FAWCETT EDGAR

AN AMBITIOUS WOMAN: A NOVEL

Edgar Fawcett

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Fawcett E.

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Содержание

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I

If any spot on the globe can be found where even Spring has lost the sweet trick of making herself charming, a cynic in search of an opportunity for some such morose discovery might thank his baleful stars were chance to drift him upon Greenpoint. Whoever named the place in past days must have done so with a double satire; for Greenpoint is not a point, nor is it ever green. Years ago it began by being the sluggish suburb of a thriftier and smarter suburb, Brooklyn. By degrees the latter broadened into a huge city, and soon its neighbor village stretched out to it arms of straggling huts and swampy river-line, in doleful welcome. To-day the affiliation is complete. Man has said let it all be Brooklyn, and it is all Brooklyn. But the sovereign dreariness of Greenpoint, like an unpropitiated god, still remains. Its melancholy, its ugliness, its torpor, its neglect, all preserve an unimpaired novelty. It is very near New York, and yet in atmosphere, suggestion, vitality, it is leagues away. Our noble city, with its magnificent maritime approaches, its mast-thronged docks, its lordly encircling rivers, its majesty of traffic, its gallant avenues of edifices, its loud assertion of life, and its fine promise of riper culture, fades into a dim memory when you have touched, after only a brief voyage, upon this forlorn opposite shore.

No Charon rows you across, though your short trip has too often the most funereal associations. You take passage in a squat little steamboat at either of two eastern ferries, and are lucky if a hearse with its satellite coaches should fail to embark in your company; for, curiously, the one enlivening fact associable with Greenpoint is its close nearness to a famed Roman Catholic cemetery. It is doubtful if the unkempt child wading in the muddy gutter ever turns his frowzy head when these dismal retinues stream past him. They are always streaming past him; they are as much a part of this lazy environ as the big, ghostly geese that saunter across its ill-tended cobblestones, the dirty goats that nibble at the placards on its many dingy fences, or the dull-faced Germans that plod its semi-paven streets. Death, that is always so bitter a commonplace, has here become a glaring triteness. Watched, along the main thoroughfare, from porches of liquor-shops and windows of tenement-houses, death has perhaps gained a sombre popularity with not a few shabby gazers. It rides in state, at a dignified pace; it has followers, too, riding deferentially behind it. Sometimes it has martial music, and the pomp of military escort. Life seldom has any of this, in Greenpoint. It cannot ride, or rarely. It must walk, and strain to keep its strength even for that. One part of it drudges with the needle, fumes over the smoky stove, sighs at the unappeasable baby; another part takes by dawn the little dwarfish ferry-boat, and hies to the great metropolis across the river, returning jaded from labor by nightfall. No wonder, here, if death should seem to possess not merely a mournful importance but a gloomy advantage as well, or if for these toilful townsfolk philosophy had reversed itself, and instead of the paths of glory leading to the grave, it should look as if the grave were forever leading to some sort of peculiar and comfortable glory.

But Greenpoint, like a hardened conscience, still has her repentant surprises. She is not quite a thing of sloth and penury. True, the broad street that leads from steamboat to cemetery is lined with squalid homes, and the mourners who are so incessantly borne along to Calvary must see little else than beer-sellers standing slippered and coatless beside their doorways, or thin, pinched women haggling with the venders of sickly groceries. But elsewhere one may find by-streets lined with low wooden dwellings that hint of neatness and suggest a better grade of living. A yellowish drab prevails as the hue of these houses; they seem all to partake of one period, like certain homogeneous fossils. But they do not breathe of antiquity; they are fanciful with trellised piazzas and other modern

embellishments of carpentry; sometimes they possess miniature Corinthian pillars, faded by the trickle of rain between their tawny flutings, as if stirred with the dumb desire to be white and classic. Scant gardens front them, edged with a few yards of ornamental fence. Their high basement windows stare at you from a foundation of brick. They are very prosaic, chiefly from their lame effort to be picturesque; and when you look down toward the river, expecting to feel refreshed by its gleam, you are disheartened at the way in which lumber-yards and sloop-wharves have quite shut any glimpse of it from your eyes.

In one of these two-storied wooden houses, not many years ago, dwelt a family of three people, – a Mr. Francis Twining, his wife, and their only child, a girl, named Claire. Mr. Twining was an Englishman by birth; many years had passed since he first landed on these shores. He had come here nearly penniless, but with proud hopes. He was then only three-and-twenty. He had sprung from a good country family, had been fitted at Eton for Oxford, and had seen one year at the famed University. Then sharp financial disaster had overtaken his father, whose death soon followed. Francis was a younger son, but even to the heir had fallen a shattered patrimony, and to himself merely a slender legacy. With this, confident and undaunted as though it were the purse of Fortunio, Francis had taken voyage for New York. At first he had shown a really splendid energy. Slim of figure, with a pale, womanish face lit by large, soft blue eyes, he gave slight physical sign of force or even will. But though possessed of both, he proved one of those ill-fated beings whom failure never tires of rebuffing. His mental ability was unquestioned; he shrank with sensitive disgust from all vice; he had plenty of ambition, and the instinct of solid industry. Yet, as years passed on, both secured him but meagre recompense for struggle. He had begun his career with a clerkship; now, at fifty-three, he was a clerk still. All his hope had fled; he had undergone bitter heart-burnings; he had striven to solve the problem of his own defeat. Meanwhile its explanation was not difficult. He had a boyish trust in his fellow-creatures that no amount of stern experience seemed to weaken. Chicanery had made him its sport. Five separate times he had been swindled mercilessly by men in whom he had reposed implicit faith. There had lain his rock of ruin: he was always reposing implicit faith in everybody. His life had been one long pathos of over-credulity. He could think, reason, reflect, analyze, but he was incapable of doubting. A fool could have deceived him, and naturally, on repeated occasions, knaves had not found it difficult. At fifty-three his last hard-earned savings had been wormed from him by the last plausible scamp. And now he had accepted himself as the favorite of misfortune; over the glow of his spirit disappointment had cast its dulling spell, like the deep film of ash that sheathes a spent ember. He had now one aim – to keep his wife and child from indigence while he lived, and one despair – that he could not keep them from indigence after he was dead. But his really lovely optimism still remained. He had been essentially amiable and complaisant in all intercourse with his kind, and this quality had not lost a ray of its fine former lustre. With ample excuse for the worst cynic feeling, he continued a gentle yet unconscious philanthropist. There was something piteously sweet in the obstinacy with which he still saw only the bright side of humanity. His delicate person had grown more slim; his rusty clothes hung about him with a mournful looseness; his oval face, worn by worriment, had taken keener lines; but his large blue eyes still kept their liquid sparkle, and kindled in prompt unison with his alert smile. The flaxen growth that had always fringed his lips and chin with cloudy lightness, had now become of a frosty gray. Seen passingly, no one would have called him, as the current phrase goes, a gentleman. His wearied mien forbade the suggestion of leisure, while his broadcloth spoke of long wear and speedy purchase. But a close gaze might have caught the unperished refinement that still clung to him with sad persistence, and was evident in such minor effects of personal detail as a glimpse of cleanly linen about throat and wrist, a cheap yet careful lustre of the often jaded boot, a culture and purity of the hand, or even a choice nicety of the finger-nail.

He had married after reaching these shores, and his marriage had proved another instance of misplaced confidence. His wife had been handsome when a young woman, and she had become Mrs. Twining at about the age of five-and-twenty. She was personally quite the opposite of her bridegroom;

she was an inch taller than he, and had an aquiline face, splendid with a pair of very black eyes that she had rolled and flashed at the other sex since early girlhood. She had rolled and flashed them at her present husband, and so conquered him. She was a good inch taller than he, and lapse of time had not diminished the difference since their union. She had been extremely vulgar as Miss Jane Wray, when Twining had married her, and she was extremely vulgar still. She had first met him in a boarding-house in East Broadway, where Twining had secured a room on his arrival from England. At this period East Broadway wore only a waning grace of gentility; some few conservative nabobs still lingered there, obstinately defying plebeian inroads. Its roomy brick mansions, with their arched, antique doorways devoid of any vestibule; their prim-railed stoops that guessed not of ornate balusters; and their many-paned, thin-sashed windows where plate-glass had never glittered, were already invaded by inmates whose Teuton names and convex noses prophesied the social decline that must soon grasp this once select purlieu. Jane Wray was neither German nor Hebrew; she was American in the least pleasant sense of that word, both as regarded parentage and breeding. She was an orphan, and the recipient of surly charity from unprosperous relatives. She wanted very greatly to marry, and Twining had seemed to her a golden chance. There was much about her from which he shrank; but she contrived to rouse his pity, and then to lure from him a promise which he would have despised himself not to keep.

