hit back to de co't, an' tol' 'em to give hit to the first orphan they seen, dat he don't want no Westmo' money."

"He did!"

"Yes, suh... I reckon tho' 'twas mostly 'cos of Mr. Garvin bein' a Westmo'," Sam added cautiously.

"Well, I'm not a Westmore – I'll chance it," Baird said decidedly.

VI

BAIRD RECONNOITERS

When he had turned in between the cedars, Baird was glad he had come. They were set close and now, in their middle-age, stood with branches interlocked, forming a canopy dense enough to shut out the sun. The soughing gloom through which Baird rode was mournful on a March day, but he had some conception of what it must be like in summer, cool and sweet-scented and perpetually whispering. The branches drooped so low in places that they shut out the country, nooks into which one could crawl and, with a tree-trunk and big roots forming a couch, dream away an entire day. And, protected from the dew, sleep through the night as well... What a trysting place for lovers, thought Baird.

The gigantic hedge ended abruptly at the foot of what had evidently once been a lawn, but overgrown now and too much shaded by locust trees. The Penniman house showed through the trees, a steep-pitched roof broken by dormer windows. Clumps of lilacs topped the bank which partially hid the road from the house, and, as he came up under their shelter, Baird eyed his surroundings keenly. But there appeared to be no one about.

The road passed within a few yards of the front porch, yet he saw no one. He could see, a short distance ahead, just beyond where the road forked, leading off to the barn, the gate and sign of which Sam had spoken.

Baird had planned this intrusion upon the Pennimans' privacy; he had no intention of going on, at least until he had searched for the person he wanted to see. He went on to the gate, then dismounted, having decided to attempt the barn first. The wide door, the entrance to the wagon-shed, stood open, and Baird looked in. Beyond was another door through which Baird glimpsed a pile of hay. He stood listening for a moment, then tiptoed across to it, for there were sounds here, a voice humming lightly.

It was the hay-loft he had come upon, a wide space half filled with hay; the remainder of the floor swept clean, a sweet-scented, airy space warmed by a broad band of sunlight. Not ten feet from him, beside a basket of eggs, sat a huge collie, forepaws planted, tail impatiently beating the floor, intent on what was passing. Baird looked on also.

It was Ann playing in the sun. She was without her cape and hood now; a slender thing in warm brown, some indeterminate garment without a belt, a sheathe-like apron, possibly. She appeared to be playing with the band of sunlight, moving in and out of it, in time to the minor, negroesque thing she was singing:

"Mr. Frog, he went a-courtin',
A-hung – a-hung.
Mr. Frog, he went a-courtin',
Sword an' pistol by his side,
A-hung – a-hung."

The excited collie barked and whined, but Ann went on, absorbed in the joy of motion, a bit of the cake-walk with its suggestion of abandon carrying her the length of the sunlight band; a waltz step backward and forward, from sunshine into shadow; a gliding turn and sweeping courtesy that might have been stolen from the minuet:

"He rode right up to Miss Mousey's den,
A-hung – a-hung.
He rode right up to Miss Mousey's den,

'I say, Missy Mouse, is you within?'
A-hung – a-hung.
'Yes, here I sits, an' here I spin,
Lift the latch an' do come in.'
A-hung – a-hung."

Her voice leaped suddenly into a joyful note:

"Suh! He took Miss Mousey on his knee,
'Say, Missy Mouse, will you marry me?'
A-hung —*a-hung!*"

She had swept into a pirouette that spun her like a top, stopped abruptly at the hay, and clapped her hands teasingly at the quivering collie: "A-hung, suh —*a-hung!*"

The dog was on her with a bound. The two came down on the hay and rolled over and over, the collie snarling in mock ferocity, Ann rippling with laughter, an ebullition of sheer animal spirits, a child at play, the gaiety Sue deplored.

But Ann was soon spent. She sat up then, flushed, panting and disheveled, the dog held at arm's length. She looked at the animal, for a full moment, into the creature's affectionate eyes, and her laughter died suddenly. She put her arms about the dog's neck and buried her face. "Oh, Prince!" she said, with a sob in her voice, "I reckon you an' Ben are the only ones that love me."

Baird had watched Ann dance with the delight one feels in a stolen pleasure – she was so utterly pretty and graceful, and so unconscious. When she rolled about in sheer abandonment on the hay he almost laughed out, in spite of the warmth that rose to his face. But, at the sob in her voice, he felt ashamed, like one caught eavesdropping. Baird was not overburdened with fine feelings, in some respects he was coarse-fibered, but there was too much genuine sorrow and longing in the girl's voice. It made him uncomfortable; he had no right to be there. He drew back into the wagon-shed, uncertain just how to present himself.

Ann solved the difficulty. She came out carrying the basket of eggs and with the collie at her heels. At sight of Baird, the dog barked furiously, and Ann stopped dead; the look she gave Baird was scarcely more friendly than the dog's bark; she was so evidently startled.

