

BURNHAM CLARA LOUISE

THE INNER FLAME

Clara Burnham

The Inner Flame

«Public Domain»

Burnham C.

The Inner Flame / C. Burnham — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	12
CHAPTER III	17
CHAPTER IV	22
CHAPTER V	29
CHAPTER VI	34
CHAPTER VII	40
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	43

Clara Louise Burnham

The Inner Flame

CHAPTER I

A NOVEMBER NIGHT

Soft snowflakes whirled around the lonely mountain cabin under a November sky. The wind that had rushed up the valley sighing and groaning between the wooded walls, now roared its wild delight in the freedom of the heights. The twilight was deepening fast. Two women were alone in the cabin. The one who was at home stooped and put another log on the blazing fire. The other could not have stooped, no matter how willing her spirit, so straitly and fashionably was her ample figure bound by artful bone and steel.

"Mercy, Mary!" she ejaculated, standing stock still in the middle of the room, fixed there by a triumphant shriek of the rioting wind. "I never had the least desire to go up in an aeroplane. Are you well anchored here?"

"Like a lichen on a rock," returned Mary Sidney, smiling. "Take off your hat, Isabel, and be comfy."

"Do you think we *must* stay all night?" demurred the visitor. "You know I love you, Mary, and if that wind would just let us hear ourselves think, I wouldn't ask anything better than an evening's chat with you alone."

"You wouldn't as it is," returned Mrs. Sidney soothingly, approaching her cousin and unpinning the veil which Mrs. Fabian had not raised. The visitor clung to her wraps with the feeling that an entire readiness to flee back to the haunts of men would aid her to depart. Mary Sidney's calm amused smile carried some reassurance. It flickered across her face as the firelight flickered across the dark rafters above.

"I *told* Henry I thought the sky looked threatening before we left town," declared the guest while she submitted to the gentle touch, "but nothing would do but that he should visit the mine this very afternoon. Isn't this fearful, Mary?" as a renewed gust shook the firelit rafters until they creaked heavily.

"Oh, no, this sounds a great deal worse than it is," was the response.

"You're comforting me, I know you are"; and Mrs. Fabian, denuded of her correct hat, permitted herself to take the offered chair by the fire. "I hope, though, that you have a kennel of St. Bernard dogs in the back yard. I *should* like to see Henry again, bad as he is!"

Mrs. Sidney took the other chair and rolled a blazing log to a better position.

"You'll see the men coming along in a little while – when they grow hungry," she returned placidly.

"And how in the world do you get servants up here?" demanded the other.

"We don't. We could get a Chinaman, but if we had him we'd have to amuse him, there's no one else for him to talk to, so we go without."

"Horrors!" ejaculated Mrs. Fabian with solemn repugnance. "And you live here alone!"

The hostess laughed at her tone. "Not enough of the year to dislike it. One learns a lot of things in these hills – bidding farewell to time, for instance. You see a man with a gun tramping through the valley and you rush to the door, and cry out, 'Hey, there, you with the gun, what day is this?' and the man turns and shouts back, 'You can't prove it by me!'"

Mrs. Sidney laughed again and her cousin shuddered.

"Thank God for civilization!" ejaculated the latter devoutly; then, as the window-glass sucked in and out with a cracking sound, "Give me my hat, Mary," she said, sitting up. "If we're going down the mountain-side, let's go decently and in order."

"For shame, you Maine woman!" was the laughing rejoinder. "Your sea-captains would call this 'a breeze o' wind!' That's all. That's another thing one becomes acquainted with up here: the wind. I didn't know anything about it when I came. You should be here some nights if you call this a storm! I used to set my dish-pans out at the door; but when a few had whirled down the mountain-side into the valley, I learned caution. One can't go around the corner here and buy a dish-pan."

"Mary," Mrs. Fabian eyed her with bewildered admiration, "you're wonderful! You didn't used to be wonderful," she added in an argumentative tone. "Once you'd have made just as much fuss about this as I would. You remember – if you try, you'll remember perfectly – that I warned you, more than twenty-five years ago, not to marry a mining engineer. I told you then it was just as bad as marrying an army officer. There would be no repose about it, and no comfort. You see I was right. Here we are, to all intents and purposes, in a shrieking balloon, and you call it home!" The speaker kept a watchful eye on the rattling casement and drew herself up with renewed tension at each wind blast, but nevertheless she talked on.

"With it all you haven't as many lines in your face as I have, and your hair is as brown as ever. Mine would be white if I lived here instead of in New York. And the calmness of your eyes, and your smile! Tell me, Mary, tell me now honestly, – I shall sympathize with you, —*is* it the calmness of despair?"

Mary Sidney did not smile. She looked into the depths of the fire and her guest wondered what memories were unfolding themselves to her rapt vision.

"No," she answered simply at last, "such calmness as I possess is not of despair, but of – faith." The speaker paused before the utterance of the last word as if hesitating for the one which should best express her meaning.

"Do you mean something religious?" asked Mrs. Fabian stiffly.

The stiffness was not disapproval. It was owing to the divided attention she was bestowing upon the storm, lest if she took her mind off the wind it might seize the advantage and hurl the cabin from its moorings.

"I should think a person would *have* to be religious here," she went on. "You must be reduced – simply *reduced* to trusting in Providence!"

Mary Sidney smiled at the fire. "I didn't have a trusting disposition. I didn't have even a happy disposition, as you evidently remember."

"Well," returned Isabel, "it wasn't a bad one: I didn't imply anything like that; but you were one of the spoiled-beauty sort of girls, not a bit cut out for hardship," the speaker looked judicially at the once familiar face, softened from its old brilliancy. "What an advantage it is to have beautiful eyes!" she added bluntly. "They don't desert you when other things go; – not that it matters a bit what sort of eyes a woman has, living the life you have."

"Oh, Allan thinks it does," returned Mary in her restful manner.

"Does he appreciate you?" Mrs. Fabian asked the question almost angrily.

Mrs. Sidney smiled. "We don't talk much about that, but we're better companions, happier, dearer, than we were twenty-five years ago."

Her cousin gazed curiously. "Then it did turn out all right. You've written so little to your friends. How could your relatives tell?"

"You see, now, why," returned the other. "There's not much letter-material here, and even when we're living in town, all our friends and our pursuits are so foreign to the people at home. Little by little one gets out of the way of writing."

"Don't you ever long for Fifth Avenue?" asked Mrs. Fabian suddenly, her cousin's exile impressing her more and more as utter forlornity.

"Oh, no, not for many years."

"You never could have kept your figure there as you have here," admitted the other in a spirit of justice. "I must say that," and the speaker composed her own rigid armor into a less uncomfortable position.

"Do your own housework, Isabel," advised the hostess with a smile.

"Heavens! it is too late to talk to me about that. I've enough to do without housework, I should hope. You've no idea how much worse things have grown in twenty-five years, Mary. A woman has so much on her mind now that nothing but regular massage from the crown of her head to her heels will offset it. The modistes and milliners are in a conspiracy to change styles so often that it takes active thought to keep abreast of them. Then you no sooner settle down really to learn Bridge, for instance, and feel that you can hold your own, than everybody begins playing Auction! And to know what people are talking about at luncheons you must see plays, and skim through books, reading at least enough so you can express an opinion; not that anybody listens. They all talk at once, their one and only object seems to be to get their own ideas out of their systems. I was glad to send Kathleen off to school. It does seem as if the girls had to go to college to escape as great a rush as we grownups live in. Then when they come back, having had another environment for four years, they adjust themselves to their own homes with such a sense of superiority that it makes you *tired*; that's what it does, Mary, *tired*. I've had a taste of it this summer. Kathleen has another year to go, but already she is perfectly changed. She cares no more for my advice, I assure you, than if I had just come down from Mars and had no judgment as to the things of this world. She's well-bred, of course, – I hope no daughter of mine could be less than well-bred, – but when I give her directions, or try to guide her in any way, there's a twinkle in her eye that I resent, Mary, I resent it distinctly. So there you are!" Mrs. Fabian gestured with a perfectly kept hand whereon a blazing gem flashed in the firelight. "There we are between Scylla and Charybdis. We either have to send our girls to college and let the little upstarts think they've outgrown us, or else have them rushed to death at home, keep them up on tonics, and let them sleep till noon!"

With this dismal peroration Mrs. Fabian sat as far back in her chair as disciplined adipose would permit, and shuddered again at the wind.

"Is a son an easier proposition then, in that madding crowd of yours?"

"A boy does seem to have his life more plainly mapped out than a girl. Edgar is in his father's office." The speaker sighed unconsciously. "What is your boy like, Mary?"

Mrs. Sidney kept silence for a thoughtful moment before answering.

"He is like Pegasus harnessed to a coal-wagon," she said at last slowly.

"How very extraordinary. What do you mean?"

Instead of replying, Mrs. Sidney went to a table in the far corner of the cabin and brought therefrom a portfolio which she opened on the chair beside her guest.

A mass of sketches was disclosed, – charcoal, water-color, oil. Mrs. Sidney lifted one, and held it before the other's eyes.

Mrs. Fabian raised her lorgnette.

"Why, it's you, Mary; and it's capital!" she ejaculated.

Another and another sheet was offered for her inspection.

"Why, they're all of you. The artist must be in love with you."

Mary Sidney gave her a slight smile. "I hope so, a little, but it was Hobson's choice when it came to models. Phil seldom could get any one beside me. Here's one of his father. He had to do it slyly behind a newspaper, for Allan is rather impatient of Phil's tendency."

"So that is what your boy is at! It's real talent, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," returned the mother with quiet conviction.

"And where is he studying?"

"He has never studied anything but mining engineering. He is working with his father here."

The unconscious sadness of the speaker's tone impressed her listener.

"He does landscapes, too," went on the mother, lifting one after another of the sketches of mountain, valley, and streamlet, "a little of everything, you see." Mrs. Sidney regarded the work wistfully.

"Why, they're lovely," declared Mrs. Fabian. "Why don't you pin them up on the walls?"

"Because it rather annoys Phil's father, to see them, and it only tantalizes the boy."

"So Mr. Sidney isn't willing he should study?"

"I don't think he would thwart us if he saw any hope in it, but one can't enter on the life of an art-student without any capital. Allan knows there is a living for Phil in the work of a mining engineer, so he has discouraged the boy's talent."

"It is a great responsibility to thwart a child's bent," declared Mrs. Fabian impressively.

"I have always felt so. I used to be very restless and anxious about it. My husband seemed to feel that because Phil was a strapping boy, a natural athlete, that painting was a womanish profession for him. He had the ability to help him into mining engineering lines, and he always pooh-poohed the idea of Phil's attempting to be an artist." Mrs. Sidney gave a little shrug. "We didn't have the money anyway, so Allan naturally has had his way."

"One can't blame him," returned Mrs. Fabian, who had relaxed as the wind ceased to shake the cabin. "Painting is even more precarious than acting; yet what a talent the boy has!"

She held before her a bold sketch in charcoal of the mountain-side in the winter – few in strokes, but striking in its breadth and power.

"He has had an offer from a newspaper in Denver to take the position of cartoonist. His ability for caricature is good. See these of Allan."

Mrs. Fabian laughed as she examined the small sheets. "I haven't seen your husband for ten years, Mary, but these recall his clean-cut face better than a photograph would, I believe. Phil rather gets back at his father in these, doesn't he?"

"Oh, Allan laughed at them too. He's secretly proud of Phil's cleverness, even while he discourages it. He tells him it is all right for an accomplishment, but a forlorn hope for a living."

"And right he is," responded Mrs. Fabian, laying down the sketches. "Look at Aunt Mary's experience. There she has lived alone all these years and given her life to the attempt to make a name in the artistic world. I go sometimes to see her, of course, for there she is right in town, but her pictures" – Mrs. Fabian lifted her eyes to the rafters – "they're daubs!"

"I know," returned Mary Sidney, looking back into the fire. "She sent me one on my last birthday. She never forgets her name-child."

Mrs. Fabian laughed. "I fancy you wished she would, for that time."

"No," returned the hostess, slowly, "I think Aunt Mary sees more than she has the technique to express. She gets an effect."

Mrs. Fabian raised her eyebrows. "She certainly does. She makes me want to run a mile."

"The gift led to our having a little correspondence. I sent her a couple of Phil's sketches and she was delighted with them."

"She might well be," was the answer. There was a brief silence, then the visitor continued: "So Phil is something of a bone of contention between you and his father?"

"It is our only difference. Yet it can scarcely even be called that, because it is a fact that we haven't the money to give him the start he should have."

Mrs. Fabian looked at her cousin curiously.

"So this new calmness of yours – this repose. It is resignation, at least, if not despair."

Mary Sidney smiled at the fire. "No," she returned, "I told you. It is faith."

"Religion?"

"Yes, religion. Not the sort of ideas we were brought up in, Isabel. Something quite different."

"What is it, then? Where did you find it?"

"It found me."

"How mysterious! Is that wind coming up again, Mary?"

"How it blew that night!" said Mary Sidney thoughtfully, still looking into the fire. "It was just before Thanksgiving, I remember, five years ago. Allan and I had come up to the mine, Phil had gone back to college, and one night a belated traveller, overtaken by the storm which came up as suddenly as this, stopped at the door and asked if he could stay all night with us. He was one of these vital men, full of energy, who seem to exhale good cheer. Allan thoroughly enjoyed a talk with him that evening, and when we went to bed I remember his sighing and remarking that a man must be either a fool or a philosopher who could keep such an optimistic outlook on life as this Mr. Tremaine. I returned that perhaps our guest had struck a gold-mine here in the mountains, and I remember how Allan grumbled – 'Either that, or the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.'