The succeeding years had brought bitter mutual disappointments. Mrs. Twining had believed firmly in her husband's powers to sound the horn of luck and slay the giant of adversity. But he had done neither, and it now looked as if his bones were one day to bleach along the roadway to success. She became an austere grumbler, forever pricking her sweet-tempered lord with a tireless little bodkin of reproach. Her vulgarities had sharpened; her wit, always cruel and acute, had tipped itself with a harsher venom and fledged itself with a swifter feather; her bright, coarse beauty had dimmed and soured; she was at present a gaunt, elderly female, with square shoulders and hard, dark eyes, who flung sarcasms broadcast with a baleful liberality, and seemed forever standing toward her own destiny in the attitude of a person who has some large unsettled claim against a nefarious government.

Claire Twining, the one child who had been born of this ill-assorted marriage, was now nineteen years old. She bore a striking likeness to her father; she possessed his blue eyes, a trifle darker in shade, his broad white forehead, his sloping delicacy of visage, and his erect though slender frame. From him, too, had come the sunny quality of her smile, the gold tints in her chestnut hair, the fine symmetry of hands and feet. Rather from association than heredity she had caught his kindly warmth of manner; but in Claire the cordial impulse was far less spontaneous; she had her black list of dislikes, and she took people on trust with wary prudence. Here spoke her mother's share in the girl's being, as it spoke also in a certain distinct chiseling of every feature, that suggested a softened memento of Miss Jane Wray's girlish countenance, though Claire's coloring no more resembled her mother's of past time than wild-rose is like peony, or pastel like chromo. But there was one more maternal imprint set deep within this girl's nature, not to be thinned or marred by any stress of events, and productive of a trait whose development for good or ill is the chief cause that her life has here been chronicled. The birthright was a perilous one; it was a heritage of discontent; its tendency was perpetual longings for better environment, for ampler share in the world's good gifts, for higher place in its esteem and stronger claim to its heed. But what in her mother had been ambition almost as crudely eager as a boorish elbow-thrust, was in Claire more decorous and interesting, like the push of a fragile yet determined hand through a sullen crowd. In both cases the dissatisfaction was something that is peculiar to the woman of our land and time – a desire not to try and adorn the sphere in which she is born, but to try and reach a new sphere held as more suited for her own adornment. Yet Claire's restless yearning lacked the homely grossness of her mother's; it reflected a finer flash; it was not all cut from one piece; it had its subtlety, its enthusiasm, even its justification. It was not a mere stubborn hunger for advancement; it was a wish to gain advancement by the passport of proper worthiness. She did not want the air to lift her away from hated surroundings, but she wanted wings that would

turn the air her willing ally. It was what her father had made her that touched what her mother had made her with a truly poetic tenderness. By only a little prouder curve of the neck and a little happier fullness of the plume, we part the statuesque swan from considerably more commonplace kindred. Something like this delightful benison of difference had fallen upon Claire.

II

Circumstance, too, had fed the potency of this difference. Claire had not been reared like her mother. When she was nine years old her parents were living in a tiny brick house near the East River, among New York suburbs. But Claire had been sent to a small school near by, kept by a dim, worn lady, with an opulent past and a most precarious present. She had studied for three years under this lady's capable care, and had lost nothing by the opportunity. Her swift, apt mind had delighted her instructress, whose name was Mrs. Carmichael. Claire was remarkably receptive; she had acquired without seeming effort. Mrs. Carmichael was one of the many ladies who attempt the education of youth without either system or equipment for so serious a task. Her slight body, doubtless attenuated by recurring memories of a cherished past, would sometimes invisibly quake before Claire's precocious questionings. She knew all that she knew superficially, and she soon became fearful lest Claire should pierce, by a sort of adroit ignorance, her veneer of academic sham. She had a narrow little peaked face, of a prevailing pink hue, as though it were being always bathed in some kind of sunset light, like the rosy afterglow of her own perished respectability. Her nervous, alert head was set on a pair of sloping shoulders, and she wore its sparse tresses shaped into roulades and bandeaus which had an amateurish look, and seemed to imitate the deft handiwork of some long-departed tirewoman. She carried her small frame with erect importance. She was always referring to vanished friendships with this or that notability, but time and place were so ignored in these volunteered reminiscences as to make her allusions acquire a tender mythic grandeur. Claire had watched well her teacher's real and native elegance, and she had set this down as a solid fact. Perhaps the child had probed her many harmless falsities with equal skill. As for Mrs. Carmichael, she would sometimes pat her pupil on the cheek and praise her in no weak terms. "I wish that I had only known you a long time ago, my little lady," she would say, in her serene treble voice. "I would have brought you up as my own dear child, for I never had a child of my own. I would have given you a place in the world to be proud of, and have watched with interest the growth of your fine mental abilities, surrounded by those poor lost friends of mine who would have delighted in so clever a girl as you are."

"When you speak of your friends as lost, Mrs. Carmichael," Claire had once replied, "do you mean that they are all dead now?"

At this question the lady slowly shook her head, with just enough emphasis not to imperil the modish architecture of her locks.

"Some of them are dead, my dear," she murmured, with the least droop of each pink eyelid, "but the rest are much too grand for me at present. They have quite forgotten me." Here Mrs. Carmichael gave a quick, fluttered cough, and then put the tips of her close-pressed fingers to the edges of her close-pressed lips.

Claire privately thought them very churlish friends to have forgotten anybody so high-bred and winsome as Mrs. Carmichael. And she publicly expressed this thought at supper the same evening, while she sat with her parents in a small lower room opening directly off the kitchen. A weary maid, whose face flamed from the meal she had just cooked, was patiently serving it. Mrs. Twining, who had lent no light hand toward the Monday's washing, was in the act of distributing a somewhat meagre beefsteak, which fate and an incompetent range had conspired to cover on both sides with a layer of thick, sooty black. Mr. Twining was waiting to get a piece of the beefsteak; he did not yet know of its disastrous condition, for a large set of pewter casters reared its uncouth pyramid between himself and the maltreated viand; but although such calamities of cookery were not rare to his board, he was putting confidence, as usual, in the favors of fortune, and preparing himself blandly for a fresh little stroke of chagrin.

Outside it was midwinter dusk, and a bleak wind was blowing from the ice-choked river, pale and dull under the sharp stars. One-Hundred-and-Twelfth Street was in those years a much wilder

spot than now; its buildings, like its flag-stones, were capricious incidents; its boon of the elevated railroad was yet undreamed of by capitalists; you rode to it in languid horse-cars from the remote centres of commerce, upward past parapets of virgin rock where perched the hut of the squatter, or wastes of houseless highway where even the aspiring tavern had not dared to pioneer. Mr. Twining had just ridden hither by this laggard means, and he was tired and hungry; he wanted his supper, a little valued chat with his beloved Claire, and a caress or two from the child as well. After these he wanted a few hours of rest before to-morrow re-dawned, with its humdrum austerities. One other thing he desired, and this was a blessing more often desired than attained. He had the wish for a peaceful domestic interval, as regarded his wife's deportment, between home-coming and departure.

But to-night it had been otherwise decreed. Mrs. Twining's faint spark of innate warmth was never roused by the contact of suds. Monday was her day of wrath; you might almost have fancied that she had used a bit of her superfluous soap in vainly trying to rub the rust from her already tarnished hopes.