"I'm afraid I'm trespassing," Baird said promptly. "I thought I might come through this way to Westmore, but the gate is locked. I'm sorry I frightened you." He made his apology with the best air possible to him, cap in hand.

Ann quieted the collie, and when she looked at Baird again a smile had dawned in her eyes. "You're a stranger – you couldn't be expected to know about the gate," she said in her soft drawl. "I'll let you through."

"Thank you," Baird said, "but I hate to give you trouble."

Ann said nothing, yet Baird observed that she was not embarrassed. She put down the basket of eggs and led the way, her head carried quite as spiritedly as Judith Westmore bore hers. Not a vestige of the playful child remained; she was collected, polite. And she was lovely. Judith could never have been as pretty – she had never had this girl's ripe lips and warm throat, or her trick of lowered lashes. Baird saw now why her eyes appeared so dark; her lashes were black and the eyelids blue-tinged, giving her eyes both brilliancy and languor. The eyes themselves were a gray-hazel, and, except when surprised or smiling, their expression was wistful, almost melancholy. A facile face, capable of swift changes, and captivating because of it. Baird knew now why he had thought her something more than merely pretty.

He made his observations as he walked on beside her. "It must be a nuisance – having people come through in this way," he remarked, in order to be saying something.

"I don't mind, but grandpa does," Ann answered. "Perhaps when my father comes he will let the gate stay open."

"Your father doesn't live here then?"

"He hasn't been here for a long time – he's coming home to-morrow." There was anticipation in her voice.

"I was thinking this morning that if I owned land about here I'd kick at having my crops ridden over as we were doing."

"It's always been done, you see. Around here the best reason for doin' things is because they've always been done." Her tone was faintly sarcastic; she glanced at him, a swiftly intelligent look.

"She's bright," was Baird's mental comment. Aloud he said, "And in my part of the world the best reason for not doing things is because they've been done before – every one's looking for a newer and better way."

"Your part of the world?" It was the first sign of personal interest she had shown.

Baird was not supersensitive, but he had felt polite antagonism in her manner. He attempted to capture interest. "I came here from Chicago. Before that I was in Wyoming for a time. I've ranched, and done a lot of other things. I spent two years in South America – got rid of fifty thousand dollars down there and nothing but a year of fever to show for it. I could tell you a few tales that would make your hair rise."

He had won her wide look. "Were you on the Amazon? Are there flowers there that catch insects and snakes that make hoops of themselves an' chase animals?"

"Yes, I've been on the Amazon – worse luck. I don't know about the hoop-snakes, but I've seen plenty of insects that are flowers and flowers that are insects – everything in nature preys on something else... How do you come to know about the Amazon?"

"I read a story about it."

"Do you like to read?"

"I like it better than anything else," she said brightly.

They had come to the gate, and she looked at the bag strapped to his saddle, then laughingly at Baird. "Looks funny, doesn't it?" he remarked. "I'm taking my dress clothes over to Westmore – they're having a dinner-dance to-night."

Ann's smile vanished. "Oh – " she said, her face grown wistful. Then with a flash into gaiety she sprang lightly to a notch in the gate-post, swung herself up by the foothold, and took a key from the niche in which it was hidden.

"Here!" Baird exclaimed. "Why didn't you let me do that?.. Let me help you!"

Ann looked at him, innate coquetry in her eyes. "If you'll stand aside, suh, I can step down."

Baird answered the look in the fashion natural to him. He took her by the waist, held her up long enough to prove the strength of his arms, then set her down; his lips pressed her cheek and his breath warmed her neck as he did so. "Arms like mine are made for reaching – and for holding," he said.

The color swept into Ann's face, and her eyes widened into brilliancy. For an instant Baird did not know what to think. Then her lashes dropped and she held the key out to him. "You know where to find it now," she said softly.

"I'll come again – I'm staying at the Hunt Club," he answered swiftly. He took her hand as well as the key; he had flushed as deeply as she.

The tacit invitation had struck Baird as involuntary, and so did her answer, a sudden inclination and as quick a shrinking; the color fled from her face. "No!" she said decidedly, and pulling her hand away sped to the house.

Baird started in pursuit, the first step, before he remembered where he was. Then he stopped. "Whew!" he said, under his breath.

He went back to the gate and unlocked it, led his horse through, and returned the key to its hiding-place. Before he mounted, he gave the house a long scrutiny. "We'll see!" he said, his eyes grayed to coldness, his cheeks still hot.

He rode for half a mile before he regained his usual aspect. Then he laughed shortly: "That was funny – she regularly took hold on me."

VII

THE WESTMORES OF WESTMORE

Baird thought, when he sat down to dinner that night, that he had never looked on a better favored company or on a more interesting setting.