"Allan came in here once, where we had left the guest to sleep on the couch, to see if he wanted anything; and he found him reading in front of the embers. When he came back he remarked: 'That fellow has a smile that doesn't usually last beyond the tenth year.' The next morning dawned bright and our guest was in haste to depart. He tried in the nicest way to pay us for taking in a stranger, and we quite honestly told him that if any money were to pass it should go from us to him for cheering our exile. He took from his pocket a small black book and held it out to me. 'Then,' he said, 'may I leave with you a little book which has broken up the clouds of life for me, and let the light stream through? You have time up here to read, – and to think?' He made the addition with that smile which had roused Allan's curiosity, shook hands with us both, thanked us again, mounted his horse and rode away. We never saw him afterward. I often wish I knew where he was, that I might thank him."

"What was the book?" asked Mrs. Fabian, impressed by the fervor of the other's tone.

"A – a commentary on the Bible. A new light on the meaning of the Bible."

"How queer! I'm sure I thought our family knew as much about the Bible as the average of decent people."

Mrs. Fabian's tone was slightly resentful.

"We did," returned Mary Sidney.

"So that's what you meant a few minutes ago by the calm of faith."

Mrs. Sidney nodded. "I know now what that sentence means: 'Cast your burden on the Lord.' Phil is the most precious thing on earth to me. The years seem to be slipping by without showing us a possible path to what we wish. 'Wait patiently on the Lord' doesn't mean inaction either. I've learned that. I know that at the right time – the right moment – circumstances will arise to show us if Phil is to –"

A sudden blast of wind brought a start and a muffled exclamation from the guest, and at the same instant a stamping sounded outside. The lamp-flames rose wildly, and smoked in the instant of opening the door wide enough to admit the lithe form of a man whose shoulders and soft felt hat glistened with snow. He quickly closed the door and stamped again, taking off the hat from his short damp locks and shaking it vigorously.

"Phil, this is my cousin, Mrs. Fabian," said Mrs. Sidney. "You used to call her Aunt Isabel when you were a little chap and we went to visit her once. Do you remember?"

"When a cousin is once removed she becomes an aunt," declared Mrs. Fabian, looking the young man over with approval.

"My hand is too wet to shake," he said, meeting her interested gaze, his own luminous in the firelight.

"Lucky boy! You have your mother's eyes!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, no," said Mary Sidney; "Phil's are blue."

"Dark with terror, then!" exclaimed Mrs. Fabian, again anxious. "Isn't the storm frightful?"

Phil's amused glance sought his mother's.

"It's sort of spitting outside," he returned, unbuttoning his corduroy coat.

"You're making fun of a tenderfoot," said Mrs. Fabian, watching his keen face admiringly. "Don't pretend. What have you done with my poor innocent husband?"

"He'll be up here in a few minutes with my poor innocent father who has been showing him why he'll never be a millionaire out of that mine."

"What do I care if he isn't, so long as he isn't lost in this storm!"

"I came on ahead because the mail had just been brought in." As he spoke, the young man brought a small bunch of letters and papers from an inner pocket.

"A great excitement, Isabel," said the hostess. "Only twice a week, you know."

"There's another letter from the Denver paper," went on Phil, looking at his mother steadily.

"You'll forgive us if we open everything, won't you, Isabel?" asked Mrs. Sidney.

"Indeed, yes. Don't mind me." Mrs. Fabian returned to her chair by the fire and regarded the pair who seated themselves by the table.

Phil had slipped off the damp coat, and his arm in its striped linen sleeve was thrown around his mother's shoulders.

The visitor's eyes filled with something like envy. Kathleen and Edgar were her step-children, the boy had been five years of age when she began to be, to use her own declaration, the best stepmother in the world. Edgar would never think of reading his letters with her in this frankly affectionate attitude. Must one live on a mountain-top, she wondered, to win the sort of look she had seen in this son's eyes?

"I've been showing your Aunt Isabel your sketches, Phil," said Mrs. Sidney, holding open a letter they had just read. "I told her about the Denver paper. This is another offer from them, Isabel, an increased offer."

"I'm sure that's very flattering," returned Mrs. Fabian.

Phil did not speak. His straight brows were knit in perplexity, and his lips were set in the look of longing that his mother knew.

"I don't know this writing from New York," said Mrs. Sidney, opening the next letter.

Glancing over it she gave a startled exclamation.

"Whew!" breathed the boy, reading over her shoulder. "Poor Aunt Mary!"

"Isabel, Aunt Mary has gone!" exclaimed Mrs. Sidney.

"What! I didn't know she was ill. She wasn't ill. Who is there to attend to things? Who wrote you?"

"Eliza Brewster. This is from her. It was very sudden. She had been at work at her easel an hour before. How sad it seems! How lonely! I wish we had both been there, Isabel. There is the letter." Phil took it across to Mrs. Fabian. "You see. She was buried day before yesterday. Oh, I'm glad we had that little interchange in the summer. Eliza loves her, but, after all, she is not her own."

Phil mechanically opened another letter. His thoughts were with that unknown relative with cravings like to his, working through the gathering years toward a goal which had ever retreated before her. He unfolded a business letter. It enclosed a small sealed envelope addressed to himself in another handwriting.

"Aunt Mary's!" said his mother. The son's arm was again around her as with heads close together they perused the following: —

My dear Grand-Nephew, Philip Sidney: —

When you open this letter, I shall have gone to a world where surely I shall be permitted to come nearer to the source of beauty.

My family all consider me a failure. I know it. They have laughed at my poor efforts. I know it; but since your mother wrote to me a month ago, sending me your sketches and telling me your longings, I have felt that out in the free Western country, there lives one with my blood in his veins, who will understand the thirst that has led me on, and nerved me to untiring effort — that has made it my only

hope of happiness to live as I have lived, and work as I have worked. He will also understand, perhaps, that few as my rewards have been, I have occasionally felt that some beauty has crept through my brain and been fixed to the canvas, and that such moments have given me the highest bliss this world could bestow.

For a month, then, I have taken comfort in my artist-boy, no matter if you are known to others as an engineer. I have kept on my easel the photograph your mother sent me, and every day while I work, I look from time to time into your eyes, your mother's lovely eyes. I rejoice in your thick hair, and your splendid chin and firm, full-curved mouth. It isn't often that a head wanders from the Louvre and becomes set on a pair of modern shoulders. I, the old woman, peering through her spectacles, and painting with a hand that is often far from steady, have found a joy in studying the harmony of your promise. You have my blood in your veins, but you will succeed where I have failed. A happy failure, Philip. Don't feel sad for me. I've had moments of joy that no one knew. No one took the trouble to know; but nobody is to blame. Lives are very full in these rushing days.

I believe in you, and I long for you to get started toward that land where you fain would be. Your mother says that the door hasn't opened yet. Looking into your young eyes, a great thought came to me. Supposing I, the ineffectual, could set that door ajar! With the thought came the first great regret for my poverty. Never mind, thought I stoutly; if I can set that door a wee bit open, his young strength can do the rest!

I have had warnings that soon the great door will be opened for me; the door that ushers in to the heart's desire. Mine has been for Truth and Beauty, O God, Thou knowest!

So I am making my will – such a poor little short will; but all for you, my kindred spirit, my knight who will deliver from failure, my Philip Sidney.

The faithful maid Eliza will take care of my effects for you. You will find some useful things among the paraphernalia here. I look at my old easel and wonder if it will ever be promoted to hold a canvas of yours.

This letter will be enclosed to you in one from my lawyer, telling you the business side of my wishes. The heart side no one can tell. I swell with longing for your success, and happiness; and so good-bye.

The mother who never had a son, gains one in you. The painter who never was an artist, becomes one in you!

And so, dear, I am your happy

Aunt Mary.

Mary Sidney and her boy exchanged a look. With unsteady hands Phil straightened the legal letter, and they read it together. Then they rose from the table with one accord.

Mrs. Fabian, wrapped in thought, looked up at the sudden movement.

Phil's concentrated gaze went past her to the fire, and he stood motionless, one hand leaning on the table, the other arm around his mother. Mary Sidney clasped the rustling paper to her breast. All the self-forgetfulness of mother-love shone in her wet eyes as she met Mrs. Fabian's questioning look.

"Isabel, I told you it would come," she said. "I told you we should know. The light is here. Phil is going to New York."

CHAPTER II

SEVERED COMPANIONSHIP

Eliza Brewster could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that tears had escaped her pale eyes. She had always felt for those who wept easily, the same leniency without comprehension that she entertained for women who fainted.

Trials had come and gone in her life; but never, since the day when she discovered some boys maltreating her cat, had she shed such tears as flowed now in her sorrow. The cat's abbreviated tail bore witness still to that day's conflict, but both his wound and hers had healed.

When would this new wound cease to ache and palpitate! Each day there in the lonely flat, Eliza Brewster renewed war with the memories to which she had no mind to succumb. The gentleness of her mistress, her innocent, ever-springing hope, her constant disappointments, the solitariness of her narrow life, the neglect of her relatives – all these things recurred to the faithful handmaiden with the terrific appeal which contracts the newly bereft heart, causing it to bleed afresh. Mary Ballard, in spite of her twenty years' greater age, had been child as well as mistress to the faithful woman, who cared for the quiet, shy dreamer of dreams through the twenty-five years of the latter's widowhood.

Now Eliza's occupation was gone. All her rather hard philosophy, all her habitual self-possession, was swamped in a world where she could no longer call her dear one from the easel to her meals; and where the rooms of the little apartment grew spacious and echoed from sheer emptiness.

Mrs. Ballard had bequeathed her maid all her clothing, and all her personal possessions, save one old-fashioned diamond brooch, which was to be sent to her namesake, Mary Sidney. Some weeks before her death, she told Eliza of the disposition of her effects. In referring to the small gift of money which was to be hers, she said: —

"I wish it were more, Eliza, but," looking wistfully into the eyes of her companion, "I have a great mission for my little capital as I have told you. If only the amount were as great as the object!"

"Nonsense, talking about wills," rejoined Eliza brusquely, a new delicacy in the loved face making her tone sharp, "more likely I'll be leaving something to you; though I don't know what it would be, unless 'twas the cat."

Mrs. Ballard smiled. "Not a bad legacy," she replied. "Pluto is very sympathetic. He likes to watch me paint. He has really concluded to endure the smell of oil and turpentine just to keep me company."

At the moment the night-black cat was lifting green eyes of approval to his own portrait which stood near, and Mrs. Ballard buried a veined hand in his glossy fur. A few weeks later that hand was still. Oh, the dear garments with the outline of the wearer still warm in their curves! Who has not known the tender, overpowering anguish of their touch? Every day Eliza tried to systematize and pack her new belongings, and every day she postponed the ordeal until to-morrow.

Mrs. Ballard's watch alone stood on the table at the head of her bed, hanging in the little satin slipper just as it had ticked beside her mistress's sleeping form so many years. The watch seemed as alive as Pluto, and almost as much of a companion. It spoke eloquently of the gentle being who had always been unconscious of its warnings.

On the mantelpiece in the living-room, which had been studio as well, was Philip Sidney's photograph and his two sketches, one of his mother, and one of a storm-beaten tree. They were the two that Mary Sidney had sent in response to her aunt's gift in the summer-time. All three pictures were turned now to the wall. Mrs. Sidney was a relative. That stamped her for Eliza. The sketches had been either the vainglorious gift of a fond mamma, or else prompted by hope of the very result they had gained. As for the photograph of the artist, Eliza could not deny that it had marvellously cheered and companioned the last months of her dear one's life.

Indeed, in those days, recent yet already seeming so long past, Eliza, out in her kitchen, had often laughed grimly to herself at the infatuation for the picture shown by her mistress.

"If she was sixteen she couldn't be more head over heels in love," she would soliloquize. "I s'pose an artist has got to be just so stirred up by good looks, whether it's a landscape or a human; but I know I wouldn't trust a handsome man around the corner with a dog's dinner."

In pursuance of these reflections, when her mistress had gone, Phil's picture went with the sketches, his face to the wall.

Eliza's attitude toward the whole world was defiance on the subject of her mistress's lifework. Of course, Mrs. Ballard was an artist; a great artist. Eliza knew it must be so, there were so many of her pictures that she could not understand.

A canvas which was a blur to her contained so much which the painter would explain while Eliza stood devotedly by, dutifully assenting to the unravelling of the snarl of form and color.

"You don't care for it, do you, Eliza?" the artist would say sometimes, wistfully.

"Indeed, I do, Mrs. Ballard," would come the response, and never words rang more prompt and true. "I'm just one o' those folks so practical, I can't see an inch before my nose and I've never had advantages. I haven't got any insight, as you call it, beyond a dishpan; but when you explain it so clear, that's when I begin to see."

This latter was a loyal lie; as a rule, Eliza never did see; but she applauded just the same with vague murmurs of wonder and admiration.

It hurt the faithful soul even now to recall how, when the sketches came from the West, her mistress had eagerly examined them, and bitten her lip, her eyes glistening. "There's the true touch, Eliza," she had said quietly. "This boy has a spark of the divine fire."

"Pooh! I don't think so at all," Eliza had returned stoutly and contemptuously. "Of course, that drawin' of his mother is pleasant enough, but you haven't seen her in years. You don't know how good the likeness is; and as for that landscape, that rough twisted tree most blown off its feet and clouds racin' above those rocks, nobody'd ever think they was anything except just what they are, a tree and rocks and clouds; awful pokerish, I call it, not a bit pretty." Eliza's long nose lifted in scorn.

Mrs. Ballard smiled and bowed her head over the wind-blown tree.

"My flesh and blood, still," she murmured.

Now, in the dreary days, Eliza moved about aimlessly, forgetting to eat, and roused only by Pluto's indignant *meows*, to remember that, though he might mourn, still he felt that he owed it to himself to keep his coat glossy by milk baths, taken internally.