The small room where the trio sat was void of any real cheer. A pygmy stove, at one side of it, stood fuel-choked and nearly florid in hue. From this a strong volume of heat engulfed Mrs. Twining in its oppressive spell, but lost vigor before it reached her husband or Claire, and left the corners of the apartment so frigid that a gaunt sofa, off where the light of the big oil-lamp could only vaguely touch it, took upon its slippery hair-cloth surface the easy semblance of ice. Two windows, not fashioned to thwart the unwonted bitterness of the weather, were draped with nothing more resistant than a pair of canvas shades, gorgeously pictorial in the full light of day, when seen by the passer who seldom passed. These shades were of similar designs; in justice to Mrs. Twining it must be told that they had been rented with the house. On each a plumed gentleman in a gondola held fond converse with a disheveled lady in a balcony. The conception was no less Venetian in meaning than vicious in execution; but to-night, for any observant wayfarer, such presentments of sunny Italy, while viewed between blotches of wan frost that crusted the intervening panes, must have appeared doubly counterfeit. Still, the chief discomfort of the chamber, just at present, was a layer of brooding cold that lay along its floor, doggedly inexterminable, and the sole approach to regularity of temperature that its four walls contained.

It had made Claire gather up her feet toward the top rung of her chair, and shiver once or twice, but it had not chilled the pretty gayety of her childish talk, all of which had thus far been addressed to her father.

"And so you like Mrs. Carmichael, my dear?" Twining had said, in his smooth, cheerful voice. "Well, I am glad of that."

"Oh yes, I like her," replied Claire, with a slight, wise nod of her head, where the clear gold of youth had not yet given way to the brown-gold of maidenhood. "But I think it strange that all her fine friends have dropped off from her. That's what she told me to-day, Father; truly, she did! Why don't they care for her any more? Is it because she's poor and has to teach little dunces like me?"

Twining's feminine blue eyes scanned the rather dingy tablecloth for a moment. "I am afraid it is," he said, in a low voice, pressing between his fingers a bit of ill-baked bread that grew doughy at a touch.

Mrs. Twining ceased to carve the obdurate beefsteak, though still retaining her hold on the horn-handled knife and fork. She lifted her head so that it quite towered above the formidable group of casters, and looked straight at her husband.

"Don't put false notions into the child, Francis," she said, each word seeming to strike the next with a steely click. "You're always doing it. *You* know nothing of where that woman came from, or who she is."

Twining looked at his wife. His gaze was very mild. "I only know what she has told me, Jane," he said.

Mrs. Twining laughed and resumed the carving. Her laugh never went with a smile; it never had the least concern with mirth; it was nearly always a presage of irony, as an east wind will blow news of storm.

"Oh, certainly; what she's told you! That's you, all over! Suppose she'd told you she'd been Lady of the White House once. You wouldn't have believed her, not you! Of course not!"

"What is a Lady of the White House?" asked Claire, appealing to her father. She was perfectly accustomed to these satiric outbursts on her mother's part; they belonged to the home-circle; she would have missed them if they had ceased; it would have been like a removal of the hair-cloth sofa, or an accident to one of the lovers on the window-shades.

Twining disregarded this simple question, which was a rare act with him; he usually heard and heeded whatever Claire had to say.

"Please don't speak hard things of Mrs. Carmichael," he answered his wife. "She's really a person who has seen better days."

"Better days!" echoed Mrs. Twining. "Well, then, we ought to shake hands. *I* think she's just *the* plainest humbug I ever saw, with her continual brag about altered circumstances. But I'll take your word for it, Francis. The next time I see her I'll tell her we're fellow-unfortunates. We'll compare our 'better days' together, and calc'late who's seen the most."

Twining gave a faint sigh, and looked down. Then he raised his eyes again, and a new spark lit their mildness. Something to-night had made him lack his old patient tolerance.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Carmichael would have much the longer list," he said.

"Oh, you think so!"

"I know so."

Mrs. Twining tossed her head. The gloss was still on her dark hair, whose gray threads had yet to come, later, in the Greenpoint days. She was still, as the phrase goes, a fine figure of a woman. Her black eyes had not lost their fire, nor her form its imposing fullness. She raised herself a little from her chair, as she now spoke, and in her voice there was the harshness that well fitted her bristling, aggressive mien.

"Oh! you *know* so, do you?" she said, in hostile undertone. Then her next words were considerably louder. "But *I* happen to know, Francis Twining, *Es*quire, who and what *I* was when you took me from a comfortable home to land me up here at the end of the world, where I'm lucky if I can get hold of yesterday's newspaper to-morrow, and cross over to the cars without leaving a shoe behind me in the mud!"

The least flush had tinged Twining's pale cheeks. He had looked very steadily at his wife all through this speech. And when he now spoke, his voice made Claire start. It did not seem his.

"You were a poor girl in a third-rate boarding-house, when I married you," he said. "And the boarding-house was kept by relatives who disliked and wanted to be rid of you. I don't see how you have fallen one degree lower since you became my wife. But if you think that you have so fallen, I beg that you will not forever taunt me with idle sneers, of which I am sick to the soul!"

Mrs. Twining rose from her chair. Her dress was of some dark-red stuff, and as the stronger light struck its woof the wrath of her knit brows seemed to gain a lurid augment. She had grown pale, and a little mole, just an inch or so to the left of her assertive nose, had got a new clearness from this cause. She did not speak, at first, to her husband. She addressed the fatigued and heated maid, who waited to hand Twining his share of the doleful beefsteak – in this case a true burnt-offering.

"You can go into the kitchen, Mary Ann," she said, with tones that had a kind of rumble, like the beginning of a large thunder-peal, before its threat has become fury. "See to the range, you know. Dump all the coal out, and then sift it."

Mary Ann went uneasily toward the door. She understood that this order thinly masked a bluff command for her absence. Mrs. Twining slowly turned her head, and followed the poor factotum

with her kindled black eyes till she had quitted the room. Then she looked with stern directness at her husband.

"I've stood a good deal from you," she said, pitching her voice in a much shriller key, "but I ain't going to stand *this*, Francis Twining, and it's time I told you so."

Twining rose. He did not look at all angry. There was a weary distress on his face, mixed with an unhabitual firmness.

"What have you stood?" he asked.

"Being browbeat by you, sir, because I see fit to talk out my mind, and ain't the weak-spirited goose you'd like to have me!" retorted Mrs. Twining, all rage and outcry.

"I don't want a quarrel," said Twining, calm as marble. "God knows I don't, Jane! But the time has come for me to speak plainly. I have never browbeaten you. It has been quite the opposite. I have already borne too much from you for the sake of peace. But no peace springs from that course. So now I mean to try another. You and I must live apart, since we can't agree." He turned to Claire, at this point, and reached out one hand, resting it on the girl's head. "Let our child choose which of us she will go with," he added.

Claire started up, sprang to her father's side, and nestled herself against him, catching one of his hands in both her own and drawing his arm about her neck. She was trembling with what seemed sudden fear as she looked up into his face.

"Father," she cried, "I'll go with *you*! I couldn't live alone with Mother. If *you* go, take me with you! Promise – please promise! Mother isn't good to me a bit. I couldn't live alone with her! She is cross nearly all the time, when you're not here, and she struck me yesterday, and she often does it, and I didn't ever tell you before, because I knew it would trouble you so to know!"

These words were spoken in a high, pleading, plaintive voice. The child's sad little secret had been wrung from her by sheer terror of desertion. There was no accusative resentment in her tones; she might have gone on for a long time hiding the truth; it had leapt to her lips now only in the shape of an impetuous argument against the dreaded chance of being left behind, should her father's menace of departure become fact. Mrs. Twining moved from her own side of the table to where her husband and daughter stood. She looked persistently at Claire, during this action, and had soon drawn very close to her.

"You sly young vixen!" she exclaimed. Her cry had a husky note, and she raised one hand. It was plain that she meant wicked work to Claire. Twining pushed Claire behind him, quick as thought, and seized his wife's hand while it fell. He had grown white to the lips. His clasp was not weak about the wrist which he still retained. He did not appear at all like a man in a passion, but rather like one filled with the resolve which gets new sinew from excitement.