They were twenty-five in all, with the great mahogany table drawn crosswise of the room to allow passage between silver-laden sideboards and china-cupboards whose aged mahogany was brightened by arrays of dull blue and gold-banded Worcester and the pinky red of platters and plates of Indian Tree pattern which Judith told him had been presented, in 1735, by Lord Westmore to his colonial cousin, the first Westmore of Westmore. From where Baird sat he could look across the hall into the drawing-room, a glimpse of dark paneling, wide fireplace, and above it the two portraits, Edward Stratton Westmore, first Westmore of Westmore, and his cousin, Lord Edward Stratton Westmore, of Stratton House, Hampshire, England.

Westmore was typically a southern colonial mansion, a spacious central building with two wings and with a collection of outbuildings for the housing of servants. The ballroom and the plantation office were in one wing, the kitchens in the other. Westmore's massive brick walls had withstood time, as had the heavy oak paneling of dining-room, hall and drawing-room. There were no modern touches to disturb the Georgian atmosphere; this was 1905, yet Westmore was still the Westmore of 1735.

And with the picturesque additions of frilled wrist-bands, perukes, looped skirts and powdered coiffures, Baird thought this might well have been a clan gathering of a hundred years ago. In the hour before dinner, Baird had met them all, Westmores, Copeleys, Dickensons and Morrisons. The Dickensons were from the city, the others were all of the county – had always been of the county, and all were interrelated.

Conscious of his own too muscular neck and shoulders and massive jaw, Baird had noticed that there was not a paunched or bull-necked man in this family. He was not fat, thank heaven! and did not intend to be, but he would never be able to attain the nice muscles and graceful carriage that, in this family, seemed to be inherent. Even old Colonel Ridley Dickenson had a perfect boot-leg. Most of the younger men were too long-backed for great strength, good horsemen but poor wrestlers, Baird judged, and the two boys of twenty who represented the third generation were inclined to be weedy and hatchet-faced; but, on the whole, they were a clean-limbed and exceedingly well-featured collection.

The women struck Baird as delicately pretty rather than beautiful or handsome. Though in several delicacy was pronounced enough to suggest ill-health, the Westmore features predominated, fine brows, dark hair, clear skin, slimness and roundness combined. The only golden-haired girl of the company was Elizabeth Dickenson, and it was easy to see how she came by her fairness; her mother was not of the clan, a somewhat hard-faced, blonde New Yorker, who had brought money to her husband, and modern social proclivities as well. Elizabeth Dickenson was more like the Chicago girls Baird had met, more striking and self-assertive than her county kin, and far more fashionably gowned.

But Judith Westmore was easily the beauty of the entire collection. There was something joyous about her mien this evening; perhaps because for the first time in many years Westmore was like the Westmore of old. Baird had gathered from the conversation he had over-heard between Mrs. Dickenson and Mrs. Copeley that this was the inauguration of a new era at Westmore.

"Edward's money – " Mrs. Dickenson had said significantly. "Judith will make the best of it."

"And who deserves it more than Judith!" Mrs. Copeley returned warmly. "When I think of all Judith has gone through! Where would Westmore be but for Judith? Sold to some carpetbagger, years ago! It nearly went, I can tell you, Cousin Mary."

"If Garvin would follow Edward's example now, and marry a girl with money," Mrs. Dickenson had remarked.

Mrs. Copeley had said nothing.

"But, then, Garvin Westmore is not Edward – any more than Sarah Westmore is Judith," Mrs. Dickenson had concluded dryly. From the cloud that settled on Mrs. Copeley's face, Baird judged that the reference was not a happy one. Who Sarah Westmore was he did not know; she was not of the assembled party.

Mrs. Dickenson was evidently giving thought to Westmore's new prosperity, for it was she who asked Edward, across the table, "Ed, while you are getting things, why don't you get an automobile? You'd look particularly well in an automobile." She had a carrying voice; it reached Baird at his end of the table.

Edward sat at the head of the table, Judith at the foot; Baird was at Judith's left, with Elizabeth Dickenson as his dinner partner. Garvin was on the other side of the table, and both he and Elizabeth Dickenson ceased to talk and waited for Edward's answer.

Baird thought that he had never seen a more smileless and at the same time a more attentive host than Edward Westmore. The man's white face was carven, his eyes melancholy, yet he talked easily and gracefully. In spite of his pallor, he was the most distinguished-looking man in this gathering of well-favored men, perhaps because he lacked their local flavor. He looked what he was, a much-traveled man with a fund of experience.

He did not smile at Mrs. Dickenson, though he answered pleasantly, "Not for me, Cousin Mary – but Garvin may have a machine if he wants it."

Garvin flushed but said nothing. It was little Priscilla Copeley who exclaimed, "Do you mean it, Cousin Ed?"