Never had he known such long luxurious naps in the lap of his mistress as now. Wrapped in thought she sat for hours without moving; the irrepressible tears welling up from her heart and creeping, one by one, down her thin cheeks.

She had made no friends in the cheap apartment building where they lived. It was a changing population, which ebbed and flowed at the mercy of its own financial tide.

"There ain't a lady in this house except you," Eliza had been wont to say to her mistress.

"I don't believe we know that," Mrs. Ballard had rejoined; "but we're too busy for neighboring, aren't we, Eliza?"

Whenever there had been any leisure, Mrs. Ballard had taken her handmaiden to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Not for worlds would Eliza mar the joy with which her mistress bestowed upon her this treat. So she climbed endless stairs, and plodded weary miles with fortitude, having ready a response to every worshipful utterance with which Mrs. Ballard pointed out this and that marvel.

"Wonderful, ain't it!" Eliza would respond with the regularity of clockwork.

"How I love to get you out of that kitchen, Eliza, up into this atmosphere of genius!" her mistress would say, in a burst of affection for the strong mainspring of her household.

"Wonderful, ain't it!" returned the beneficiary, stepping on the other foot in the effort to rest one leg.

The sight of the very exterior of the great repository of art-treasures caused Eliza's bones to ache, if she caught sight of the imposing pile from a car window.

One day, however, all this was changed. The Metropolitan Museum of Art rose in Eliza's estimation to the level of her own kitchen where a chromo depicting kittens in various attitudes of abandon hung over the table.

Mistress and maid were doing the well-worn circuit. The faithful echo had repeated "Wonderful, ain't it!" for the twentieth time. The ardor in Mrs. Ballard's eyes was lending wings to her slender body, but Eliza had lagged, spurred on, and rested the other leg, until, to paraphrase a bit from Mr. Lowell —

"On which leg she felt the worse,
She couldn't 'a' told you, 'nother," —

when suddenly an inspiration of deliverance seized her. The fact that it had not seized her months before was simply another proof of devotion to the sun of her existence. Each time she entered the massive gates to her place of torture, she left such mentality as she possessed behind her. As well might a fish be expected to navigate in the free air of heaven as Eliza in these marble halls. This was her mistress's element. Let her guide. But one memorable day the two were standing before a marine.

"Oh, Eliza, that's new!" exclaimed Mrs. Ballard; and from the vigor of her tone, her handmaid feared the worst. She had believed they were nearly ready to depart. Now her companion seemed inspired for another two hours.

"Might it not have been painted from your island," continued Mrs. Ballard. "What adorable work!"

"Wonderful, ain't it!" came Eliza's wooden accents.

"What feeling!" murmured her rapt companion.

"I only hope 'tain't sciatica," thought Eliza, wiggling her hip. Her casually roving eye caught sight of one vacancy on the bench in the middle of the room.

"Don't you want to sit down a spell and look at it, Mrs. Ballard?" she asked. "There's a place."

"No," was the slow, absent reply. "I seem to prefer to stand in its presence — a royal presence, Eliza."

Miss Brewster waited no longer. With incontinent haste she limped, as in seven-league boots, toward the desired haven. She saw that a portly gentleman was heading for the same spot. She sprinted. She beat him by a toe's length, and nearly received him on her maiden lap. He recovered himself and glared at her. She maintained an unconscious air, her gaze fixed on the sky of the marine painting. It was all she could see; there were so many standing in front of her, welcoming this new treasure to the home of beauty.

Presently Mrs. Ballard, missing her shadow, looked about and at last descried Eliza. She approached, her small, veined hands clasped on her breast for joy.

"It seems as if it must have been done from the island!" she exclaimed. "How can you sit down, Eliza! I should think it would take you straight to your old home!"

Miss Brewster did not say that she thought there was more likelihood of her again seeing her native place if she did sit down; but for once her clockwork did not act. It seemed as if the succumbing of her legs had impeded the other mechanism.

"I just felt as if I had to, Mrs. Ballard," she answered numbly.

"You dear!" exclaimed her mistress impulsively, speaking low. "I might have known it. You felt overcome. I don't wonder. It took me back to the island, too, in a flash! I dare say you often conceal

homesickness from me, Eliza. We must try to go there next summer! I did use to think that perhaps Mrs. Fabian – but, no matter; we can go on our own account, Eliza, and we will, too."

"It would be lots better for you than staying here in summer, that's sure."

Mrs. Ballard sighed, "Yes, if only the rent didn't keep on, and keep on."

Eliza knew the arguments. She did not pursue the subject now. She rose, keeping firm pressure, however, against the bench.

"Take this place, Mrs. Ballard, and rest a minute."

"Oh, I'm not a bit tired. I thought we'd take one or two more rooms. The light is wonderful to-day."

Up to the present moment Eliza in this temple of genius had, as has been said, galvanized her energies and followed where her mistress led, at any cost, as unquestioningly as the needle follows the magnet; but this was the moment of her emancipation. Mrs. Ballard herself gave her the cue, for she added with consideration for an unwonted sentiment: —

"Unless you'd rather stay and look at that reminder of home a while longer, Eliza? I'll come back for you."

"Oh, would you, just as soon, Mrs. Ballard?"

The eagerness of the tone touched her mistress.

"Why, of course, my dear, do so; but I'd get up if I were you." Eliza had sunk back upon the bench with the certainty and impact of a pile-driver. "There is such a crowd you can't see anything from here but the sky."

"I feel as if I could look at that sky for a week," responded Eliza with a sincerity which admitted of no doubt.

"It is wonderful, isn't it?" returned her mistress, unconscious of plagiarism. She patted Eliza's shoulder. "I'll be back soon," she assured her, and moved away.

"The good creature!" she thought. "How selfish I have been to her! I ought occasionally to let her go home; but I know she'd never go without me. She wouldn't believe that I'd eat three meals a day, no matter how faithfully I promised." And Mrs. Ballard laughed a little before becoming engrossed in an old favorite.

She was gone so long that Eliza cogitated with newly acquired ingenuity.

"It's a good thing," she reflected, "that the fool-catcher ain't artistic. He'd 'a' caught me here lots o' times. Supposin' I was with that dear crazy critter all this time, hoppin' along in misery, or standin' in front o' some paintin' like a stork." Eliza's light eyes twinkled. "Why shouldn't I set up a taste in pictures, too? Just watch me from this on."

After this day Mrs. Ballard did observe with joy a transformation in her handmaid's attitude. When they visited the galleries Eliza would move along with her usual calm until suddenly some picture would particularly hold her attention.

"Is that a very fine paintin'?" she would ask of her cicerone.

"Which one, Eliza? Oh, yes, I see. Certainly, or it wouldn't be here; but in that next room are those I thought we should make a study of to-day."

Eliza's light eyes swept the unbroken polished surface of the floor of the adjoining room. "I know I haven't got very far along in understandin' these things," she said modestly, "but to my eyes there is a certain somethin' there," — she paused and let her transfixed gaze toward the chosen picture say the rest.

Mrs. Ballard held her lip between her teeth reflectively as she looked at it too. On that first occasion it was a summer landscape painted at sunset.

"We've passed it many times," she thought, "but it's evident that Eliza is waking up!"

The reflection was exultant. Far be it from Mrs. Ballard to interrupt the birth throes of her companion's artistic consciousness.

"Then stay right here, Eliza, as long as you wish," she replied sympathetically. "I shall be near by."

She hurried away in her light-footed fashion, and Eliza continued to stand before her cynosure long enough to disarm possible suspicion, and then backed thoughtfully away until she reached a bench upon which she sank, still with eyes upon the picture.

Mrs. Ballard from the next room observed her trance.

"She is waking up. Her eyes are opening, bless her heart," she thought. "Constant dropping does wear the stone."

Eliza would have paraphrased the proverb and declared that constant dropping saves the life.

From this day on she professed, and triumphantly acted upon, an appreciation for certain pictures; and Mrs. Ballard marvelled with pride at the catholicity of her taste; for such serpentine wisdom did Eliza display in passing, unseeing, many an inviting bench, that never, to their last pilgrimage to Mrs. Ballard's mecca, did the latter suspect the source of her companion's modest enthusiasm.

"Poor thing," thought Eliza during these periods of rest; "it's a sin and a shame that she hasn't got anybody worthy to come with her. If those relatives of hers were, any of 'em, fit to live, one of 'em would bring her here sometimes. The poor dear, as long as she hasn't a soul but an ignorant country body like me to sympathize with her, I've got to do my best; and really if I set a spell once in a while, I'll have more sprawl and can seem to enjoy it more. It's awful hard when you can't think of anything but your joints! I'm younger'n she is, and I'm ashamed o' gettin' so tuckered; but she's got some kind o' wings that seem to lift her along."

Mrs. Ballard, from the next room, caught Eliza's eye, smiled, and nodded, well pleased. So the era of peace ensued; and when Miss Brewster caught sight from a street car of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she was able to regard it without a frown.

CHAPTER III

MRS. FABIAN'S VISIT

Eliza was not obliged to give up the apartment until the end of the month. Hence her drifting from day to day, and Pluto's naps in the lap of luxury.

All her energy and systematic habits were in a state of suspension. Her clocks ran down. The watch in the tiny satin slipper beside her bed alone ticked the minutes away, and when Eliza wound it her eyes were too wet to see the time. Night fell and she went to bed. Morning dawned and she arose. She drank tea, but it was too much trouble to eat.

One day the bell rang. At first she determined not to answer it. Then second thought came to her. What was she waiting here for except to answer the bell? Was her next duty not to introduce the usurper into his kingdom – to give into his desecrating hands those objects, – easel, palette, brushes, paints, – hallowed by her dear one's use? At the sound of a knock she hastened to fling open the door. Mrs. Fabian, elegantly gowned and furred, stood before her.

Eliza gazed at this apparition dumb.

"Why, Eliza Brewster," exclaimed the visitor with concern, "I scarcely knew you." After the mutual gaze of astonishment the caller moved in with her air of stately assurance, and Eliza followed her perforce into the living-room. Here Mrs. Fabian swiftly examined the possibilities of the scanty chairs, then seated herself in the largest.

"You have been ill, too, Eliza? You look like a ghost!"

The gaunt woman in the alpaca dress, so filled with resentment that she begrudged her own tears because they informed this "relative" of her grief, stood in silence with a beating heart.

"Sit down, you poor creature," went on Mrs. Fabian, unsuspecting hidden fires.

They burned higher at the tone of patronage, but Eliza, weakened from mourning and lack of food, felt her knees trembling and sank into the nearest chair.

Mrs. Fabian, genuinely touched by the ravages she saw, broke the silence that followed.

"I was greatly surprised and shocked to hear of Aunt Mary's sudden going."

She began to feel uncomfortable under the set gaze of Eliza's swollen eyes.

"I suppose you sent to my house at once, and found that Mr. Fabian and I were in the far West."

"No, I didn't think of sending," returned Eliza.

"You should have done so. Surely there was no one nearer to Aunt Mary than I."

"It was in the paper," said Eliza dully.

"Had I been here I should, of course, have taken charge of the funeral."

The pale eyes emitted a curious light.

"No, you wouldn't, Mrs. Fabian," was the quiet reply.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the time for you to have done something for Mrs. Ballard was while she was alive."

Eliza was too spent physically to speak other than softly, but her words brought the amazed color to her visitor's face.

"You are presuming," Mrs. Fabian said, after a moment. "What do you know about it? I suppose Aunt Mary did not think it worth while to tell you all the things I did for her."

"No," agreed Eliza, "she never said a word about the times you came with your automobile to take her riding; nor the picture exhibitions you took her to see, or the way you had her to dinner Thanksgiving time and other times, or how you had her to spend part o' the summer with you at the island, or –"

"Eliza Brewster, what does this mean!" Mrs. Fabian's eyes were dilated. "Aunt Mary was not related to my husband or to his children. I never expected him to marry my family."

Miss Brewster's gaze was fixed upon the speaker with pale scorn, but the latter continued with what she endeavored to make a dignified defence. "I always sent Aunt Mary a present at Christmas."

"Yes," interrupted Eliza. "Last season 'twas a paper-cutter. You gave her cuts enough without that."

"And I called upon her at intervals," continued the visitor in a heightened tone to drown the small voice.

"Intervals of a year," said Eliza.

Mrs. Fabian started to rise, but bethought herself, and sank back.

"You are impertinent," she said coldly. "A person in your position cannot understand the duties of one in mine. There can be no discussion between you and me." The speaker stirred in her chair and collected herself. "I – and every one of Aunt Mary's relatives – appreciate your faithful service to her, and thank you for it."

"Don't you dare!" ejaculated Eliza, with such sudden belligerency that Mrs. Fabian started.

"You're almost crazed with fatigue and grief, poor creature," she said at last. "I can see that you are scarcely responsible for what you say to-day. You must take a long rest. Shall you go home to the island or take another place in town? I can find you one."

Mrs. Fabian felt the superiority of her own self-control as she made this kind offer; besides, in these troublous days with servants, steady, reliable Eliza, with a sure touch in cookery, was not to be despised. The visitor accompanied her offer with a soothing attempt at a smile.

Eliza had relapsed into dullness. "I won't trouble you," she said.

"It would not be any trouble," was the magnanimous reply. "Just let me know any time when you would like a reference, Eliza. It will give me pleasure to reward your faithfulness."