"You shall never strike that child again." Then he released his wife's wrist, and half turned, putting his arms round Claire, while she again nestled at his side. "I will do all I can for you," he went on, "but neither she nor I shall live with you after to-morrow. It was bad enough to have you make things hard for me, but you shan't spoil her with your own coarseness." The next moment he turned to Claire, wrapped her still more fervently in both arms, and kissed her twice or thrice on the uplifted forehead.

Mrs. Twining stood quite still, for a short while. She was watching her husband intently. Something new in him had revealed itself to her; it blunted the edge of her anger; she was unprepared for it. Personal defiance in Twining might merely have quickened her own long-petted sense of grievance, which had grown morbidly dear, as we know. But a fresh experience fronted her; she found herself repelled, so to speak, by the revolt of an insulted fatherhood.

It was a very serious rebellion, and she felt its force. Past concessions from her husband gave the measure of his present mutiny. He had never been humble to her, but he had yielded, and she had grown more used than she realized to his pliant complaisance. This abrupt change shocked her with an actual fright. Her ready little body-guard of taunts and innuendoes fled her usual summons.

The despot stood deserted; not a janizary was left. She saw, in quick, startled perspective, her own future, uncompanioned by the man whose supporting nearness her bitter gibes had so often slighted. But apart from merely selfish causes, a thrill of human regard for her child and the father of her child lent fresh accent to alarm. It was like the tremor wrought in a slack harp-string, or one rusty with disuse, but it was still a definite vibration.

She succumbed awkwardly, like most overthrown tyrants. Tears would have looked incongruous had they left the chill black of her eyes, just as there are climes of so fixed a rigor that thaws rank in them as phenomena. But her brows met in a perplexed frown that had no trace of ire, and she made a flurried upward gesture with both hands, receding several steps. When she spoke, which she promptly did, her native idiom forgot the slight garb of change that marriage and nicer association had lent it, and stood forth, stripped by agitation, in graceless nudity.

"Mercy me, Francis!" she exclaimed, "you ain't talking as if you was a sane man at all! You'll quit your lawful wife, sir, 'cause she's boxed her own young one's ears? Why, that child can put on the airs of any six, when she's a mind to. I ain't punished her half enough. Do set down and eat your supper and stop bein' a fool!"

These chronicled words have the effect of rather bald commonplace it is true; but to the man and the child who heard them an apprehensive whimper, a timorous dilation of the eyeball and a flurried quiver about the severe mouth were accompaniments that held piercing significance. Such tokens from their domestic autocrat meant surrender, and surrender was hard for both Twining and Claire to join with past impressions of rule and sway, of command and observance, from the very source which now gave forth their direct opposites.

Both father and daughter still remained silent. Claire's head was still nestling against his breast; Twining's arms still clasped her slight frame, as before. Neither spoke. But Mrs. Twining soon spoke again, and she moved toward the door as she did so.

"Oh, you won't set down, eh?" she inquired; and there was now a sullen fright both in her manner and tone. "Very well. P'raps you'll eat your supper when I'm gone. I've always heard crazy people must be humored. Besides 'tisn't safe, with so many knives and forks round."

After that she left the room, going up stairs into the little hall above the basement, where she could have seen her breath freeze if economic reasons had not kept the lank, pendant gas-burner still unlighted.

She had beaten a positive retreat. Her exit had been a distinct concession. Twining turned his gaze toward the vacant threshold after she had passed it, as if he could not just realize the unwonted humility of her leave-taking.

"Claire," he said, again kissing the child, while she yet clung to him, "you should have told me before that your mother struck you. You should have told me the first time she did it." He embraced her still more closely. Since she was a baby he had always treasured her, and now that defeat and disappointment dealt him such persistent strokes, his love grew deeper with each disastrous year. Claire's presence in his life had gained a precious worth from trouble; it was the star that brightened with sweeter force against a deepening gloom.

He leaned down and slowly passed his lips along her silky hair, just where its folds flowed off from one pale temple. "Oh, my little girl," he said, in a voice whose volume and feeling had both plainly strengthened, "I hope that happy days are in store for you! I shall do my best, darling, but if I fail don't blame me. Don't blame me!"

He appeared no longer to be addressing Claire. He had lifted his head. Both his arms engirt her as previously, but his eyes, looking straight before him, were sombre with meditation.

Claire gazed up into his face. "Father," she cried, "I shall be happy if I am always with you! Don't look like that. Please don't. What does it mean? I have never seen you so sad before. It frightens me. Father, you are so strange and different." He smiled down at the child as her high, pained appeal ended; but the smile soon fled again; a gloomy agitation replaced it. She felt his clasping arms tremble.

"You cannot always have me," he answered. "I love you very much, my little one, but some day I must leave you; my time will have come, and it may come while your life is yet in its first flower. Then I want you to be wiser than I. Listen to what I say. I am in a dark humor now, but it will soon pass, for I can't help being cheerful, as you know; there's a good deal more sun than shadow in me. But just now I am all shadow. I feel as if I should never be successful, Claire. That is a queer word to your young ears. Do you recollect, when I took you for that one day to the country, last summer, how we set out to climb the large hill, and were sure, at starting, that we should reach its top? But half way up we grew tired and hot; there was no breeze, and the way was rough; so we sat down, didn't we, and rested, and then went home? You have not forgotten? Well, success means to do what you set out for, darling. It means to climb the hill – not to get tired and go home. That is what everybody is trying to do. But only a few of us ever reach the top. And to reach the top means to have many good things – to be like the grand people who were once Mrs. Carmichael's friends. Do you understand, Claire?"

"Yes," said the child. Her lips were parted. A gloom had clouded the blue of her eyes; they seemed almost black, and two unwonted gleams pierced them. She was alarmed yet fascinated by the real sorrow in her father's look, and by his unfamiliar speech, with its fervent speed and bitter ring.

"I shall never gain the top of the hill, Claire!" Twining went on. "Something tells me so now – to-night. To-morrow I shall be changed. I shall turn hopeful again. I shall go climbing along, and pick myself up stoutly if I stumble. But remember what I tell you to-night. In my heart, little girl, there is a great fear. I am afraid I must leave you, when I do die, poor and helpless. We are always helpless when we are poor. But you must not lose courage. There is one thing a girl can always do if she has beauty and wit, and you will have both. She can marry. In the years of life left to me, I shall strain hard to make you a lady. I am a gentleman. My father, and his father, and his father, too, were all gentlemen. It is in your blood to be a lady, and a lady you shall be. But your mother" – Here he paused. Even his raw sense of wrong, and the precipitate reasoning native to all passion, forbade his completing the last sentence.

"I know what you mean, Father," said Claire, who had not lost the significance of a word, and whose mind would have grasped subtler discourse than the present. She spoke falteringly, and turned her eyes toward the deserted table; and then, with her shaken, tragic little voice, she lapsed into the prose of things, slipping over that edge between the emotional and the ordinary whose unwilling junction makes the clash that we like to call comedy.

"Father," she said, "please sit down and eat your supper. It's getting cold. Please do!"

This is not at all an index of Claire's thoughts, for they were then in a storm of dread and misgiving; but she shrank from the changed aspect of one known and loved in moods widely different. She seized, as if by a fond instinct, the most ready means of re-securing her father as she had at first found him and had always afterward prized him.

But her attempt was vain. Twining's arms only tightened about her frail form. Like all with whom outburst is rare, his perturbation worked toward a climax; it would brook no repression. There are craters that keep the peace for many decades, but in spite of that their stored lava will not be cheated of the eruptive chance.

So it was with Twining. He trembled more than ever, and his cheeks were now quite hueless. "I want you to do all that I shall leave undone, Claire!" he exclaimed, with voluble swiftness. "I want you to conquer a high place among men and women. Be cool and wary, my daughter. Don't live to serve self only, but push your claims, enforce your rights, refuse to be thrust back, never make false steps, put faith in the few and doubt the many. Remember what I am saying. You will need to recall it, for you must start (God help you, little one!) with all the world against you! Yes, all the world against you" …

A sudden gasp ended Twining's words. His embrace of Claire relaxed, and he staggered toward the sofa, which was just behind him. As he sank upon it, his eyes closed and his head fell sideways. One hand fluttered about his throat, and he seemed in straits for breath. Claire was greatly terrified.