"Take him up on it, Garvin! Take him up quick!" Colonel Dickenson cut in mischievously. "By George, suh, you'd be the most popular spark in the county – with the ladies! Every man whose horse you scared could cuss you all the way to limbo. Hot water you'd be in! and that's what you like... Go ahead, suh!" He might have been hallooing on the hounds. The colonel was a keen sportsman, and a bon-vivant, a member of two hunt clubs and several city clubs – his wife's money had given him both the leisure and the opportunity.

Garvin was not allowed an immediate hearing. "Oh, Garve! I can see you making a Nebuchadnezzar of yourself under that machine!" Elizabeth Dickenson exclaimed, and one of the Copeley boys added: "I'd rather have it than the sorrel, Garve. George Pettee told me there were two hundred automobiles now in the city – every fellow wants one. Yours would be the first out here – unless father'll get us one. Will you, suh?"

Mr. Copeley was a tall white-haired man, second cousin to the Westmores, and markedly a Westmore. He had looked his surprise at Edward's offer, then had looked thoughtful. "No, suh," he said quietly. "I don't like them. If the county's goin' to be overrun with them, I'll move... Garvin, you'll have to get to work on that two miles of road from here to the Post-Road befo' you can run a machine over it – that would be the most sensible thing you've done in years. I reckon Edward would like you to get to work at something – it doesn't matter much what... You wouldn't be furnishing a chauffeur, would you, Ed?"

"No," Edward said.

Baird had watched his opportunity. It was only in his sleep that Nickolas Baird lost sight of business, and not always then. "I can get you a good machine, straight from the factory, and at trade price, Garvin."

Garvin had given his, cousin Copeley a flaming glance, but he answered his brother courteously. "Thank you, Ed. I'll take the machine – and I'll put the road in shape."

"Very well – we'll thank Mr. Baird to-morrow for his kind offer."

"Will you take me riding, Garve?" Priscilla Copeley asked softly, under cover of the remarks that followed.

Baird had noticed her, the pretty, dark-eyed girl who sat beside Garvin. She nestled against his elbow for her half-whisper, and Baird saw the look her mother gave her and the sharp gesture that made her daughter straighten and flush. Baird did not know why he felt sorry for Garvin at that moment; possibly his sensing of the general disapproval. He did not like the man, but that was mainly because of his wild act that morning. But it was a little hard on a fellow, having every one down on him. And it was plain that Garvin mourned his horse. The hunt and Garvin's mishap had been thoroughly discussed in the drawing-room, and Garvin had been restless under it. All they knew was that Garvin had had to shoot his horse. There had been a touch of desperation in Garvin's aside to Baird: "God! I wish they'd let up on the subject – I've had about enough for one day!"

And now Mr. Copeley was giving him another thrust. "You're in for it now, Garvin – are you going at the road pick and shovel?"

Judith spoke for the first time since the subject had been introduced. "Bear Brokaw would be the best man to help you, Garvin," she suggested brightly.

She had been watching the serving of dinner, a word now and then to the three negroes who bore around the best viands Baird had ever tasted. Soup had been followed by roast oysters, terrapin and turkey, and accompanying vegetables and hot breads. The evening had turned very mild, as warm as a May night, and the mint-juleps taken in the drawing-room had been soothing. Edward was evidently a connoisseur, the wines were of the best and the array of glasses were not allowed to languish; the men one and all appeared to be good drinkers.

But Judith had evidently not been too absorbed to follow the conversation and to note Garvin's curled lip and angry eyes, for her remark instantly created a diversion. Mrs. Morrison, Judith's aunt, a stately woman with proudly-carried head, spoke from Edward's end of the table. "I'm surprised at you, Judith – after the way that white-trash robbed me! Ben's nothing but a common thief!"

The young people smiled covertly, but Edward asked with genuine concern: "Bear Brokaw rob you, Aunt Carlotta! Why, I remember Bear – I used to go hunting with him. I thought there wasn't an honester man living than Bear Brokaw."

"He is a thief, Edward," Mrs. Morrison reiterated decidedly.

Edward looked his surprise.

"Ben Brokaw bought a tree of Aunt Carlotta Morrison," Judith said demurely. The look she flashed on Baird was a-gleam with mirth.

Edward glanced casually about the table and caught the covert smiles. "Well?" he questioned more equably.

Baird had discovered that the interests of the clan were entirely local and centered in themselves; he had not heard a single remark that ventured beyond their native state. They evidently criticized one another freely, but Baird judged that any stranger who essayed the same freedom would be set upon by the entire connection, with the ferocity of a pack of hounds.

"It was a thoroughly thievish transaction, Edward," Mrs. Morrison maintained warmly. "You know I never approved of the man – a creature that climbs trees like a monkey and sleeps out in the woods like a savage. Your uncle would have known better, but I consented to sell him that tree – you know, one of the big chestnuts down by the cabins. It was dead, and I wanted it down, and I didn't tell Ben I thought he was crazy when he wanted me to sign a slip of paper, just sayin' that I'd sold the tree to him, half shares on the wood. I thought the lumberin' old thing had got some funny notion. But he knew what he was about... Edward, it was a honey-tree! He'd been watching and had seen the bees goin' in and out. He got forty buckets of honey out of that tree!.. If that's not stealing, I don't know what is, and I think the family ought to boycott him."