Mrs. Fabian loved approval quite as much as she did admiration. She would feel much more comfortable to win that of even this uncompromising, cranky individual, so lined with the signs of suffering. As Eliza Brewster was a native of the island where Mrs. Fabian had resorted from the days of her girlhood, she had a very slight but old acquaintance with this woman. As she glanced at the thin hair, now fast turning grey, the sunken eyes and cheeks, and the bony, roughened hands, she shuddered beneath her ermine-lined sables, to remember that she and Eliza Brewster were about the same age. She passed a white-gloved hand over the firm contour of her smooth cheek as if to make sure of its firmness. "I believe it was I who recommended you to Aunt Mary in the first place, long ago," she added.

"That's one o' your mistakes," said Eliza drily.

"On the contrary," returned Mrs. Fabian graciously. She was determined to warm this forlorn specimen of New England frigidity into something humanly companionable, else how was she going to attain the object of her visit? She went on with such flattery of manner as she might have employed toward a desirable débutante. "It has proved quite the best thing that I ever did for Aunt Mary; securing her comfort and thereby the peace of mind of all who belonged to her. Don't call it a mistake, Eliza."

"However that may be," returned the other immovably, "'t wa'n't you that did it. 'Twas your Cousin Mary."

"Oh – was it? Oh, indeed?" responded Mrs. Fabian, slipping back her furs still further. Eliza Brewster's disagreeable manner was making her nervous. "Yes, I believe Mrs. Sidney was with us on her wedding-trip just at that time. Mr. Fabian and I have just returned from visiting Mrs. Sidney out in her wild mountain home."

Eliza's eyes roved involuntarily to two blank sheets of board standing on the mantelpiece; but she was silent.

"Do you know the contents of Aunt Mary's will, Eliza?" asked Mrs. Fabian, after waiting vainly for an inquiry as to her cousin's well-being.

"I do."

"What do you think of it?"

"That don't matter, does it?"

A streak of light illumined Mrs. Fabian's annoyance. Ah, that was what was the matter with Eliza. After twenty-five years of faithful service, she had expected to inherit her mistress's few hundreds. Full explanation, this, of the present sullenness. The disappointment must, indeed, have been bitter.

Mrs. Fabian felt an impulse of genuine sympathy. She knew the singular loneliness of Eliza's situation; knew that she had no near kin, and the transplanting from the island home had been complete. What an outlook now, was Eliza Brewster's!

"Perhaps the will was as much of a surprise to you as it was to the rest of us," Mrs. Fabian went on. "The Sidneys were amazed. They didn't tell me just how much Aunt Mary left young Mr. Sidney. Do you know?"

"Yes," replied Eliza promptly.

And again Mrs. Fabian looked at her interrogatively. As well question the Sphinx. She comprehended the stony closing of the thin lips. There might be a combination which would make them open, but she did not have it. She shrugged her fine-cloth shoulders. "Oh, well, it doesn't matter. It must have been very little, anyway."

She sighed. She must get at her business, though she dreaded absurdly to introduce it. "Well, Eliza, if you will take me to Aunt Mary's room, I will go through her belongings. It is always the most painful duty connected with a death, but it cannot be escaped."

Eliza stared at her, speechless.

"Aunt Mary had a few very nice things," went on Mrs. Fabian. She tried to smile as at a loving memory. "The regulation treasures of a dear old lady, – her diamond ring, a diamond brooch, and a camel's hair shawl – My heavens!" cried the visitor, interrupting herself suddenly with a shriek of terror. "Take it away! Take it away!"

She clung to the back of her chair; for Pluto, silent as a shadow, had sprung upon the ends of her pelerine as they lay in her lap and was daintily nosing the fur, while perilously grasping its richness, his eyes glowing with excitement. Eliza rose, and sweeping him into one arm resumed her seat.

"Oh, how that frightened me!" Mrs. Fabian panted and looked angrily at the animal with the jetty coat and abbreviated tail, whose eyes, live emeralds, expanded and contracted as they glowed still upon the coveted fur.

If she expected an apology, none came. Eliza's pale face showed no emotion. Endurance was written in every line.

"To be interrupted at such a critical moment!" Mrs. Fabian felt it was unbearable.

"Let me see" – she began again with a little laugh. "Your pet knocked everything out of my head, Eliza. Oh, yes, I was saying that I will look over Aunt Mary's things now."

She rose as she spoke. Eliza kept her seat.

"You can't do that, Mrs. Fabian."

"I certainly shall, Eliza Brewster. What do you mean?"

"I mean that they're mine. She left 'em all to me."

The speaker struggled to control the trembling of her lips.

The visitor looked the limp black alpaca figure over, haughtily.

"Aunt Mary left you her diamond ring, her diamond brooch, and her camel's hair shawl?" she asked sceptically.

"She left her diamond brooch to her namesake, Mrs. Sidney. I sent it to her a week ago."

"Then, since you know Aunt Mary's wishes, what did she leave me? The ring?"

"No, ma'am!"

"The shawl?"

"No, ma'am."

Mrs. Fabian's nostrils dilated.

"My aunt's poor trifles are nothing to me, of course, except for sentiment's sake," she said haughtily.

Eliza bowed her bitter face over Pluto's fur.

"I am quite sure, however, that she did not pass away without some mention of me, – her sister's child."

"She did, though, Mrs. Fabian. If it's a keepsake you want," added Eliza drily, "you may have the paper-cutter. It's never been out o' the box."

The visitor, still standing, eyed the other with compressed lips before she spoke: —

"I have told you that I don't consider you responsible to-day. You are half-crazed, and I'm sorry for you. Answer me this, however, and mind, I shall verify your words by a visit to Mrs. Ballard's lawyer. Did my aunt leave you, legally, all her personal possessions?"

"She did."

Mrs. Fabian maintained another space of silence, gazing at the seated figure, whose gown looked rusty behind the polished lynx-black pressed against it. There was no mistaking the truth in the pale, wretched eyes.

"Disappointed about the money, though, and taking out her ill temper on me," thought the visitor.

To Eliza's increased heaviness of heart, the lady resumed her seat.

"Aunt Mary's death was sudden and unexpected and that explains her not speaking of me," she said; "but I know it would please her that I should use something that she had owned. I remember that shawl as being a very good one. It came to her from some of her husband's people. I'll buy that of you, Eliza."

"Will you?" returned the other, and Pluto emitted an indignant yowl and tried to leap from the tightening hold.

"Don't you let him go, Eliza!" cried Mrs. Fabian in a panic. "He's crazy about my fur. They always are. – Yes, the shawl is of no use to you and the money will be. It is so fine, it would be wicked to cut it into a wrap. I shall spread it on my grand piano."

Silence, while Eliza struggled still to control the trembling lips, and Pluto twisted to escape her imprisoning arm.

"I'm willing to give you twenty-five dollars for that shawl."

Mrs. Fabian waited, and presently Eliza spoke: —

"It ain't enough," she said, against her impending breath.

"Fifty, then. We all feel grateful to you."

"Mrs. Fabian," Eliza sat up in her chair as if galvanized and looked her visitor in the eyes, while she spoke with unsteady solemnity, "the price o' that shawl is one million dollars."

The visitor stared at the shabby figure with the grey, unkempt locks, then shrugged her shoulders with a smile. "You'll come to your senses, Eliza," she said. "Some day that fifty dollars will look very good to you. I'll hold the offer open – "

"Likewise," added Eliza, breaking in upon her words with heightened voice, but the same deliberation, "that is the price of each handkerchief she left me, and each one of her little, wornout slippers, and her – "

She could get no further. She choked. Mrs. Fabian rose; Pluto, with another cry and a supreme writhe, tore himself from his iron prison.

The visitor shuddered, and looked at him fearfully, as his eager eyes seemed to threaten her. She hastened precipitately toward the door.

Eliza, putting the utmost constraint upon herself, rose and ushered her out.

Mrs. Fabian uttered a brief good-bye. Eliza was beyond speech.

While the visitor entered her waiting car, and sank with relief among its cushions, the mourner stood, her back against the closed door, and her eyes closed.

Restrained drops ran down her cheeks in well-worn ruts, and occasionally a spasmodic sob shook the slight form.

Pluto came to her feet, his short tail stiffly outstretched and his half-closed eyes lifted to the sightless face. In the long silence he rubbed himself against her feet in token of forgiveness.

CHAPTER IV

PHILIP SIDNEY

The Fabians had given Philip Sidney a pressing invitation to spend his first week in New York with them. When he arrived, however, and announced himself at the house, through some misunderstanding there was no one there to receive him save the servants.

A comely maid apologized for the absence of her mistress, saying that Mr. Sidney had not been expected until the following day; and showing him to his room she left him to his own devices.

Emerging from his bath and toilet, he found Mrs. Fabian not yet returned. It was but four o'clock, and he decided to go to the Ballard apartment and attend to his errand there.

Eliza had been doing some sweeping, the need for it goading her New England conscience to action. Her brown calico dress was pinned up over her petticoat, and her stern, lined face looked out from a sweeping-cap.

There sounded suddenly a vigorous knock on her door.

She scowled. "Some fresh agent, I s'pose," she thought. "Too sly to speak up the tube."

Broom in hand, she strode to the door and pulled it open with swift indignation.

"Why didn't you ring?" she exclaimed fiercely. "We don't want –"

She paused, her mouth open, and stared at the young man who pulled off a soft felt hat, and looked reassuring and breezy as he smiled.

"I did ring, but it was the wrong apartment. There was no card downstairs, so I started up the trail. Is this Mrs. Ballard's?"

The frank face, which she instantly recognized, and the clear voice that had a non-citified deliberation, accused Eliza of lack of hospitality; and she suddenly grew intensely conscious of her cap and petticoat.

"Come in," she said. "I was doin' some sweepin'. The first –" she paused abruptly and led the way down the corridor to the shabby living-room.

Phil's long steps followed her while his eyes shone with appreciation of the drum-major effect of the cap and broom, and the memory of his fierce greeting.

"I don't wonder Aunt Mary died," he thought. "I would too."

Meanwhile Eliza's heart was thumping. This interview was the climax of all she had dreaded. The usurper had an even more manly and attractive exterior than she had expected, but well she knew the brutal indifference of youth; the selfishness that takes all things for granted, and that secretly despises the treasures of the old.

The haste with which she set the broom in the corner, unpinned her dress, and pulled off her cap, was tribute to the virile masculinity of the visitor; but the stony expression of her face was defence from the blows which she felt he would deliver with the same airy unconsciousness that showed in the swing of his walk.

"You're Eliza Brewster, I'm sure," he said. "My mother knew you when she was a girl."

The hasty removal of Eliza's cap had caused a weird flying-out of her locks. The direct gaze bent upon her twinkled.

"I wonder if she'd let me paint her as Medusa," he was thinking; while her unspoken comment was: "And she never saw his teeth! It's just as well."

"Yes, that's who I am," she said. "Sit down, Mr. Sidney. I've been expectin' you."

"You didn't behave that way," he replied good-naturedly, obeying. "I thought at first I was going downstairs quicker than I came up, and I'd taken them three at a time."

His manner was disarming and Eliza smoothed her flying locks.

"The agents try to sneak around the rules o' the house," she said briefly.

"So this is where Aunt Mary lived." He looked about the room with interest. "We people in God's country hear about these flats where you don't dare keep a dog for fear it'll wag its tail and knock something over."

The troublesome lump in Eliza's throat had to be swallowed, so the visitor's keen glance swept about the bare place in silence.

"I see she didn't go in much for jim-cracks," he added presently.

Eliza's lump was swallowed. "Mrs. Ballard didn't care for common things," she said coldly. "She was an artist."

Phil comprehended vaguely that rebuke was implied, and he met the hard gaze as he hastened to reply: —

"Yes, yes, I understand." An increase of the pathos he had always discerned since learning about his great-aunt, swept over him now, face to face with the meagreness of her surroundings. "Did Aunt Mary work in this room? I see an easel over there."

"Yes, she worked here." The reply came in an expressionless voice.

"Poor Aunt Mary!" thought the visitor. "No companion but this image!"

Eliza exerted heroic self-control as she continued: "I've got the things packed up for you – the paints, and brushes, and palette. The easel's yours, too. Do you want to take 'em to-day?"

"Would it be a convenience to you if I did? Are you going to give up the flat immediately?"

"In a week."

"Then I'll leave them a few days if you don't mind while I'm looking for a room. I haven't an idea where to go. I'm more lost here than I ever was in the woods; but the Fabians will advise me, perhaps. Mrs. Fabian has been here to see you, I suppose."

Eliza's thin lips parted in a monosyllable of assent.

"What a wooden Indian!" thought Phil. Nevertheless, being a genial soul and having heard Miss Brewster's faithfulness extolled, he talked on: "We hear about New York streets being canyons. They are that, and the sky-line is amazing; but the noise, – great heavens, what a racket! and I can't seem to get a breath."

The young fellow rose restlessly, throwing back his shoulders, and paced the little room, filling it with his mountain stride.

Eliza Brewster watched him. She thought of her mistress, and the pride and joy it would have been to her to receive this six feet of manhood under her roof.

"She wouldn't 'a' kept her sentimental dreams long," reflected Eliza bitterly. "He'd 'a' hurt her, he'd 'a' stepped on her feelin's and never known it. He walks as if he had spurs on his boots." She steeled herself against considering him through Mrs. Ballard's eyes. "He's better-lookin' than the picture," she thought, "and I wouldn't trust a handsome man as far as I could see him. They haven't any business with beauty and it always upsets 'em one way or another – yes, every time."

Her eyes wandered to the mantelpiece whose bareness was relieved only by three varying sized pieces of blank paper. She felt the slightest quiver of remorse as she looked. She seemed to see her mistress's gentle glance filled with rebuke.

She stirred in her chair, folded her arms, and cleared her throat.

"You can leave the things here till I go, if you want to," she said.

Phil paused in his promenade and regarded her. Her manner was so unmistakably inimical that for the first time he wondered.