She thought that to be death which was merely a transient pause of vitality. The rough gust will bow the frailer tree, and Twining, weary in mind and body, had made too abrupt drafts upon a temperament far from robust.

The child uttered a piercing cry. It summoned the proscribed Mary Ann from exile in the neighboring kitchen; it was heard and heeded by Mrs. Twining, aloof in some remoter chamber. Yet, before either had reached the scene of Claire's disquietude, her father had already pressed the warm hand which sought his cold one, and had looked at her with a gaze that wore the glow of recognition.

"Claire," he soon said, brokenly, and with faint utterance, "I – I was unwell for a moment – that is all. Here, little girl, kiss me, and then give me a glass of water."

"Yes, Father," said Claire. Her response showed a joyous relief. She knelt beside him, and put her lips to his. It was like the good-night kiss she always gave him, except that she made it longer than of old. And then she rose to get the glass of water, hearing footsteps approach.

As she poured the liquid, with unsteady fingers, a partial echo of her father's impetuous enjoinder swept through her mind. "I shall never forget this night," she told herself. Her silent prophecy proved true. She never did forget.

III

Twining's menace was not carried out. There was no actual reconciliation between husband and wife, and yet matters slowly rearranged themselves. The domestic machinery, being again set moving, went at first in a lame, spasmodic way, as though jarred and strained through all its wheel-work. But by degrees the old order of things returned. And yet a marked change, in one respect at least, was always afterward evident. Mrs. Twining had received a clear admonition, and she was discreet enough permanently to regard it. She still dealt in her former slurs and innuendoes; the leopard could not change its spots; no such radical reformation was naturally to be expected. But Twining had put forth his protest; he had shown very plainly that his endurance had its limits, and through all the years that followed, his wife never lost sight of this vivid little fact. She had been seriously frightened, and the fright left its vibration of warning as long as she and her husband dwelt under the same roof. Her sting had by no means been extracted, but its point was blunter and its poison less irritant. She never again struck Claire. She was sometimes very imperious to her daughter, and very acrimonious as well. But in her conduct there was now a sombre acknowledgment of curtailed authority, – an under-current of concession, occasionally rather faint, it is true, yet always operative.

During the next year the family deserted One-Hundred-and-Twelfth Street for a new place of abode. Twining received a few extra hundreds as earnest of shadowy thousands promised him by a glib-tongued rogue who was to appall the medical world with a wondrous compound that must soon rob half the diseases known to pathology of their last terrors. The elixir was to be "placed handsomely on the market," and toward this elegant enterprise poor Twining gave serious aid. For the lump of savings that went from him, however, he was paid only a tithe of his rash investment. One day he learned that the humane chemist had fled from the scene of his proposed benignities, and a little later came the drear discovery that his miraculous potion was merely an unskillful blending of two or three common specifics with as many popular nervines.

Meanwhile the halcyon promise of bettered fortunes had induced Twining to secure easier quarters. For several months he set his household gods within apartments on the second floor of a shapely brownstone residence in a central side-street. This was really a decisive move toward greater social importance. The very tone of his upholstery bespoke a distinct rise in life. There was not a hair-cloth sofa in his pretty suite of chambers. The furniture was tufted and modish; one or two glowing grates replaced the dark awkwardness of stoves; draughts were an abolished evil; to sup on burnt beefsteak had grown a shunned memory, since the family now dined at six o'clock each evening in a lower room, where they had a small table all to themselves, and ate a repast served in courses with a distinct air of fashion, if not always cooked after the loftier methods. Here they met other groups at other small tables, and bowed to them with the bland nod of co-sharers in worldly comfort. It was all a most noteworthy change for the Twinings, and its effect upon Mrs. Twining was no less obvious than acute. She seemed to clutch the new favors of fate with a mingled greed and distrust. She was like one who crushes thirstily between his lips a luscious fruit, won by theft, and thought to be watched with the intent of quick seizure.

She had already quite lost faith in anything like the permanence of her husband's good fortune. "I'd better make hay while the sun shines," she would exclaim, with a burst of laughter that had, as usual, no touch of mirth in it. "Lord knows when it'll end. I'm sure I hope never. Don't think I'm croaking. Gracious me, no! But even the Five Points won't seem so bad, after this. They say every dog has his day, don't they, Francis? So, all right; if mine's a short day, I'll be up and doing while it lasts."

She was undoubtedly up and doing. She carried her large frame with a more assertive majesty; she aired one or two fresh gowns with a loud ostentation; she had a little quarrel with a fellow-lodger of her own sex about the prevailing fashion in bonnets, and said so many personal things during the contest that her adversary, who was a person with nerves, retired in tearful disarray. On more than one

Sunday morning she induced her husband to walk with her along Fifth Avenue and "see the churches come out." At such times she would lean upon his arm, grandly indifferent to the fact that her stature overtopped his own, and stare with her severe black eyes at all the passing phases of costume. It is probable that the pair made a very grotesque picture on these occasions, since all that implied refinement in the man's face and demeanor must have acquired a fatal stamp of insignificance beside the woman's pretension of carriage and raw spruceness of apparel. But Mrs. Twining was making her hay, as she has told us, while the sun shone, and it is hardly strange that she should not be critical as to the exact quality of her crop. A good deal of rough experience in the woes of dearth and drouth had, naturally, not made her a fastidious harvester.

Claire, meanwhile, had begun to feel as if she dwelt on quite a new sort of planet. Her environment had lost every trace of its former dullness. Its neutral shades had freshened into brilliant and exciting tints. Little Mrs. Carmichael, with her hoard of memories stowed away like old brocades in a scented chest, had herself faded off into a memory as dim as these. Claire had of late become one of the pupils in a large, well-reputed school, where she met girls of all ages and characters, but seemingly of only a single social rank. The academy was superintended by a magnificent lady in chronic black corded-silk, whose rich rustle was heard for a half minute before she entered each of her various class-rooms and held bits of whispered converse with the instructresses under her serene sway. Her name was Mrs. Arcularius, and its fine rhythmical polysyllable seemed to symbolize the dignity of its owner's slow walk, the majesty of her arched nose and gold eye-glasses, and the white breadth of her forehead, from which the gray tresses were rolled backward in high solidness, with quite a regal effect of hair-dressing. This lady was the direct contra-type of Mrs. Carmichael. It was widely recorded of her that she had once been a gentlewoman of independent wealth, had chanced upon adverse times, and had for this reason become the proprietress of a school. But she had made her grand friends pay the penalty of her misfortunes; she had acquired the skill of using them as an advertisement of her venture at self-support. She had not gone up to One-Hundred-and-Twelfth Street and mourned their loss; she had stayed in Twenty-Third Street, and suffered their children, little and big, to come unto her. She had at first graciously allowed herself to be pitied for her reverses, but she had always possessed the art of handing back their patronage to those who proffered it, in the wholly altered form of a gracious condescension from herself. This is a very clever thing to do; it is a thing which they alone know how to do who know how to fall from high places with a self-saving rebound; and Mrs. Arcularius, who was a decidedly ignorant woman, was also a marvelously clever one. She knew rather less, in a strictly educational sense, than poor, unsuccessful Mrs. Carmichael. She had been a friend of Mrs. Carmichael's in the latter's gladsome days, but she was now not even aware that her old associate was teaching school anywhere. Everybody was aware, on the other hand, that Mrs. Arcularius was teaching school, and just where she was teaching it. Poverty had crushed one; it had stimulated the other. Mrs. Arcularius was now exceedingly particular as regarded her visiting-book. She was a conspicuous figure at the most select receptions. Whether the fact that she presided over a fashionable school had made her lose caste or no, she chose secretly to believe that it had, and for this reason let her voluminous black silk robes rustle only in the most irreproachable assemblages.