Edward kept his countenance in spite of the titter about him. "Did he cord his wood according to agreement?" he asked.

"Yes, he did," Mrs. Morrison admitted.

"He was doing up-to-date business – that's all, Aunt Carlotta," Judith remarked.

"Something more than that," Edward said. "I remember Uncle Morrison broke up some of his traps and warned him off the property. You urged him to it, if I remember, Aunt Carlotta."

"But think of such revengefulness – after all these years! And your uncle dead, too!"

"There's a good deal of such undying hatred about," Edward answered evenly. "It's a pity." He looked down at his plate.

But the younger people were still smiling. "Don't worry, Aunt Carlotta, Bear isn't going to work for any of us," one of the Copeley boys said. "I saw him this evenin' on my way here – he's at the Pennimans'... By the way – he said Coats Penniman was coming home."

It was Judith's perceptible start and Edward's quick lift of the head that arrested Baird's attention. But neither of them spoke; it was Garvin who asked swiftly, "When is he coming?"

"To-morrow, Bear said."

Garvin made no comment, but Mr. Copeley exclaimed, "Why didn't you tell your bit of news sooner, my boy?.. It means Coats will take hold of the place. I'm afraid it does, Ed."

His remark had some significance that was evidently not clear to other members of the family, for Mrs. Morrison asked, "Why, what difference does it make to you who runs the Penniman place, Edward?"

Edward paid no attention to her question; he was motioning to one of the servants to bring him more wine, and when his glass was filled he emptied it at a draft. It did not flush him, however; if anything, he looked paler. It struck Baird that the man must be ill, there must be some reason for such persistent pallor.

The dinner was nearing an end, and Baird himself was warmed through and through. He had been well treated. Priscilla Copeley had played prettily with him across the table, and not been reproved by her mother; she had promised to ride with him the next day. And Elizabeth Dickenson had said that his name would be on the list for the next Assembly Ball. Baird was not particularly fond of dancing, and a formal ball was a nuisance, but he welcomed her invitation to the next Fair Field Hunt Club meet. Colonel Dickenson was president of the club, and Baird knew that he would be well presented to a group of sportsmen who would be useful to him.

But it was Judith who stirred him. He was alive to his finger tips with admiration, and fully conscious that he had given himself up to a new experience; delighting in it. In the last few days he had merely touched the fringe of the new thing. He had seen very little of society, nothing at all of people such as these, and Judith was the embodiment of caste. Her ancestry spoke in every atom of her. She was a thoroughbred. She was superb; so truly a part of that old Georgian house with its indelible history.

And Baird loved to see good generalship. Judith had handled that long tableful of people as a gambler would a pack of cards. She had attended to every one's needs, been observant of every face, and at the same time had devoted herself to him. She had furthered the two girls' play with him, and then had drawn him back to her again. She was wonderful and very beautiful. He was giving her the first adoration he had ever experienced.

This was the first time Baird had seen Judith with shoulders bared, the tantalizingly perfect shoulders and bust of a mature woman, but that realization did not stir him half so much as his capture of the brilliant glance with which she swept the table. It softened into intimacy when he caught it; took him into her confidence. When, on their way to the ballroom, the negro fiddlers paused under the dining-room window and played the first bars of a waltz, and the young people sprang up to follow, leaving their elders to coffee and wine, Baird was as eager as any one of them. Judith had promised him the first dance, she would be in his arms for the first time, but Baird was thinking less of that than he was of what she was going to say to him, a favor she had said she meant to ask.

VIII

THE COLONEL IS SUSPICIOUS

Like most big-framed men who have a sense of rhythm, Baird danced well, though a little lazily. He found Judith an exhilarating partner. A touch of languor would have made her an exquisite dancer, but Baird discovered that her apparently soft curves covered muscles of tempered steel; there was subdued energy and swift grace in every movement of hers; no wonder she was a perfect horsewoman.

During their first dance Baird told Judith, in his downright fashion, that she was the most delightful hostess he had ever known and the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; a "wonder-woman" he called her, which, for Nickolas Baird, was a poetic flight. When they danced again, he begged her to set him his task: "What is it you are going to ask of me, Wonder-woman?.. I've never had the least inclination to become a knight until I met you. I'm aching to swear allegiance – what is it I'm to do for you?"

Baird was accustomed to making love somewhat roughly and altogether carelessly, he merely yielded a little to habit when he held Judith closely and spoke in her ear. Nevertheless, it was plain to even an onlooker that the spell of profound respect was upon him. It made his rough strength appealing, the sort of appeal a young man of Baird's virile type usually makes to a woman older than himself. What he was asking was how best to please her; his forgetfulness implied restrained impetuosity, not presumption. And evidently he pleased Judith; her occasional upward glance was not disapproving.