Perhaps, after all, she was not just a machine. And the same thought which had been entertained by Mrs. Fabian occurred to him.

"Twenty-five years of faithful service," he reflected. "I wonder if she expected the money? She's sore at me. That's a cinch."

Phil's artist nature grasped her standpoint in a flash. The granite face, with its signs of suffering, the loneliness, the poverty, all appealed to him to excuse her disappointment.

His eyes swept about the bare walls.

"Where are Aunt Mary's pictures?" he asked. "Was she too modest to hang them?"

"There were some up there," replied Eliza. "I took 'em down."

The visitor's quick eyes noted the white boards on the mantelpiece. With an unexpected movement, he strode across to it, and turned them around.

He stood in the same position for a space.

"Great guns, but she hates me!" he thought, while Eliza, startled, felt the shamed color stream up to her temples.

"What would Mrs. Ballard say!" was her guilty reflection.

Pluto here relieved the situation by making a majestic entrance. His jewel eyes fixed on the stranger for a moment with blinking indifference, then he proceeded, with measured tread, toward the haven of his mistress's lap.

"Hello, Katze," said Phil, stooping his scarlet face. He seized the creature by the nape of its neck and instantly the amazed cat was swung up to his broad shoulder, where it sat, claws digging into his coat and eyes glowering into his own.

"Say, charcoal would make a white mark on you, pussy," he went on, smoothing the creature in a manner which evidently found favor, for Pluto did not offer to stir.

"When I'm not doing her as Medusa," he reflected, "I'll paint her as a witch with this familiar. She'll only have to look at the artist to get the right expression."

"A distinguished visitor from the island of Manx, I suspect," he said aloud.

"No," returned Eliza, still fearfully embarrassed. "Pluto was born right here in New York."

The ever-ready stars in the visitor's eyes twinkled again into the green fire opposite them.

"It was his tail I was noticing. Manx cats are like that."

"Oh, that was boys. If I could 'a' caught 'em I'd 'a' liked to cut off their arms."

"I'll bet on that," thought Phil, "and their legs too."

Eliza cleared her throat. She seemed still to see the gentle eyes of her lost one rebuking her. With utter disregard of a future state she was preparing a lie.

"About those sketches," she said presently, and such was her hoarseness that she was obliged to clear her throat again, "you see, I was – sweepin', and I turned 'em to the wall."

"Oh, yes," said Phil, and continued to smooth Pluto who purred lustily. "A pretty good one for New England," he thought; and carelessly turning the third card about, he came face to face with his own photograph.

With one glance of disgust he tore the picture in two and threw it down.

Eliza started. "What did you do that for?" she demanded sharply.

Phil made a motion of impatience.

"Oh, it's so darned pretty!" he explained. "I thought all those pictures were in the fire."

"Mrs. Ballard set great store by that," said Eliza coldly, "and by the sketches, too," she added.

She was sitting up stiffly in her chair, now, and her gaze fixed on Phil, as, her cat on his shoulder singing loud praise of his fondling hand, he came and stood before her.

"I wish you'd let me see some of Aunt Mary's pictures," he said.

The dead woman's letter was against his heart. He felt that they were standing together, opposed to the hard, grudging face confronting him.

But this was Eliza's crucial moment. In spite of herself she feared in the depths of her heart that that which Mrs. Ballard had said was true; that this restless, careless boy had an artistic ability which her dear one had never attained. She shrank with actual nausea from his comments on her mistress's work. He might not say anything unkind, but she should see the lines of his mouth, the quiver of an eyelash.

She felt unable to rise.

"She left 'em all to me," she said mechanically, pale eyes meeting dark ones.

Phil brushed Pluto's ears and the cat sang through the indignity.

"Talk about the bark on a tree!" he thought. "I believe I'll paint her as a miser, after all! She'd be a wonder, with Pluto standing guard, green eyes peering out of the shadow."

He smiled down at Eliza, the curves of his lips stretching over the teeth she had admired.

"All right," he said. "I'm not going to take them away from you."

Eliza forced herself to her feet, and without another word slowly left the room.

Phil met the cat's blinking eyes where the pupils were dilating and contracting. "Katze, this place gives me the horrors!" he confided.

More than once on the train he had read over his aunt's letter, and each time her words smote an answering chord in his heart and set it to aching.

The present visit accentuated the perception of what her life had been. For a moment his eyes glistened wet against the cat's indolent contentment.

"I wish she hadn't saved any money, the poor little thing," he muttered. "No friends, no sympathy – nothing but that avaricious piece of humanity, calculating every day, probably, on how soon she would get it all. I'll paint her as a harpy. That's what I'll do. Talons of steel! That's all she needs." He heard a sound and dashed a hand across his eyes.

Eliza, heavy of heart, stony of face, entered, a number of pictures bound together, in her hands. The visitor darted forward to relieve her, and Pluto drove claws into his suddenly unsteady resting-place.

Eliza yielded up her treasures like victims, and stood motionless while Phil received them. Never had she looked so gaunt and grey and old; but the visitor did not give her a glance. Aunt Mary's letter was beating against his heart. Here was the work her longing hands had wrought, here the thwarting of her hopes.

His fingers were not quite steady as he untied the strings, and moving the easel into a good light placed a canvas upon it.

Eliza did not wish to look at him, but she could not help it. Her pale gaze fixed on his face in a torture of expectation, as he backed away from the easel, his eyes on the picture.

Pluto rubbed against his ear as a hint that caressing be renewed.

He stood in silence, and Eliza could detect nothing like a smile on his face.

Presently he removed the canvas, and took up another. It was the portrait of Pluto.

"Hello, Katze. Got your picture took, did you? Aunt Mary saw your green shadows all right."

He set the canvas aside, and took up another. Eliza's muscles ached with tension. Her bony hands clasped as she recognized the picture. To the kittens over the table in the kitchen she had once confided that this landscape, which the artist had called "Autumn," looked to her eyes like nothing on earth but a prairie fire! It had been a terrible moment of heresy. She was punished for it now.

Phil backed away from the canvas, and elbow in his hand, rested his finger on his lips for what seemed to Eliza an age. Her heart thumped, but she could not remove her gaze from him.

Pluto, finding squirming and rubbing of no avail, leaped to the floor and blinked reflectively at his mistress. A flagpole would have offered equal facilities for cuddling.

He therefore made deliberate selection of the least unsatisfactory chair, and with noiseless grace took possession.

Phil nodded. "Yes, sir," he murmured; "yes, sir."

Eliza's teeth bit tighter on her suffering under lip. What did "Yes, sir" mean? At least he was not smiling.

He went on, slightly nodding, and thinking aloud; "Aunt Mary was ahead of her time. She knew what she was after."

Eliza tried to speak, and couldn't. Something clicked in her throat.

Phil went on regarding the autumnal tangle, and with a superhuman effort Eliza commanded her tongue.

"What was that you said, Mr. Sidney?"

Phil, again becoming conscious of the stony presence, smiled a little.

"Aunt Mary would have found sympathizers in Munich," he said.

"That's Germany, ain't it?" said Eliza, words and breath interlocking.

"Yes. Most of Uncle Sam's relatives want to see plainer what's doing; at least those who are able to buy pictures."

"Ahead of her time!" gasped Eliza, her blood racing through her veins. "Ought to 'a' been in Germany!"

And then the most amazing occurrence of Philip Sidney's life took place. There was a rush toward him, and suddenly his Medusa, his witch, his miser, his harpy was on her knees on the floor beside him, covering his hand with tears and kisses, and pouring out a torrent of words.

"I've nearly died with dread of you, Mr. Sidney. Oh, why isn't she here to hear you say those words of her pictures! Nobody was ever kind to her. Her relations paid no more attention to her, or her work, than if she'd been a – a – I don't know what. She was poor, and too modest, and the best and sweetest creature on earth; and when your sketches came she admired 'em so that I began to hate you then. Yes, Mr. Sidney, you was a relative, and goin' to be a success, and the look in her eyes when she saw your work killed me. It killed me!"

"Do, do get up," said Philip, trying to raise her. "Don't weep so, Eliza. I understand."

But the torrent could not yet be stemmed.

"I've looked forward to your comin' like to an operation. I've thought you might laugh at her pictures, 'cause young folks are so cruel, and they don't know! Let me cry, Mr. Sidney. Don't mind! You've given me the first happy moment I've known since she left me. I was the only one she had, even to go to picture galleries with her, and my bones ached 'cause I was a stupid thing, and she had wings just like a little spirit o' light."

Philip's lashes were moist again.

"I wish I had been here to go with her," he said.

Eliza lifted her streaming eyes. "Would you 'a' gone?" she asked, and allowed Phil to raise her gently to her feet.

"Indeed, I would," he answered gravely, "and we should have lived together, and worked together."

"Oh, why couldn't it 'a' been! Why couldn't it 'a' been! What it would 'a' meant to her to have heard what you said just now about her pictures!"

Phil's hands were holding Eliza's thin shoulders, and her famished eyes were drinking in the comfort of him.

"I have an idea that we ought not to believe that we could make her happier than she is," he said, with the same gravity.

"I know," faltered Eliza, surprised; "of course that's the way I ought to feel; but there wasn't ever anything she cared much about except paintin'. She" – Eliza swallowed the tremulous sob that was the aftermath of the storm – "she loved music, but she wasn't a performer."

Phil smiled into the appealing face.

"Then she's painting, for all we know," he said. "Do you believe music is all that goes on there?"

"It's all that's mentioned," said Eliza apologetically.

"I have an idea that dying doesn't change us any," said the young man. "Why should it?"

"It didn't need to change her," agreed the other, her voice breaking.

"I believe that in the end we get what we want."

"That's comfortin'."

"Not so you'd notice it," returned Phil with conviction. "It makes the chills run down my spine occasionally when I stop to realize it."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that we had better examine what we're wanting; and choose something that won't go back on us. Aunt Mary did; and I believe she had a strong faith."

"We never talked religion," said Eliza.

"Just lived it. That's better."

"I didn't," returned Eliza, a spark of the old belligerency flashing in her faded eyes. "I can't think of one single enemy that I love!"

"You were everything to Aunt Mary. Do you suppose I shall ever forget that?"

"I sat down in front o' those pictures in the Metropolitan Museum," said Eliza, her lips trembling again. "It's awful big, and I got so tuckered, the pictures sort o' ran together till I didn't know a landscape from a portrait. Then I used to take on over somethin' that had a seat in front of it, and she'd leave me sittin' there starin'. Oh, Mr. Sidney, I can't think o' one other mean thing I ever did to her," – remorseful grief shook the speaker's voice, – "but I'd ought to 'a' stood up to the end. It would 'a' showed more interest!"

Phil squeezed the spare shoulders as they heaved. He laughed a little.

"Now, Eliza, whatever way you managed it, I know you made her happy."

"Yes," groaned the repentant one, "she said my artistic soul was wakin' up. Do you s'pose where she is now she knows it was black deceit?"

"She knows nothing black where she is," – Phil's voice rang with decision; "but she does know more than ever about love and sacrifice such as you have shown her. Beside," in a lighter tone, "how about your artistic soul? See how far above everybody else you understood her pictures."

Eliza's hungry gaze became suddenly inscrutable. "Mr. Sidney," she began, after a pause, "I loved every stroke her dear hand made, but" – again pain crept into the breaking voice – "you said yourself America wasn't worthy of her, and I'm only what you might call the scum of America when it comes to *insight* and – and *expression* and – and *atmosphere*. Usually I had sense enough to wait till she told me what a thing was before I talked about it; but one day, I can't ever forget it, I praised a flock o' sheep at the back of a field she was doin' and she said they was – was cows!"

Sobs rent the speaker and she covered her eyes.

"I told her – 'twas my glasses," she went on when she could speak. "I – told her they – hadn't been right for – a long time. She laughed – and tried to make a joke of it, but – "

Eliza's voice was drowned in the flood.

Phil patted her shoulders and smiled across the bowed head at the forlorn mantelpiece, where the sketches, unconscious of forgiveness, still turned faces toward the wall.

"You've grown awfully morbid, alone here," he said, giving her a little shake. "You should be only thankful, as I am, that Aunt Mary had you and that you were here to take care of her to the end. Come and sit down. She wrote me a wonderful letter. I have it in my pocket and I'll show it to you."

Eliza obediently yielded herself to be guided to a chair. Pluto had selected the best with unerring instinct; and suddenly into his feline dreams an earthquake intruded as Phil tossed him lightly to the floor.

Drawing his chair close to Eliza, who had wilted back against the faded cretonne roses, the young man drew from his pocket an envelope and took out of it a letter, and a small card photograph.

"Mother gave me this old picture of Aunt Mary – "

Eliza pulled herself up and took it eagerly. "I must get my glasses," she said. "I've cried myself nearly blind."

Phil's big hand pushed her back.

"I'll get them," he returned. "Where are they?"

"There, on the end o' the mantelpiece. I had 'em, readin' an advertisement."

She leaned back again and watched him as he crossed the room; watched him with wonder. In years she had not so given her confidence to a human being.

She put on the spectacles and wistfully regarded the picture of a pretty woman whose heavy braids, wound around her head, caught the light. Her plain dress was white and she wore black velvet bands on her wrists.

"Aunt Mary was considered different by her friends, mother says. In a time of frills she liked plain things."

"I guess she *was* different," agreed Eliza devoutly. "Would you think a man who married her would like whiskey better?"

Phil shook his head. "Sorry," he said, laconically.

"One good thing, he drank himself to death quick and left her free."

Phil held out the letter.

"Read it to me, please, Mr. Sidney."

"Can't do it," returned the young man with cheerful frankness. "It makes my nose tingle every time."