She greatly desired that her pupils should all bear the sacred sign of aristocratic parentage. She did not object to the offspring of struggling plutocrats; for she was wise in her generation, and had seen more than one costly-laden camel squeeze itself through a needle's eye straight into the kingdom of the blessed. But she had strong objections to having her school lose tone. Above all things, this was her dread and abhorrence.

And therefore she had been covertly distressed by the application of Twining for his daughter's admission. She had "placed" him before he had spoken three words to her. She always "placed" with equal speed everybody whom she met for the first time. He was a decayed foreigner, and she abominated decayed foreigners. He was a person who wanted to make his common little daughter profit by the prestige of her establishment, and she had a like distaste for all persons of this class. She

looked at Claire's attire, and inwardly shivered. The girl had on a frock cut and trimmed in a way that struck her observer as positively satanic. The lovely natural wave of her hair had been tortured by her mother into long ringlets, made sleek and firm under the stiffening spell of sugar-and-water, and pendant about her shoulders with a graceless vertical primness. But the head and front of the poor child's offending was, in the sight of her new critic, a hat which Mrs. Twining esteemed a triumph of taste, which she had bought as a great bargain the day before, and which was half-smothered, from crown to brim, in small white roses, each bearing a little movable glass bead that was meant to imitate a dew-drop.

Mrs. Arcularius decided, however, to receive Claire as one of her pupils. There had been a falling-off, of late, in their list. A good many sweet girl-graduates had gone off at her last commencement day. Besides, it was absurd to suppose that any flock could be kept from an incidental black sheep or so. More than this, there was a fascinating intelligence about Claire's face, with its two dark-blue stars of eyes, and a musical sorcery in the child's timid tones when she spoke, that no *diablerie* of millinery could dispel.

It soon proved that Claire's fellow-scholars were far from sharing this latter opinion. She was received among them with haughty coolness, varied by incidental giggles. She suffered three days of silent torture, and at their end told her father, in a passion of tears, that he must take her away from Mrs. Arcularius's school. The girls there all despised her and laughed at her; hardly one of them had yet even spoken to her; they seemed to think her beneath them; it was horrible; she could not stand it; it was just as if she had some disease and they were all afraid of catching it from her.

"There is one girl," sobbed Claire, with her arms round her father's neck and her head on his dear, kindly breast, "that I know I shall slap or throw something at if I stay. She has red hair and very white skin, with little freckles all over it, and she is quite fat. She wears a different dress every day, and it's always something handsome but queer to look at… I heard her tell another girl that all her clothes came from Paris. She brings two bananas for lunch, and long cakes spread over with chocolate, that spirt out something soft and yellow, like custard, when she bites into them, and soil her fingers… Well, Father, that girl sits near me, and she is always making fun of me behind my back, and whispering things about me to the others that make them burst out laughing and watch me from the corners of their eyes… Of course this is only at recess, but at all times, Father, I can feel how they are thinking that I have no right, no business among them… And perhaps I haven't. Oh, Father, I want to be a lady as much as you want me to be one, but … isn't there some other way of learning how? If you'll only take me from that dreadful place, I'll … I'll go anywhere else you please!"

Indignant, yet pierced with sympathy for his darling, Twining promised her that she should go back no more to Mrs. Arcularius's.

Claire kissed him, and then put her wet cheek against his. But an instant later she lifted her head. She had thought of her mother, who was paying one of their fellow-boarders a visit that evening, and at this very moment was stating to her hostess, with a sort of saturnine braggadocio, that Claire's new school "ought to be a regular first-class one, and no mistake, for it was going to cost a regular first-class kind of a price."

"But Mother?" said Claire, in anxious query, "what will *she* say, Father?"

"Never mind what your mother will say, my dear," answered Twining, in his gentle undertone. And Claire remembered a certain night in One-Hundred-and-Twelfth Street, – a night which she had never really forgotten, as we know, and whose incident was fated sharply to revisit her through many an eventful year yet unlived.

But Claire's tears were scarcely dried before she regretted the promise won from her father, and asked him to revoke it. Her young face looked pale and resolute as she did so. Her brief burst of weakness had passed. The ambition to seize and hold any near means of advancement was already no weak impulse in her youthful being. As it afterward struck the great key-note of her life, and became

the source of every discord or harmony which that life was to contain, so now its force had begun to stir secret centres and to prelude the steady influence which must soon impel and sway her.

"Let me try a little while longer, Father," she said, standing near him and holding his hand. Her head was slightly thrown backward; her mouth was grave and firm. She was so slender and fragile that this solemn mood might have made one think, as he regarded her, of a lily that had found some art to cast aside its droop, while all its lightsome traits of stem or petal still remained.

"Yes, I mean it, Father," she continued, with a very deep seriousness. "I have begun to climb the hill, and I shan't get tired so soon and sit down to rest. You told me I must not, and I won't. I do not want to sit down at all until I shall reach the top… But you can help me, if you will; you can make it easier for me." She pressed his hand. "*Will* you make it easier, Father?" she said.

"Yes!" he answered. He spoke the word without knowing what she meant. He could have spoken no other at this moment, with her eyes fixed on him like that, and her clinging hand tense about his own. He loved her so well that he would have faced any peril to save her from any harm. She was his cheer, his pride, his hope, his happiness. He thought her the most beautiful little girl in all the world. He had forgotten to tell himself that her mother made her look a guy in seeking to make her more pretty. To him she was always his innocent, blameless idol – his Claire, whom he had named after his own dead mother, known only in the idealizing years of early childhood. He never looked into her face without feeling his heart beat a trifle quicker. He had been in love with her from the time when he first held her, a new-born baby, and he was in love with her still. It was a love which had the best glow and thrill of those dramatic passions that make our tales, our tragedies, and our epics, only that by absence of the one fevered sentiment knit and kinned with these, it so gained in purity and unselfishness as to strip from all hint of over-praise the holier epithet of divine.

Naturally enough came Twining's afterthought.

"What is it that I can do for you, Claire?" he asked. "How *can* I make it easier?"

"In this way, Father. Listen. I want to dress differently at school. I want to wear another frock – I know which one – I am afraid you wouldn't recollect which it is if I told you. But it is not the pink merino which I have on now. Pink merino is not nice. And my new hat with the white roses is not nice, either. I didn't think of this till I noticed how the other girls dressed at Mrs. Arcularius's. Then I remembered that mine was something very like the style in which Mrs. Halloran used to dress her little girl, Bridget, every Sunday. You do recollect Mrs. Halloran, don't you Father? Her husband used to work on one of the Harlem boats, and they lived down near the river in that small red house, and there was a bee-hive in the garden, and a horrid bull-dog that used to jump out of his kennel if he heard the least noise, and bark so, and try to break his chain. But little Bridget used to have pink kid shoes, though, to match her dress, and very proud they made her. And her hair was curled in that stiff way, just as Mother curls mine. Now, Father, I want you to let me brush all the curl out of my hair except what it has of its own free choice, and to let me just tie it in a bunch behind with a dark ribbon, and to let me wear my brown bonnet, which is rather shabby, perhaps, though I don't mind that. And if Mother cares to buy me anything new, I want you to go with us – say some Saturday evening when the stores keep open – and to let me use my own taste in choosing quiet and pretty things. But that will be afterward. I'd like you to think, just now, only about to-morrow, you know. I'd like" – But there Twining stopped her with a kiss. He was smiling, but his eyes were moist.

"You shan't dress like little Bridget Halloran any longer, Claire, darling," he said. "I'll see to it as soon as your mother returns."

He kept his word. When Mrs. Twining reappeared he sent Claire out of the room. She knew a storm was coming; she was glad to be away while it broke and raged. She went as far away as possible, into her own bedroom, two chambers off, closing the intermediate doors. Once, while waiting here, she heard the smothered sound of a high, wrathful voice. It was her mother's, no doubt. But she knew that however hot the conflict, her father had made up his mind to be victor.

And he was. The next day Claire went to Mrs. Arcularius's without her white roses or her pink merino.

"You look for all the world like a charity-child," her mother said to her, in gruff leave-taking. "Still, I don't s'pose it matters any. You might as well practice for a short spell beforehand."