So Colonel Dickenson thought as he watched them dance. He had forsaken the dining-room for the moment, and, avoiding the drawing-room where the elder women were gathered, had come by the veranda to the ballroom. He had a jovial remark for each couple as they circled by him, and for Judith and Baird also:

"I couldn't trip it more lightly myself – damme if I could!"

But Judith had caught his eye. "I see Cousin Ridley over there – I'm afraid I'm wanted," she said, when the dance was over. "That's the penalty I pay for being 'a delightful hostess.'" If her lips had been fuller they would have pouted.

"Can't you be allowed a little respite?" Baird exclaimed. "I want another dance – and another after that!"

Judith smiled and shook her head.

"But you haven't told me what I'm to do for you, yet, Wonder-woman?"

"It must wait... There will be some square dances by and by, and an even number of couples without us."

"And we can go to the porch – somewhere where we can talk – where it is cool?"

Judith made a little affirmative gesture.

"I'll do my duty till then," Baird said brusquely. "I hate dancing – except with you."

She allowed him to capture her intimate glance, but the instant she had turned away her face settled into gravity, an expression both hard and apprehensive. It made her look more nearly her age.

"What is it, Ridley?" she asked sharply. "Anything wrong – up-stairs?"

"No, no!" the colonel said. "I just wanted a word with you befo' I've lost my feet – Edward's goin' to have us all under the table befo' mo'nin'." The colonel usually abbreviated his syllables when warmed.

Judith drew a quick breath. "Oh – well, come out to the veranda – "

The entrance to Westmore was the usual Georgian portico; the veranda crossed the back of the house, a gallery, really, overlooking the terraces and connecting the two wings of the house, affording an entrance to the ballroom at one end, to the kitchens at the other, and a rear entrance

to the main hall. There were high-backed benches here, and Judith led the way to one of them. She sighed inaudibly as she sat down.

The colonel began promptly: "I wasn't meaning to spoil your dance, Judith, but Mary's been telling me to ask that young friend of Garvin's to our Fair Field meet. Of co's' you can be relied on to choose your friends sensibly, but Garvin's not so certain. Who is this Nickolas Baird? If I introduce him, I've got to stand fo' him. I want to know a little more about him than Mary could tell me. I'll be damned if I'll present him – knowin' no more about him than I do! What's his family?"

"I doubt if he has any," Judith answered equably. "In fact, I know he hasn't – he told me that both his father and his mother were dead."

"You know what I mean, Judith!" the colonel objected warmly.

"Of course the first question would be, 'What's his family?' and the next, 'Has he money?'" There was amusement in Judith's voice. Then she added more seriously, "I really know very little about him, Ridley – except that he seems to be a nice, clever sort of boy. Edward approves of him, so I asked him here. Edwin Carter can tell you more about him than I can. He put him up at the Hunt Club and introduced him to Edward and Garvin. Edwin Carter spoke highly of him."

The chill of the veranda had cooled the colonel somewhat. "Edwin Carter, eh!" he said more quietly. "Well, he generally knows what he is about. He has more social sense than most of his money-makin' crowd – but then he would have – he's a Carter. He certainly has a deal more business sense than any Westmore born, and if he's back of this young fellow, there's some business reason fo' it. Has he money, Judith?"

"Mr. Baird? I think so. He seems to make money easily, at any rate. He speaks of losing fifty thousand dollars with far more lightness than you would of dining, or of being deprived of the meal. His brain appears to be stored with schemes, and all sorts of useful knowledge as well. He is entertaining, for he has been everywhere and knows all kinds of people. Get him to tell you about South America some time, Ridley, and you'll be repaid for the trouble."

"Well, I hope he's not scheming to relieve Edward of some of his money," was the colonel's frank comment.

"Now, Ridley!"

"Oh, you're a clever woman, Judith, that's sure, but you don't know anything about promoters. I know too much about 'em. I'll wager my best horse this young man's a promoter – in with the Carter gang and out here at the Hunt Club fo' a purpose. What does he mean – givin' away automobiles. He spoke up like a flash at dinner; there's something in it fo' him, I'll wager." The colonel expressed himself with all the astuteness of the man who had never in his life handled a dollar of his own making, and whose business ventures had been confined to a lordly interest in his wife's safety-deposit box.

Judith laughed. "I hope there is something in it for him, I'm sure... I wish he would teach Garvin his secret," she added with a sigh.

"He'll probably lead Garvin into mischief," the colonel returned severely. "There are too many of this young man's kind bein' received into our first families. I'm continually at odds with Mary over the young men she recommends to Elizabeth. I don't feel inclined to countenance this young man, Judith."