So Eliza read the letter in silence. It took her some minutes and when she had finished, her lip caught between her teeth, she took off her glasses and wiped them while she regarded Phil.

"And you've got to live up to that," she said.

"I'm going to try," he answered simply.

Eliza gazed at him, her hands in her lap. She felt old beside his youth, weak beside his strength, ignorant beside that knowledge which had stirred her mistress to exaltation. Nevertheless, the humble love, and desire to help him that swelled her heart was a new desire to live, a consecration.

Presently he took his leave, promising to return in a few days for his belongings.

After the door had closed behind him, she looked down at the cat, who had awakened from another nap at the stir of the departure.

He rubbed against her brown calico skirt as she lighted the gas; then she moved thoughtfully to the mantelpiece and turned the sketches about.

"Mary Sidney," she mused, looking at the graceful head of Phil's mother, "you've had your heartache, and your sacrifices. You've been most pulled in two, between longin' to stay with your husband and follow your son – you told me somethin' of it in your note thankin' for the brooch. Nobody escapes, Mary Sidney. I guess I haven't done you justice, seein' you've raised a boy like that."

Turning to the sketch of the storm-beaten tree, she clasped her hands before it. "Dear one," she mused tenderly, "you loved him. You was great. You died not knowin' how great you were; and you won't care if I do understand this kind better, 'cause all America's too ignorant for you, and I'm one o' the worst."

Her eyes dwelt lingeringly on the sketch. She fancied she could hear the wind whistling through the writhing branches. "It looks like my life," she thought, "risin' out o' the mist and the cloud."

She gazed at it in silence, then turned to the destroyed photograph. She seized the pieces quickly and turned them face up. The rent had missed the chin and cut across the collar. She regarded the face wistfully. The cat stretched his forepaws up her skirt until he was of a preternatural length. It was supper-time.

"I wonder, Pluto," she said slowly, "if I couldn't fit that into a minicher frame. Some of 'em come real reasonable."

CHAPTER V

ELIZA'S INVITATION

For the first time since she had been left alone, Eliza drank her tea that night without tears; and no lump in her throat prevented her swallowing the egg she had boiled.

She held Mrs. Ballard's watch in her hand a minute before getting into bed; and looked long at its gold face, and listened to its loud and busy ticking.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Ballard," she thought; and association added, "as we forgive our debtors!"

"No, I can't!" she muttered fiercely. "I can't! What's the use o' pretendin'!"

Muffling the watch in its slipper, she turned out the gas and got into bed. Composing herself to sleep more peacefully than she had been able to do for many a night, her last thought was of Mrs. Ballard's heir; and a sense of comfort stole over her in the very fact of his existence. Again she seemed to feel the sympathetic pressure of his kind hand.

"He thinks she may be paintin' still," she reflected. "She's got colors to work with that's most blindin', they're so gorgeous, if we can judge anything by the sunsets at the island. Why not think so! It's just as reasonable as playin' harps, for all I can see."

Ever since her dear one's passing, Eliza had felt too crushed and too wicked to pray; and being unable to say the whole of her Lord's Prayer, her New England conscience would not allow her to say any of it; but to-night a sense of hope and gratitude lightened the darkness, and a new gentleness crept over her countenance as it relaxed its lines in slumber.

She wakened next morning without the load of despair on her heart; and slowly realized what had changed her outlook. She even smiled at the cat, who had leaped up on the foot of her bed. He understood that he might come no nearer.

"Every single mornin', Pluto, I've been dreadin' that the day had come I'd got to show her pictures to him. Well, that's over."

"Meow!" remarked Pluto, commenting on the selfishness of beings who overslept.

"Yes, I know what you want." Eliza turned her head wearily on the pillow. "'Weak as a cat!' I don't think much o' that expression. I notice you're strong enough to get everything you want. Oh, dear, I wonder if I'll ever feel like myself again!"

The cat jumped to the floor, and coming to the head of the bed sat down and regarded the haggard face reproachfully.

"You're just as handsome as a picture, Pluto," mused Eliza aloud. "I don't know as it's ever made you any worse 'n common cats."

This optimistic change of heart lightened the atmosphere of the cheerless kitchen that morning; and Eliza drew up the shade, which let the sun slant in past a neighboring roof for a short half-hour.

A beam struck the kittens frisking above the kitchen table, and they seemed to spring from the shadowy gloom of their corner, flinging their little paws about with the infantine glee which had first captivated their owner.

"Oh, yes, you can dance, still," she murmured, addressing them reproachfully; but she left the shade up.

It was nearly noon when her doorbell rang again. Eliza hastened to the glass. She had on her black alpaca to-day. Sweeping-cap and apron were remanded to their corner, and she made certain that her hair was smooth, then went to the speaking-tube.

"Yes?" she said, and listened for the possible voice of yesterday; but a woman's tones put the question: —

"Is this Mrs. Ballard's apartment?"

"Yes," replied Eliza briefly.

"Is this Eliza Brewster?" again asked the sweet voice.

"It is," came the non-committal admission.

"May I come up, Eliza? It's Mrs. Wright."

"Mrs. who?"

"Mrs. Wright. Don't you remember my spending the day with Mrs. Ballard last spring, just before I went to Brewster's Island?"

"Oh, Mrs. Wright!" exclaimed Eliza in a different tone. "Excuse me for keepin' you waitin'. Come right up."

Well Eliza recalled the enjoyment of her dear one in that visit of an old friend, rarely seen. Mrs. Ballard's social pleasures were so few, this day gleamed as a bright spot in memory; and, not content with opening wide the door, Eliza went out to the head of the stairs to receive the mounting figure.

"*She* stood here the last time," she said brokenly, as the visitor reached her and held out both hands to receive Eliza's.

The newcomer's silver-white hair made an aureole about the face that looked with kindly eyes into the other's dim ones.

"I was just thinking of that as I saw you waiting," she said. "It was a shock to me to learn that Mrs. Ballard had left us. Was it very sudden, Eliza?"

The latter could not trust herself to speak. She nodded and ushered Mrs. Wright into the living-room, where they both sat down, the visitor's heart touched by the mourner's altered countenance, and the evident struggle she was making not to give way. Her compassion showed in her gentle face and Eliza made a brave effort to smile.

"I know I'm a sight, Mrs. Wright," she faltered. "I've never been any hand to cry, but I've nearly washed the eyes out o' my head the past week. I don't expect anybody to know what I've lost." Her lips twitched and she bit them hard.

"I can very well imagine," returned the other, "for Mrs. Ballard spoke so warmly of you to me, and told me how many years your fortunes had been cast together. She said you were the mainspring of the house."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wright," said Eliza humbly. "Yes, I saw that she ate and slept right. Her interests were where I couldn't follow 'cause I didn't know enough; but she was the mainspring o' my life. It's broken, broken. I haven't got the energy to lift a finger, nor a thing to live for. Honestly, Mrs. Wright," added Eliza in a burst of despair, "if 't wa'n't for the commonness of a Brewster bein' found so disrespectable as dead in a New York flat, and strange folks layin' their hands on me, I wouldn't 'a' lived through some o' the nights I've had since she went away. I'd lay there and try to think o' one single person it'd make any difference to, and there ain't one."

"My dear," returned Mrs. Wright, regarding the haggard face, "how about your relatives on the island?"

Eliza shook her head. "The only folks o' mine that are left are '-in-laws,' or else cousins I've scarcely heard from for twenty-five years. They haven't troubled themselves about me, and if I'd 'a' walked out that way, they'd only 'a' said I'd ought to be ashamed o' myself."

"And so you ought," said Mrs. Wright with her gentle smile.

"Well, I didn't anyway," said Eliza wearily. "Did you stay at the island all summer?"

"Yes, and I'm still there. May I take off my coat, Eliza?"

The hostess started up with sudden recollection.

"I hope you'll excuse me, Mrs. Wright; if I ever had any manners they're gone."

Slipping off the coat, and relinquishing it into Eliza's hands, the visitor went on talking. "My husband gave up business a couple of years ago. Perhaps Mrs. Ballard has told you that he was never a successful business man." Mrs. Wright stifled a sigh under a bright smile. "Nobody can be well and idle long, you know, so the next thing he began to be ailing, the dear man, and he thought the sea would do him good; and, my dear Eliza, it has done him so much good that we have become islanders."

"You don't mean you're going to stay there?"

The visitor nodded the silvery aureole of her hair.

"That is what I mean. Mr. Wright went fishing all summer and he thinks he has found his niche in life. He has not been so well and happy in years."

"You'll stay all winter?" asked Eliza incredulously.

"Yes," the visitor smiled again, "and all the winters, so far as I know. Mr. Wright is perfectly content."

"How about you?" asked Eliza briefly. She had gone back to her chair and frowned unconsciously into the peaceful face regarding her.

"Oh!" Mrs. Wright raised her eyebrows and gave her head a slight shake. "In my father's house are many mansions! I like to feel that it is all His house, even now, and that wherever I may live He is there, so why should I be lonely?"

Listening to these words, it seemed to Eliza as if some lamp, kept burning on the altar of this woman's soul, sent its steady light into the peaceful eyes regarding her.

"It's a good thing you can get comfort that way," she responded, rather awkwardly. "I know it must 'a' been a struggle to consent to it – any one used to a big city like Boston. What does your niece say to it?"

"Violet was with me a while. I am visiting her here now."

"She teaches, don't she? – the languages, or something?" inquired Eliza vaguely.

"No, gymnastic dancing and other branches of physical culture. She works hard, and no place ever rested her like the island, she thought. Do you remember Jane Foster?"

The corners of Eliza's mouth drew down in a smiling grimace of recollection.

"Do I remember Jennie Foster!" she said. "We grew up together."

"Well, she keeps a boarding-house in Portland now in winters and comes to the old home, summers. We boarded with her, and now, instead of closing up the place, she has rented it to me."

Eliza shook her head. "Pretty high up," she commented. "Some o' those February gales will pretty near shave you off the hill."

"A good many husky generations have been brought up and gone forth into the world out of that house," said Mrs. Wright cheerfully. "There are some trees, you know. Do you remember the apple orchard?"

"Huh!" commented Eliza. "I know how the scrawny little things look when they're bare! A lot o' shelter they'll be."

Mrs. Wright dropped her head a little to one side and her kind grey eyes rested on Eliza's grief-scarred face. "I'm glad I came to see you," she said irrelevantly.

"I'm a kind of a Job's comforter, I'm afraid. When I've thought of anything the past fortnight I've thought about Brewster's Island, – a sort of a counter-irritant, I guess."

"No, no, we can't have that. You mustn't call the Blessed Isle by such a name."

"Perhaps it won't be such a Blessed Isle after you've spent a winter there," remarked Eliza drily.

Mrs. Wright smiled. "I know it was your native place, and I hoped you might have pleasant associations with it."

Eliza sighed wearily. "Yes, if I could be twelve years old again, and go coastin' and skatin', and when it was dark tumble into bed under the eaves with a hot bag o' sand to keep the sheets from freezin' me, I should like it, I s'pose. I used to; but nobody on that snow-covered hill cares whether I'm alive or dead, and that cruel black ocean that swallowed up my father one night, and killed my mother, *that* roarin' around the island in the freezin' gale is the only thing I can see and hear when I think of the winter."

"Then you have been thinking of going back to the island?"

"Well, it's either that or goin' into somebody's kitchen, here." Eliza's mouth twitched grimly. "Mrs. Fabian offered me a recommendation."

"Oh, yes. The Fabians were very kind to Violet this summer."

"You don't say so! I'm glad they can be kind to somebody."

The bitterness of Eliza's tone impressed her visitor. "Mrs. Ballard was Mrs. Fabian's aunt, I believe," she ventured.

"I believe so, too," said Eliza, "but nothing she ever did proved it."

Mrs. Wright veered away from dangerous ground. "I have been thinking of you a great deal since I learned of Mrs. Ballard's going, and I wanted at least to see you before I went back." There was a little pause, then she added: "It occurred to me that you might be going home to the island – "

"I haven't any home there," interrupted Eliza stoically.

" – and I was going to ask you, in that case, if you wouldn't eat your Thanksgiving dinner with me."

Eliza looked at her visitor, startled.

"Think of me," she said slowly, "eatin' a Thanksgivin' dinner – anywhere."

Mrs. Wright felt a pang at her heart under the desolation of the voice. It seemed the voice of the forlorn room in which they sat. She rose to hide the look in her eyes, and moving to the mantel took up the sketches that stood there.

"Are these interesting things Mrs. Ballard's work?" she asked.

Eliza was clutching the meagre arms of her chair until her knuckles whitened. How fate was softening toward her! The thought that this friend of her lost one would have her own hearth on the dreaded island warmed the winter prospect. A link with Mrs. Ballard. A friend with whom she might talk of her. The rift made yesterday in her submerging clouds widened.

"Mrs. Wright," she said, unheeding the visitor's question, "you're religious, I know, 'cause you quoted the Bible, and 'cause you take cheerfully bein' buried in a snowdrift on Brewster's Island instead of havin' the things you're accustomed to. So I want you to know before you invite me to have Thanksgivin' dinner with you that I'm the wickedest woman in New York. I haven't said a prayer since Mrs. Ballard died. I hate Mrs. Fabian for her neglect of her, and I did hate the young man Mrs. Ballard left her little bit o' money to."

Mrs. Wright, holding the sketch of Mary Sidney, turned and looked at the speaker.

"Hated him 'cause he was an artist, and I didn't believe he'd appreciate her work, but just spend her savings careless. That's his mother you've got in your hand, and that's him, layin' on the mantelpiece torn across the middle."