Claire's altered raiment produced an immense sensation among her classmates. Even several of the teachers showed signs of surprise. The new plainness of her attire brought out her unquestioned beauty, as gaudier and ill-blended vestments had before marred and obscured it. The back-drawn effect of her chestnut tresses, which were still streaked here and there with sunny threads, could not be doubted as charming even by the most prejudiced caviler. Her brow and temples were shown in their full purity of moulding, and the eyes beneath them gained poetic tenderness from this lovely exposure. She was not yet a girl clothed at all after the dainty manner of the girls about her, but she was at least no longer spoiled and hampered by unbecoming and vulgar garments. Everybody felt this promptly, and Claire herself soon recognized, by an intuition which always stood vassal to her singularly quick perceptions, that everybody had felt it.

This was to be a memorable day with her. It may seem trivial to employ so august a term when dealing with one yet on the threshold of our truly vital episodes, but, after all, there is a reality about the chagrins and victories of childhood which is none the less potent while both exist because both must shortly drop into shadow before harsher pangs and warmer transports. Claire had resolved to be a kind of miniature heroine if occasion should ask her to play that part; and she had a conviction, based on very fair grounds of reasoning, that some such demand might be made of her before the school-exercises for that day should reach their end.

Nor was she wrong. The recitations began, and were continued under various teachers until the twelve o'clock recess. Claire had suffered hitherto from the embarrassments of her surroundings, as regarded any frank assertion of what she knew and just how she knew it. But to-day she had conquered embarrassment; she was on her mettle, as the phrase goes; it was the main aim of her meditated plan to let herself be browbeaten in no particular, and the excitement born of this resolve had put her best faculties into nimble readiness.

Her understanding was of the quality beloved by instructors; it had a prehensile trait; it seized things and clung to them. The alarm of Mrs. Carmichael lest her pupil should unmask her elegant deficiencies had been no unfounded one. This lady's tuition of Claire had been but a series of suggestions, each of which the girl had rapidly tracked to its lair of remoter truth. Mrs. Carmichael had pointed her the path – quite often, it must be owned, with a somewhat faltering finger – and she had glided whither it led at a pace no less swift than secure. This was especially true of the French language, for which her aptitude was phenomenal, and which, under new conditions of instruction, she soon almost mastered. As a matter of mere fact, she had been placed, at present, among her inferiors in knowledge. She was much more advanced than the class of superb young misses who had wounded her with their callow disdain. And to-day she made this tellingly evident. Her answers came placid, self-assured, unhesitating. She sat, all through the morning, with hands folded together in her lap, and with looks that paid no seeming heed to any of her associates. Some of them were extremely stupid. They gave stammering responses, or rattled off the wrong thing with fatal glibness, or preserved that stolid silence which is the most naked candor of ignorance. The freckled girl, who ate bananas, cut an especially dull figure. Through some novel freak of parental indulgence she had been permitted to wear, this morning, a ring of clustered sapphires and diamonds, very beautiful and precious; and this she turned and re-turned, while puckering her forehead, whenever a question was put to her, as though the fair bauble might prove talismanic and show her some royal road out of learning's tangled mazes. No one appeared to think her replies particularly blundering or fatuous. Her ring, and her last new Parisian gown, and the luxurious prospect of her approaching lunch, seemed to invest even her weak wit with prestige. Claire felt it to be somehow in the air that this maiden's mental poverty should receive nothing except respectful sympathy from her fellows. Fortune does not

shower every known gift on one favorite; that seemed to be tacitly understood. When she floundered in a French verb, or came to dire grief in compound fractions, the imbecility provoked no laughter; it bore a sort of gilded pardonableness, like the peccadillo of a princess.

When recess came, Claire had distinguished herself. Everybody was convinced that her powers of mind were much above the common. Two of the teachers, both ladies of gentle bearing and kindly disposition, came to her side, and cheered her with a few words of complimentary encouragement. The grand Mrs. Arcularius did not come; she was elsewhere, in her elegant little reception-room; she had not yet heard of her new pupil's handsome exploits. But if she had already heard of them she would have paid Claire no congratulations. Good scholarship, she would have argued, with splendid egotism, was in this case a form of gratitude to which she was of course amply entitled, since she had allowed Twining the honor of seeing her autograph on his daughter's future receipted bills.

During the first portion of the recess hour Claire ate her modest lunch, choking it down with strong reluctance. But one teacher now remained in the large class-room, and she was closely occupied in the examination of some written exercises. The girls were gathered here and there, among the files of desks, in whispering groups. They were all discussing Claire; she herself knew it; an instinct told her so. She was very much excited, but outwardly quite calm. The girls no longer stared at her; not a single giggle now broke the air; they had been impressed, startled, and perhaps a little awed as well; their pariah had turned out a sort of notability; she had clad herself in a sudden armor of cool defiance against impudence. They might have regarded her lately-revealed endowments as a queerness collateral with the eccentric quality of her clothing. But the pink robe, the brittle-looking curls, the beflowered hat, had vanished and left them no chance for such associative ridicule. There had been a transformation, abrupt and baffling. Claire was not going to be their butt; of this there was no doubt; she must either be accepted as an equal, or avoided as an inferior; she could no longer hold the position of a target for their covert raillery.

The freckled girl, of the sumptuous mid-day meal, however, preserved opposite opinions. Her name was Ada Gerrard, and her family was one of great wealth and distinction. Her elder sister, a mindless blonde with creamy skin and exuberant figure, had made a notable English marriage, having wedded no less a potentate than the young Marquis of Monogram, heir of a renowned ducal house. Miss Ada was a leader in her way, and she felt keenly disappointed by the unforeseen turn of affairs. She had anticipated prodigious fun out of the new scholar. She was by nature cruel and arrogant, and she was now affected as some feline creature that has been cheated of the prey it has meant to maul and maim.

Her reddish-hazel eyes, that showed so little white as to look like two large beads of clouded amber, and were fringed with scant lashes of lighter red, kept up a persistent scrutiny of Claire. She was sitting not far away from the latter, who caught, now and then, a waft of the delicate violet perfume which exhaled from her fine foreign apparel. She was occupied with her epicurean repast, whose dainties she devoured with a solemn gluttony; but this did not prevent her from keeping up a little fusillade of whispers to a friend on whom she had bestowed one or two bites of luscious cake as a mark of peculiar clemency.

The converse was at first low-toned. Claire had finished her brief refreshment. She had opened a book, and maintained at least the semblance of being engaged in its contents. Suddenly she heard Ada Gerrard speak these words, in a voice lifted above her former key, though doubtless meant solely for her companion's ears:

"I don't care *how* much she knows. She's a common little thing, and *I* wouldn't notice her if she got on her knees and begged me to."

Claire waited a few seconds, with head lowered above her book. She trembled while she so waited. The tremor was half from anger, half from intimidation. She felt, in every fibre of her being, the coarseness of this speech, but through her sensitive soul had shot a pang of false shame, dealt by the piercing sense of contrast between her own humble state and the probable grandeur and comfort

of life which had fed Ada Gerrard's present superciliousness. But anger conquered. She ceased to tremble, and closed her book. Then she rose, quietly, and faced her classmate. It may have been that the generations of gentlewomen from which, on her father's side, she had sprung, helped to nerve and steady her now; since the primal source of all aristocracy is a cogent self-assertion, and those races alone gain heights overbrowing their kind whose first founders have had the will and vigor to push forward resisted claims.

Everybody saw her rise. It flashed through the little throng, in an instant, that something had spurred her into a course of retaliation. At least fifteen pairs of eager eyes were leveled upon her pale face. But she regarded Ada Gerrard only; and when she spoke, with enough clearness to be heard in all parts of the room, her first words were addressed strictly to that special offender.

"You say that you will not notice me," Claire began, "and yet you say it so loudly that I can hear you, and thus you very plainly contradict yourself; or, in other words, you try to attract my attention by speaking a falsehood."