"Would you have Elizabeth marry a cousin?" Judith asked coldly. "There has been a little too much of that in our family, don't you think?"

The colonel said nothing.

Judith continued more brightly: "I'll tell you, Ridley, exactly what I think of Mr. Baird: I think he is a very clever young man, with no family background and not much money, but with influential men behind him. They know he is a financial genius. If you're wagering a horse, I'll wager Black Betty that in ten years Mr. Nickolas Baird will be worth a million... And your discountenancing him will not make a particle of difference. Christine Carter told Elizabeth that he was going to be asked to the next Assembly Ball, and you know that that places him. If he wants to go to the Fair Field

meet, he will go – he is the sort of man who'll always get what he wants. It's just as well for people like ourselves to realize that Mr. Baird's type is becoming plentiful – right here in our stronghold – and adapt ourselves to the inevitable. If we are sensible, we'll draw what advantage we can from it... I'll tell you what I should do, if I were you, Ridley: I'd ask Mr. Baird to dinner at your club and study him a little – you are an excellent judge of character" – Judith's voice was soothing at this point – "and if you don't like him, drop him... As for me, I have no intention of dropping him – principally because Edward likes him." She concluded firmly enough.

"It's not so much Edward who likes him, is it?" the colonel blurted out. "The young man's pretty well smitten with you, if I'm any judge, and if I should see Elizabeth at your tricks I'd say that she was something more than flirting."

Judith was plentifully endowed with Westmore temper; the colonel was wont to say that there had never been a more imperious Westmore than his Cousin Judith; he grew uncomfortably warm during the perceptible pause that followed his hasty speech.

Then Judith's laugh rang clearly. "My dear Ridley! You are amusing!.. Yes, that clever boy is scheming to take Edward's money, and I am helping him to it! Either that, or he is in love with me and I am forgetting that I am thirty-four and he twenty-six – a little romance snatched at in my old age!" She rippled into more subdued mirth as she rose. "You go on in and talk to Edward – he'll give you the best of reasons for *our* countenancing Mr. Baird." She changed then suddenly to sternness. "I'd advise you, though, not to make any such remarks to him as you've just made to me, Cousin Ridley. Edward is head of our family, remember, and you're more Westmore than Dickenson – at least I've always thought so. I'm certainly Westmore enough to set the family interest before everything else – I've always done so in the past, and am likely to do so in the future."

The colonel had been entertaining a jumble of thoughts, among others, that women of thirty-four were sometimes emotionally erratic, particularly if they had had so barren an emotional existence as Judith; and also, that young fellows of twenty-six were apt to be dangerously impressionable. But at Judith's reproof he came up standing:

"I beg your pardon, Cousin Judith," he said, in his old-fashioned, florid manner. "Edward's hospitality has been a little too much fo' me – my tongue has run a little too loose. That happens to me sometimes, as you know. I beg yo' pardon. What I really think is that you are a woman in a million, Judith – a very splendid woman, my dear. Westmo' owes everything to you – we all know that, and I'm on my knees to you – I always have been."

Judith Westmore was not demonstrative, so her answer to his apology surprised and vastly pleased the colonel. She framed his tanned face with her hands and kissed his cheek. "You are a dear," she said brightly. "Now go in to Edward and be nice to him. He's worried over Garvin – and a number of things... I'm going in now to talk to Cousin Mary, and after that I'll have to go up-stairs. If any one wants to see me, just say I'm busy."

The colonel did as he was bidden; Judith was usually obeyed. She had her own methods with each member of the clan, and it was a rare thing for one of them to venture upon criticism of Judith. The colonel had been, as he said, a little overcome by Edward's hospitality.

IX

A FEMININE PROCEDURE

But Judith did not go up-stairs.

After nearly an hour spent in the drawing-room, she left her elder cousins engrossed in whist, saying that she was going up until time for supper. She went to the foot of the stairs, then half-way up, to where the stairs made a turn, and stood for a time, listening. Everything was quiet above. In the dining-room the men were still talking, and the drawing-room was silent except for an occasional remark. Smothered by the intervening walls, the music and the stir in the ballroom seemed distant.

Judith listened to the conclusion of a waltz, then to the chatter on the veranda – until it was drawn back again into the ballroom by the less rhythmic measure of a square dance. Then she crept down, went quickly through the hall and out to the veranda.

Baird was there, waiting for her. He sprang up from a bench. "I hoped you'd come!" he said. "I didn't like to go in and ask for you."

They stood for a moment. "Have you been enjoying yourself?" Judith asked.

"No, you didn't come back."

Judith laughed softly. "You are not polite to my party, suh."

"Never mind." He touched her bare arm. "Where can I get something to put around you?"

"My cape is in the hall – behind the stairs – and my overshoes... It is so warm – we might go down to the walk."

"Down to the terraces," Baird said with the quickness of the man alert to every advantage.