Eliza's aspect as she talked was wild. Mrs. Wright picked up the torn pieces and fitted them together. In fancy she saw Eliza rending the card. She felt that she understood all; the heart-break, the starvation fare of tea, tears, and misery, and the blank future.

"His name's Philip Sidney, and his mother was Mrs. Ballard's niece and namesake. Yesterday he came. He was altogether different from what I expected. He took a load off o' my mind and heart. I don't begrudge him anything."

"You're sorry, then, that you tore this handsome picture."

"Oh, I didn't – 'cause Mrs. Ballard set such store by it. I only turned it to the wall. 'Twas he tore it. He said it was too pretty or something. He does look different. The picture's kind o' dreamin' lookin' and he's so awake he – well, he sparkles."

Mrs. Wright smiled at the haggard speaker.

"I'm so glad you like him. Has he come to New York to study?"

"Yes; he had to be a mining engineer when he wanted to paint. So now he's goin' to study with Mrs. Ballard's money."

"Why – I remember," said Mrs. Wright, thoughtfully regarding the sketches. "Mrs. Ballard told me about him in the spring." She looked up again at her hostess. "You've been through a great deal, Eliza," she said, "and you've tried to go alone."

"I had to go alone," returned Eliza fiercely; "but I can be honest if I am lonely and I won't sit down at your table without your knowin' that I'm a sinner. Don't talk religion to me either," she added, "'cause I ain't the kind it would do any good to."

Mrs. Wright came back to her chair and her eyes were thoughtful.

"I have a better idea still," she said. "For how long have you this apartment?"

"One week more."

"Oh, only a week. Then, supposing you come and live with me this winter."

Eliza leaned back in her chair, speechless. The grey wall of the future slowly dissolved. The possibility of friendship – of a home – was actually unnerving in its contrast to all she had steeled herself to endure.

"Come and help me, Eliza," went on the gentle voice. "Show me how to meet an island winter. I believe between us we can make a cosy sort of season of it."

"Cosy!" echoed Eliza's dry lips.

"Yes. There by the gnarled little apple trees, handicapped by winter winds, and the forlorn little chicken-house that stands near the orchard. Do you remember that?"

"Yes," answered Eliza mechanically. "'T wa'n't always a chicken-house. Polly Ann Foster built it 'cause she quarrelled with her son and wouldn't live with him. I was a little girl and we were all scared of her. When she died they began using it for the hens."

"Well, it's empty and forlorn now. Miss Foster can't keep chickens and go back to Portland every fall. That's our only near neighbor, you remember."

"I remember. Why should you be such an angel to me?" burst forth Eliza.

"Is that being an angel? Why, I'm so glad. You know I might be a little bit lonely at the island. Mr. Wright is pretty sleepy in the evening and the house rambles. We'll shut up part of it, Eliza, won't we?"

"Oh, Mrs. Wright!" exclaimed the lonely woman, every trace of her fierceness gone. "What a godsend you're givin' me."

"Then it's settled; and Violet will be so glad. She isn't quite pleased with our plan for the winter."

CHAPTER VI

BROTHER AND SISTER

Kathleen Fabian sat at her desk, deeply engrossed in the theme she was writing, when her brother's name was brought to her.

The expression of her face as she took the card did not indicate that the surprise was wholly joyous. She frowned and bit her lip, and an anxious look grew in her eyes as she went out into the hall to meet the visitor, who advanced with bounds, and grasped her in one arm, giving her cheek a brotherly peck.

"What has happened, Edgar?" she asked as he led her back into her room.

"I've come to see you, that's all," was the rejoinder.

Edgar Fabian was an airy youth, carefully arrayed in the height of fashion. His fair hair was brushed until it reflected the light, and his jaunty assurance was wont to carry all before it.

"Is anything wrong at home?" insisted his sister.

"Certainly not."

They were now inside the room and the young man closed the door.

"Well, I haven't any money," said Kathleen bluntly, – "at least, not for you!"

Edgar was but little taller than she, and, as she looked at him now, her serious slender face opposed to his boyish one, her peculiar slow speech, in which her teeth scarcely closed, sounding lazy beside his crispness, she seemed the elder of the two.

"This leaping at conclusions is too feminine a weakness for you to indulge in, Kath," was the rejoinder as the visitor slid out of a silk-lined overcoat; but he rested his gaze upon his sister's dark hair rather than the eyes beneath. "I like your hospitality," he added. "I hope it isn't presumption for me to remove my coat. Try to control your joy when your brother comes up from New York to see you."

"Of course I should always be glad to see you if – if you'd let me," was the reply.

"What's to prevent?" inquired the visitor cheerfully.

"My diary," was the laconic response.

"Oh, you make me tired," said Edgar, taking out a cigarette-case. "May I?"

"No," returned Kathleen, speaking with her characteristic deliberation.

"You may have one, too"; he offered his case, still standing, since she did not sit. He smiled as he said it; the evenness of his teeth and the glee of his smile had melted much ice before now.

"No, thanks," she answered coldly.

He gave an exclamation.

"Oh, your grave and reverend senior airs won't go down with me, you know." He sniffed suspiciously. "Some one has been having a whiff here this morning."

"It wasn't I."

"Well, it was somebody; and some one more critical than I is liable to drop in here and notice it. Just to save you trouble, I'll light up. Better take one. It's your golden opportunity."

Again he offered the case, and now Kathleen took a cigarette mechanically. She still questioned her brother's debonair countenance.

"Well," he said impatiently, after a moment of silence, "are we going to stand here until dinner-time like two tenpins?"

"Are you going to stay until dinner-time?"

"Why," with another effort at gayety, "if you go on like this and positively won't take no for an answer, perhaps I shall be obliged to. Say, Kath, what's the matter with you? You used to be a good fellow. College has ruined you. I didn't treat you like this when you came to see me."

"Forgive me, Edgar," Kathleen's drawl became very nearly an exclamation. "I was thinking so hard."

She dropped into a chair and he lighted his cigarette, and bending forward allowed her to draw the flame into her own.

"Now, this is something like it," remarked the young man, sinking upon a leather-covered divan. He picked up a guitar that lay at its head, and strummed lightly upon it. "Think of your giving house-room to anything so light-minded as a guitar!" he added, his disapproving eyes roving about the entire apartment. "This room looks more like a hermit's cell every time I come."

"No," rejoined Kathleen, with her soft laziness of speech, and blowing a ring of smoke upon the air, "it is only that you have time to forget between your visits."

Edgar removed his cigarette and began to murmur "The Owl and the Pussy Cat," in a tenor voice calculated to pour oil on troubled waters, while he struck the accompanying chords with a sure touch.

"They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note!"

he sang. "Think of it!" he groaned, pausing to save the life of his cigarette; "plenty of money! Who wouldn't be an owl or a pussy-cat!"

Kathleen's eyes narrowed.

"You speak of the rarity of my visits," he went on. "I suppose you think it is nothing to take a few hours out of a business day to run up here."

Kathleen smiled. "On the contrary, I think it so much of a thing that it always startles me to get your card on a week day, and you seem to have other uses for your Sundays."

"Very well," returned her brother, strumming the guitar with conscious rectitude; "know then that the Administration sent me up here to-day on business."

"With me?"

"No" (singing) —

'Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge — "'

"Edgar!" protested the girl lazily, "it's too early in the day for that."

"Hello, grave and reverend senior," he retorted. "I didn't know you were so much of a connoisseur."

The girl's reply had a sad note.

"I wish you would do something with that voice," she said.

The singer smiled. He was now smoking again, and strumming the melody of the song. Perhaps he was thinking that he had done a good deal with his voice.

"I don't know that it has been altogether wasted," he replied.

"Carrying off the honors as the singing-girl in a college play isn't what I mean."

"Oh, I'm sure it isn't," scoffed the possessor of the voice. "I'd take long odds that what you mean involves something that would come under the head of work spelled with a capital W — "

"Think of a *man butterfly*!" ejaculated Kathleen, removing her cigarette and her drawl for an unwonted verbal explosion. "Edgar, I should have been the man, and you the girl in our family."

"I should object," he rejoined calmly, all his attention apparently concentrated on the compassing of some intricate fingering of the guitar strings.

"Think of your rooms at college and this!" went on Kathleen.

"I'd like mighty well to have a squint at the loved and lost to take the taste of this out of my mouth," returned the visitor imperturbably.

"How is father?" asked Kathleen, relapsing into her usual manner.

"Smaht," rejoined Edgar.

At the reminder of Brewster's Island, Kathleen's eyes smiled, then grew grave. "I can't bear to have you call father the Administration," she said.

"Why not? – you didn't want me to call him Governor."

"It sounds so – so disrespectful."

"Not to me. I think it suggests salaams."

"No, Edgar – slams; but I don't want to joke."

"I'm sure of it," interpolated the guitar-playing one.

"Stop that noise a minute, please."

He obeyed.

"I wish you wouldn't speak of father so coldly."

"Then it'll be likely to be hotly, and at that you'd make a fuss," returned the youth doggedly.

"He is a good father," declared the girl, the lingering words coming devoutly.

"Yes," retorted Edgar drily. "Perhaps, if your little day-dream could come true and you be the son, you wouldn't think so."

"I believe it is father's fault largely," said Kathleen. "He began by spoiling you."

"Then, if I'm spoiled, what's the use of kicking? – and if he's done it he must pay for it; but that's just what he won't do – pay for it."

The speaker stubbed the light out of his cigarette and tossed it on the table. He rose and walked the floor.

"He has put you in his office," said Kathleen. "He will give you every chance to rise."

"Yes, and meanwhile pays me a salary smaller than the allowance he gave me at college."

"Because," said the girl, "he found that you couldn't even keep within that. He knew you must wake up."

"What occasion?" demanded Edgar, standing still to gesture. "I'm the only son. Look at the money he has."

"And has worked for; *worked* for, Edgar. Can't you understand? Supposing you had worked like that, and had a son who dipped into the bag with both hands and threw your money away."

"I don't want to throw it away. I get one hundred cents' worth of fun out of every dollar I spend. What more does he want? I didn't ask to be born, did I? I didn't ask to have expensive tastes. Why should I have to ride in a taxicab?"

"You don't. There are the street cars."

Edgar's blond face turned upon her angrily. "When do you suppose I want a machine? When I'm doddering around with a cane?"

"Earn it, then."

"Yes, I can on a petty few hundreds a year!"

"You drive down with father every morning, don't you?"

"No, I don't. I have to get there before he does."

Kathleen laughed. "What an outrage!"

"I take the car first and then it goes back for him," said Edgar sulkily.

"Oh, the cruelty of some parents!" drawled Kathleen, knocking the ash from her cigarette. "The idea of Peter going back for father. He should stand in Wall Street awaiting your orders."

"No, he shouldn't, but I should have a motor of my own. The Ad. is more old-fashioned than any of the other fathers in our set." The speaker paused and gestured defensively. "You'll get off all that ancient stuff about the new generation wanting to begin where the old left off. Of course we do. Why not? I hope my son will begin where I leave off."

Kathleen gave her one-sided smile – her Mona Lisa smile her admirers called it: —

"Where you leave off is not liable to be a bed of roses if you keep on as you've begun." She looked up at her brother gravely as she tapped the end of her cigarette and dropped it in the ash

receiver. "Why don't you use your brains?" she asked. "Can't you see that the more father notices that you have no ambition, the tighter he will draw the rein?"

"I have plenty of ambition."

"For work?"

"Oh, you make me tired!"

The young man resumed his impatient walk.

The sister leaned back in her chair, her dark eyes following him, without the hint of a smile.

"I'd like to see you tired," she said seriously.

He turned on her. "Ever see me after a polo game?"

"But life isn't a game, Edgar."

He opened his eyes at her and grimaced scornfully.

"The grave and reverend senior again; nearly ready to graduate, and inform the world that

'Life is real, life is earnest,
And the grave is not its goal!'

Might as well be in the grave at once as dig and grind the days away. Heaven help us when you get home! I suppose you must go through the fine-spun theory stage like the usual attack of measles."

"Measles are catching," remarked Kathleen quietly.

"Exactly! but I'm mighty glad I'm immune from the know-it-all disease."

"That would mean that you'd had it, Edgar, and you never did have it; not even a rash. Open the window, please. We're a little blue in here."

Edgar threw open the unoffending window with a force that threatened the mechanism.

"No doubt," he said, "you'd like to have me live, like that cowboy, in a stable, and get my own meals."

"A garage would suit you better, I suppose," returned Kathleen. "What are you talking about?"

"Hasn't mother written you of the genius who has come out of the wild and woolly to get his Pegasus curried in New York?"

"Has mother taken up a genius? – Mother, of all people!"

"Why, she's had him at the house, and insists on my being civil to him; but I haven't seen him yet. I get enough of him right at the breakfast and dinner table without hunting up the stable. His ambition is at the bottom of my coffee cup, and his genius for hard work is served as an entrée every night."

"Oh," – Kathleen's face gained a ray of interest, – "you mean that cousin of ours."

"He's no cousin," retorted Edgar. "He's one of mother's fifty-seven varieties, a sort of step-neighbor-in-law of ours. When father and mother were out at the mine they met him. I think it was up to him to stay out there and make that mine pay. I think if he'd shown a little genius for hard work right there, it would have been more to the point."

"Yes, mother wrote me." Kathleen's tone was tinged with the interest in her eyes. "What is his name, now?"

"Sidney," responded Edgar with open disgust. "Oh, I'm authority on his name all right, – Philip Sidney; I've had it dinged into my ears faithfully."

"A name to live up to," remarked the girl. "It was interesting, Aunt Mary leaving him her money."

"It would have been more interesting if she'd had anything to leave."

Edgar had thrown himself back on the divan and was watching curtains and smoke draw out the window.