Possibly Judith had the terraces in mind, but she demurred. "Oh, no – the ground is too damp."

Baird's answer was to dive into the hall. When he came out he had Judith's cape on his arm and a pair of overshoes in each hand. He held up the larger pair. "I've jumped some one's claim!.. Think any one will want these before we get back?"

"They'll certainly not guess where to look for them... You know how to surmount a difficulty, don't you?" She had planned for this adventure, and her cheeks were warm.

"By helping myself to some one else's belongings – if there is no other way... Sit down and let me make sure you will be dry."

Baird had also planned for an hour on the terraces, and was elated. He knelt and put on Judith's overshoes with much care, a caressing clasp for each foot before he planted it on the floor. "They are so small," he said. "There are not many women whose feet are kissable." Then dashed by his temerity, he added quickly, "You must descend on me if I talk – nonsense. I am apt to be forward – I need training badly. I'm in your hands, you know."

Judith thought, as she looked down at his massive jaw with its suggestion of animal force, that undoubtedly he spoke from much predatory experience; his air of deference sat oddly on him; he was most attractive when presumptuous. Her reflections caused her a pang. Retrospective jealousy over affairs that were none of her concern? She shrugged mentally. She was foolish! For the first time in her life she was deliberately tampering with forces which she knew were dangerous.

She thought it best to say gravely, "You are a little – assured, Mr. Baird."

"I'm afraid I am," he assented ruefully; then added with native shrewdness and candor combined, "I suppose because I've usually found it paid."

"I suppose it does – with some people," Judith returned with instant hauteur. She was glad he could not see her flush.

Baird got to his feet. "May I help you with your cape?" he asked so humbly that the prick of his previous remark ceased to smart. Why take offense at his candor; his respect for her was apparent enough.

She regained her usual manner as Baird helped her down the steps and, on reaching the walk, dropped her arm, and vented his discomfort by criticizing the moon. "The stars are doing their best – why doesn't the silly thing choose the end of the month to be full in?" he complained. "I'm afraid you will stumble."

Judith did stumble a few moments afterward, and, as a matter of course, Baird took possession of her arm. Judith judged that he had been sufficiently rebuked and also that she had proved that she needed guidance and yet was not eager to accept it, a truly feminine procedure.

And Baird was evidently bent upon gaining the terraces without offending her by too much urgency. They had come to the verge of the first terrace, and he tested the ground. "It's not muddy," he announced. "The sod is too heavy... Shan't we go down?"

"I ought not to go so far away – some one will be wanting me," Judith objected.

"That is one reason you should go," Baird said decidedly. "You've been on duty all evening. Come, shunt it all for a few minutes." Baird had regained his assurance; it never deserted him for long.

"I should like to," Judith confessed, and her sigh was genuine enough.

"Of course you would. Isn't there a bench down there – somewhere?"

"On the edge of the last terrace – under those two cedars."

"Let's go to it – please, Wonder-woman! They'll all be out after that dance and I won't have a moment with you. Come!"

He pleaded a little masterfully, Judith thought, but as long as he did not suspect that it was his forcefulness that attracted her, all was well. "I suppose I can hear down there, if any one called," she said doubtfully.

"Certainly you can."

They went down to where the two cedars loomed, a dark mass, and groped their way to the bench. It was dark beneath the trees and quite dry. Below them was a hollow and beyond it a steep slope crowned by a group of trees, their outlines distinct against the sky. In every direction but this the country dropped away from the house, affording views for miles. Except for the music in the house behind them and the occasional snort or stamp of a horse in the stables, it was very still.

"This is splendid," Baird said, "but are you warm enough? You have nothing on your head – there's a hood to your cape ... may I?"

He drew it up over her hair, restraining his impulse to touch her cheek as he did so. The cape reminded him of Ann Penniman and his afternoon's adventure, and he smiled a little to himself. That had been so natural a performance, and this enforced deference was so entirely a new experience. He was enjoying it; he liked the way in which Judith kept the distance between them. She sat well against her corner of the bench. He could see her face now, black and white and rounded into girlishness by the encircling hood, again reminding him of Ann.

"I like those hooded capes," he remarked. "I don't know that I ever saw one till I came here."

"Haven't you? Almost every woman here has one – they are so convenient. Do you know what sun-bonnets are? If you're here in the summer you'll become acquainted with them, too. But I suppose you will be off befo' then." She spoke more lazily than usual, slurred her words more, another reminder of Ann.

"I shan't be able to get away when I go – if you continue to be kind to me."

Judith laughed. "Do you happen to be Irish?"

"Of course I'm Irish! Haven't you noticed my long upper lip? My father was a pretty successful Chicago ward politician and I have the gift of gab and manipulation too. I can talk money out of a man – any hour of the day. Now that I have had enough of adventure, I mean to settle down to handling people and making money. I was born to it... But that sort of thing is contrary to all your traditions, isn't it?" he added.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.