"Do you remember," continued his sister, "what nice cookies Aunt Mary used to give us when we were little? Mother felt sorry not to be here when she died."

"Oh, mother's ripping," declared Edgar, his cheerfulness restored by some inspiriting memory. "She's had a hand-to-hand, knock-down-and-drag-out with the old gargoyle that holds the fort over there at Aunt Mary's."

"What do you mean?" drawled Kathleen with faint disgust.

"Mother gave a graphic account of the fray at dinner one night. I wasn't giving the story my whole attention, but I gathered that she and the doughty Eliza each got hold of one end of Aunt Mary's camel's hair shawl and had a tug of war; and Eliza's cat won the day for her by jumping on mother and nearly clawing her furs off."

"Edgar," protested Kathleen, "your bump of respect is an intaglio!"

"Well, I think I've got it about right. There were diamonds mixed up in it too. I believe Eliza wears a diamond tiara at her work so as to keep it away from mother; while the parent of the worshipful Philip came in for a diamond necklace, and mother was left nothing but cold neglect."

"Absurd!" breathed Kathleen. "Aunt Mary was poor as a church mouse."

"Well, whatever happened, the fur was rising on the back of mother's neck, and I didn't know but there would be a silver lining to the cloud and she'd cut Philip Sidney; but," with a heavy sigh, "no such luck. The cowboy still gallops his Pegasus over my prostrate body every meal."

"What do you mean by a stable?" asked Kathleen.

"Why, Pegasus has to have one, I suppose."

"Is that all? Are you only being witty?"

"Not a bit of it. You know the literal truth is all I'm ever up to. The genius has a room over a stable, and an oil stove!"

"Why a stable?"

"Convenient for Pegasus, I suppose," responded Edgar carelessly. "Beside, doubtless he would feel out of place in any abode more civilized."

"Edgar Fabian, that's nonsense. I remember his mother, when she came East years ago, don't you?"

"They're as poor as Job's turkey," said Edgar with a careless shrug. "That's why he jumped at Aunt Mary's pittance like a trout at a fly."

"Oh, Edgar, what an object-lesson for you!" Kathleen clasped her hands.

"Oh, of course!" ejaculated Edgar, his even teeth very much clenched.

"You ought to go to see him!"

"So I've heard," with intense sarcasm. "Mother has bored the life out of me."

"It isn't civil not to," said Kathleen, relapsing into languor. "He's a sort of a relative."

"Yes. The sort to keep away from. If I went up there, it would be to take his mahl-stick and smash his face."

"Nice, hospitable plan," remarked Kathleen. "Possibly he wouldn't permit it."

"Oh, I've no doubt he'd think it was real mean and pick up a fan and slap me on the wrist. Oh, forget him! Say, Kath," as if with sudden remembrance, "do you know I came off without my purse to-day?"

The girl's eyes gained a curious expression. She was silent a moment, hands clasped around her knee. Under her gaze her brother picked up the guitar again and his nervous fingers swept the strings.

"I thought you said this was a business trip."

"It is. Go down and ask them at the bank if I didn't put a bee in their bonnet this morning."

"Then the house pays your expenses. Your purse didn't have to suffer."

"Oh, well, if you want the literal truth, I'm flat broke."

"You always are flat broke at this time in the month. Why shouldn't *I* be? – as a matter of fact, I am."

Edgar frowned. "What have you been buying?"

"A new microscope. I've saved for it, Edgar."

The girl cast a warm glance across the room to where, on a table, stood a tall slender object covered with a cloth.

"Saved for it!" was the disgusted response. "Shameful idea when the Ad. could just as well buy you an observatory."

"I don't believe father is nearly as rich as you think he is," said the girl defensively.

"He's the prize tight-wad. That's what he is. Look at our summers! Isn't it enough that instead of Newport the Fabians rusticate on Brewster's Island?"

"He met mother there. He loves it."

"Well, I can tell you, mother would exchange a whole lot of sentiment for one good whirl at Newport or some other place where there are live ones! Say, Kath, be a good fellow. You can spare a dime or so. Ten dollars would be better than nothing. I'll give it back the first of the month, honor bright. Think of my having to depend on taxis! It would make angels weep."

The sister continued to regard him and he reddened under the pensive gaze, and twanged the guitar.

"You never have paid me back the first of the month and I wish you wouldn't promise," she said at last; "but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'm coming home to spend Sunday and I will give you the ten dollars – it's all I have just now – if you will take me to see that cousin of ours."

"What cousin?" asked Edgar.

"Aunt Mary's heir. The artist."

"Why are you determined to stuff him down my throat? He is absolutely no kin to us and has no demand on us. I decline."

"Then I shall go with mother," declared Kathleen, in her laziest drawl. "I'm sure she will take me. I am interested in his determination. I want to see – his oil stove. I want to pat Pegasus."

"Go, then, and much good may it do you!" Edgar put down the guitar and started up. "Where's the ten, Kath? Awful sorry to bother you."

The girl did not rise. She shook her head.

"You haven't earned it. I've decided you must work for this one, before it follows its predecessors to that bourne from which no bank-note returneth."

There was an unusual sparkle in the eyes that met the blue ones.

"You said you could go with mother," protested Edgar.

"I can if I have to, but I prefer to hunt up stables with a man."

"Oh, confound it! you always get your own way. Fork over, then. I'll go with you; but it just means fastening him right on us. We'll be cousins then for sure."

Kathleen went to her closet and reappeared with the ten dollar bill. With a gesture of farewell she touched her finger to her lips and bestowed the kiss on the bank-note.

Her brother looked at his watch.

"Great Scott! I've got to hike for that train," he said; and wriggling into his overcoat he kissed his sister's cheek, and hurried away.

CHAPTER VII

THE FLITTING

It was Eliza's last day in the apartment. Out of respect to probable scruples on the part of her future hostess as to travelling on Sunday, she had planned to sit idle this Sabbath day, although everything was packed and she was ready to start.

By Mrs. Wright's advice she had sold nearly all the shabby furnishings of the apartment. She had eaten a picnic luncheon in the forlorn kitchen, from whence even the gambolling kittens had fled to the bottom of Eliza's trunk, and now sat on a camp-chair in the middle of the empty parlor, as solitary as Alexander Selkirk on his island, monarch of all she surveyed, which was a pair of green eyes glowering at her from behind the wire network in the side of a wicker basket, which reposed on the only other chair in the room.

Stern and inexorable looked Eliza sitting in state on the camp-chair, and furious glared the jewel eyes back at her.

"You've got to get used to it, Pluto," she said. "Do you suppose I like it any better than you do? I don't know as you're so bad off either. I think I'd like to be put in a bag and carried to Brewster's Island with no care of cars or boats or anything else. You always do get the best of it."

Eliza looked very haggard. It had been a wrenching week, packing her dear one's belongings, and selling into careless, grudging hands the old furniture with its tender associations.

Philip had been too busy to come to her aid. They had exchanged notes. She had addressed him at the Fabians', and he had replied that he had taken a room, and asked that his belongings be stacked up somewhere. He promised that he would come for them early Sunday afternoon.

So now she was waiting, her capable hands folded in her black alpaca lap, and her face expressing endurance.

"I'm countin' the hours, Pluto," she declared. "This place is misery to me now. I feel just as much in a strange garret as you do in that basket. I just wish Mr. Sidney'd come and take his things and then there won't be much more daylight to look around here in. And I hope you won't act like all possessed when we start for the train nor when we get on it."

"Meow!" cried Pluto, exasperated.

"There now!" exclaimed Eliza, in trepidation – "you do that just once when the train's standin' still, and where'll we be! I've always thought you had a little more intelligence than the law allows; and if you go to actin' like an alley cat you'll disappoint me dreadfully!"

Eliza rose anxiously and threw herself on her knees beside the basket and opened it. Pluto sprang out, and she caught him and pressed her thin cheek against his fur in a rare caress. Her eyes stung in her effort to repress tears.

"Oh, law! I'm sick o' myself," she muttered. "Cryin'! cryin'! gracious, what a fool! I'd ought to sold you to somebody, I suppose," – she clung tighter to the handsome creature and buried her eyes in his glossy coat, – "or given you away, more likely. Who'd want to pay anything for a cat that don't know how bothersome it's goin' to be to get the right train, and hasn't the decency to keep his mouth shut, and – Oh!" as a knock sounded on the door. "There he is now."

The glow of Eliza's one interview with Mrs. Ballard's heir had faded long ago. The sordid and wounding events of the week had eclipsed whatever cheer he had brought her, and it was only as one of the events of her flitting that she looked forward to his advent this afternoon, and the departure of the last and most intimate of her dear one's possessions.

The knock on the door preceded its immediate opening.

"May I come in?"

The long step took the little hall in three strides.

The sight that met the newcomer's eyes was the bare room, with Eliza kneeling in front of an open basket, clasping Pluto to her breast. The woman's face and posture were dramatic.

"Deserted!" was the word that rose to Phil's lips, but he repressed it. He would not twit on facts; but his all-observing eyes shone.

"I'm always wanting to paint you, Eliza," he said. "Sometime I will, too."

"Me!" returned Eliza drearily. "You'll be hard up when you take me."

"So far as that goes, I'm hard up now. That's chronic," responded Phil cheerfully. "What are you doing – not taking leave of that king among cats? If you're leaving him behind, I speak for him."

"H'm!" exclaimed Eliza, loosening her clasp of her pet and rising. "You'd made a bad bargain if you took Pluto." She removed the basket from its chair. "Sit down, Mr. Sidney," she said wearily, resuming her own seat. "It's too forlorn for you to stay, but maybe you'd like to ketch your breath before you take the things."

Philip picked up the basket and looked curiously at its wire window.

"Yes," continued Eliza. "I'm taking Pluto, so I had to have that. It was an extravagance, and he ain't worth it. I despise to see folks cartin' cats and dogs around. I didn't think I'd ever come to it; but somehow I'm – used to that selfish critter, and he's – he's all the folks I've got. It never once came to me that you'd take him."

"Indeed I would," replied Phil; "and wait till you see the place I have for him. Rats and mice while you wait, I suppose, though I haven't seen any yet."

"Oh, well," returned Eliza hastily, her eyes following Pluto as he rubbed himself against Phil's leg. "I've got the basket now. I guess I'll have to use it."

"It's a shame I haven't been here to help you," said Phil. "You've had a hard week, I know, but I've had a busy one."

"You've got a room, you say," said Eliza listlessly. "Rats and mice. That don't sound very good."

Phil smiled. "I don't know, – as I say, I haven't seen them yet; but Pluto would be a fine guard to keep them off my blankets. I don't believe, though, there's been any grain in there for a good while."

"Grain!" repeated Eliza.

Phil laughed. "I'll tell you about it later; but first, may I have the things? I have an expressman down at the door. I rode over here with him in state. Good thing I didn't meet Mrs. Fabian."

Eliza's thin lip curled as she rose. She led Philip to a room, in the middle of which was gathered a heterogeneous collection of articles. "In this box is the paintin' things," she said, touching a wooden case. "In this barrel is some dishes. I couldn't get anything for 'em anyway, and you wrote you was going to get your own breakfasts."

"Capital," put in Phil; "and here's a bedstead."

"Yes, and the spring and mattress," returned Eliza. "It's Mrs. Ballard's bed. I couldn't sell it."

Philip regarded the disconnected pieces dubiously – "I guess I'd have to be amputated at the knees to use that."

"Well," – Eliza shook her head quickly. "Take it anyway, and do what you've a mind to with it, only don't tell me. The beddin's in the barrel with the dishes – you said you'd be glad of a chair, so here's one, and the two in the parlor are for you. You can take 'em right along. I haven't got very long to wait anyway. I calc'late to go to the station early."

Phil touched her shoulder with his hand.

"I'll see that you get to the station early enough."

"You mustn't think o' me," said Eliza, as Phil picked up some of the furniture and started for the stairs.

When he returned for the next load he brought the expressman with him. Together they took the last of the articles down the stairway.

Eliza stood at the top and watched the final descent.

"Good-bye Mr. Sidney," she said.

He smiled brightly up at her across a couple of chairs, and the easel.

"Good-bye for five minutes."

"No, no," said Eliza; "don't you come back." She winked violently toward the receding cap of the expressman. "You'd better ride right over with the things just the way you came."

"All right," responded Phil laughing. "*Bon voyage!*"

"Hey?" asked Eliza.

"Have a good trip. My respects to Pluto."

She went back into the apartment and closed the door. It seemed emptier, stiller than ever after the little flurry of moving.

"It was clever of him," she thought gratefully, "not to let the other man handle the easel."

Now, indeed, desolation settled upon Eliza Brewster. Pluto's short tail stiffened in the majestic disapproval with which he walked about the room in search of an oasis of comfort.

Eliza heard his protesting meows. She stood still at the window looking out on the grey November sky. "I haven't got a chair to sit down on, Pluto," she said. "It's got past cryin'!"

She took out the gold-faced watch that was ticking against her thin bosom. Two hours yet before there would be any reason in going to the station. Suddenly it occurred to her that she had placed flannel in the bottom of the cat's travelling-basket. This would be the golden opportunity to endear the spot to his forlorn feline heart.

She tucked the watch back in its hiding-place. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" she cried.

No response. The receding meows had ceased. She looked perplexed; then an illuminating thought occurred to her. Tables there were none, but the square top of the kitchen range remained. On this she had spread clean papers and upon them had laid her coat and hat, and the shabby boa and muff of black astrachan which had belonged to her dear one.

She hastened down the hall. Her intuition had not failed. Upon this bed, his glossy coat revealing the rustiness of the garments, lay Pluto curled up, regardless of vicissitudes.

Eliza had scarcely swept him off his bed when the outer door of the apartment opened again, and closed.

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.