Here she paused. A dead silence ensued. Many bewildered looks were exchanged. The presiding teacher stopped her task, and sat with a gaze of puzzled alarm fixed upon this resolute young combatant. Ada Gerrard flushed crimson, and ceased to discuss her savory confections.

Claire's voice quivered as she now proceeded, but she quickly controlled this perturbed sign: "I do not think there is much chance of my begging you on my knees to notice me," she said. "But I might be tempted to take such a way of begging that you would try and help me to forget, as long as I remain here, how I have had the ill-luck of being thrown near anyone so unkind, so impudent, and so vulgar as yourself."

Ada Gerrard sprang to her feet as the last calm word sounded from Claire's lips. She had clenched both of her plump hands, and there was a wrathful scowl on her face. Several titters were heard from her companions; they seemed to sting her; it was impossible for her to fail in perceiving that she had met an adversary of twice her own prowess. She knew to which side the sympathy had veered; all her imposing superiority in the way of dress, of diet, of home-splendor, of titled kindred, were momentarily as nothing beside Claire's placid antagonism. She was only an ugly girl in an ugly rage, who had behaved insolently and been rebuked with justice; while Claire, pale, unflinching, wholly in the right and wholly aware of it, her drawbacks of uncouth costume no longer present, her beauty a fact beyond dispute, her intelligence a recent discovery and a sharp surprise, stood clad with the dignity of easy and complete conquest.

Ada Gerrard suddenly burst into tears. They were very irate tears; there was not the least tincture of remorse or shame in them. She flung herself back into her chair, and covered her face for several minutes while she wept.

Claire watched her, tranquilly, for a little while. Then she sat down again and reopened her book. An intense silence reigned, broken by the sobs of Ada Gerrard. Claire leaned her head on her hand, feigning abrupt absorption in the page that she regarded, and feigning it very well. But her mind was in a secret whirl, now. She was mutely, but impetuously asking herself: "Will they think I was right? Will they take my part? Will they treat me any more kindly, or just as before?"

These silent, pathetic queries were fated to receive a speedy answer. Before the school hours of that same day had ended, the ostracism which had so wrung poor Claire's spirit was in a measure ended likewise. Less than a week had elapsed before she was on friendly terms with a number of her classmates. A little adverse clique soon shaped itself against her. Ada Gerrard, fiercely unforgiving, headed this hostile faction; its remaining members were a few stanch personal adherents who had never been able to resist the dazzling fascination of Miss Gerrard's toilets and lunches. But this opposing element was not actively inimical. Claire's party had the strength of multitude and the courage of its opinions. Still, its members were by no means ardent devotees; they sometimes hurt her with the sly stab of patronage, and they often gave her furtively to understand that her claims upon their favor were of a sort which they practically recognized without theoretically approving.

It would be hard to define just how they conveyed this impression. And yet Claire frequently felt its weight, like that of some vague tyranny which offers no tangible excuse for revolt. She could neither realize nor estimate the force with which she had been thrown into contact. Her years were yet too few, her experience was yet too limited; nor was the force manifest in active strength at Mrs. Arcularius's school, a narrow enough theatre for its exercise, and one where its full-grown momentum must of necessity dwindle into something like mere juvenile parody. Claire was yet to learn with how much rank haste its evil growth had sprung up in the big metropolis outside, thwarting and clogging any pure development of what has been called the republican idea, and making us sometimes bitterly wonder if the great dead philosophers were not tricked, after all, by wills-o'-the-wisp no less lovely than elusive.

But there were a few girls who met Claire on a perfectly equal footing, and left from their intercourse, at all times, the least frosty sparkle of condescension. Some of these may or may not consciously have undertaken their rôles. But with one, past doubt, and for excellent reasons, the kindly impulse was in every way spontaneous. The name of this pupil was Sophia Bergemann. She professed a deep fondness for Claire, and it was evidently sincere. She belonged among Mrs. Arcularius's tolerated plutocrats. Her father was a German brewer who had made a very large fortune out of lager-beer, and who dwelt in Hoboken, where he had built an immense house on spacious grounds. It was said that the lawns were adorned with statues in bronze and marble, and that the main drawing-room of the mansion was frescoed with a design representing Germany offering a tankard of foaming beer to Columbia, in colossal sociability. But the latter statement may have been only the caustic invention of Sophia's foes. She was stoutly disapproved by the conservative element, and this fact had helped to make her so warm a supporter of Claire. Being at daggers drawn with Ada Gerrard, she naturally hailed Claire's public rebuke with rapture, and immediately became her stanch ally.

"I was afraid you'd stay meek and mild right straight along, just as you began," she afterward confessed. "Somehow you looked as if you hadn't got any spunk. And I do like spunk. I believe in it." This article of faith Sophia had several times frankly verified. She had once pulled the ear of her fellow-pupil, and again narrowly escaped expulsion by slapping another's face. She had a buxom figure, a broad-blown countenance, nearly as round as a moon at the full, solid cheeks of constant vivid coloring, and hair so yellow that its keen tint blent with her brilliant complexion in producing the effect of an expensive wax doll enlarged and animated. She was drearily stupid at all her lessons, rivaling Ada Gerrard as the regnant ignoramus of the academy. Her gestures were painfully awkward; her walk was a cumbrous prance; she seemed incapable of seating herself without an elastic bounce. She grew very fond of Claire, as weeks went on, and gave her repeated invitations to pass a portion of the summer holidays at the grand Hoboken abode.

But before the summer holidays arrived, Claire had left Mrs. Arcularius's school for good. Twining had awakened to one more dismayed perception of having been grossly duped; the reed on which he had leaned had snapped beneath him; prompt retrenchments became inevitable; his poor ventured thousands were dissolved, as a last ironical sort of ingredient, in the worthless elixir.

For a long time his affairs stood miserably involved. His innocent share in a matter of imposture and chicanery was misconstrued and sharply censured by his employers. He was discharged from his clerkship, and put face to face with the worst threats of need. Mrs. Twining, forced to resign her briefly-worn robes of ease for the old garb of drudgery, spared no zeal in proving herself not to have been a false prophetess of disaster.

"I ain't a bit surprised," she would declare, with one of her thin, acid laughs. "Mercy, no! Don't mind me. I was prepared for it, Francis. So here we are over in Jersey City, and a pretty shabby part of it, too! Oh, well, it's better'n keeping a peanut-stand, anyhow. You'll bring me there, some day; you're bound to. I ain't eaten a peanut in ever so long. I'm saving my taste for 'em."

Twining secretly writhed under these thrusts. His meagre stock of money was slipping from him daily. But he was still cheerful. The tough texture of his optimism still refused to be rent. A

few more years, and its severance must come, warp and woof, but as yet the sturdy fibres held good against every strain.

He secured another position at last. The salary, smaller than before, was at least regular. But the quarters in Jersey City, though humble and restricted, made too strong an annual drain upon his impoverished purse. After two years of pitiful struggle, the family removed to Greenpoint. Claire was then sixteen. But before this new change occurred, Twining's evil genius had again tempted him, and with the usual malign result. He trusted a fellow-man once more, and once more he was confounded. This time it was of necessity a much smaller hazard. Only three hundred dollars went, though millions were of course to be ultimately realized. One day a sallow, elderly man, with eyes bleared from dissipation and clothes that hung glazed round a bony figure, fell in with poor Twining, and talked to him glibly about a miraculous patent. It concerned the giving of signals on railroads by an electrical process. It was to effect a sublime security against all future accidents of travel by land. A few primary steps were to be taken before this marvel should obtain the indorsements of eager capitalists. The sallow little man, in three interviews, during which he cleverly contrived not to smell too strongly of liquor, convinced Twining that he was a neglected genius. The money was given him, and a receipt for it was signed with a hand whose insecurity passed for grateful emotion. But this origin might have been ascribed with more truth to the rheumy moisture that filled the recipient's eyes when he placed a plump roll of bills within his threadbare waistcoat-pocket. Twining never saw him after that eventful conference. He died about three weeks later of delirium tremens in a city hospital. It was his seventh attack.

This fresh blow leveled Twining. Neither his wife nor his child ever knew of it. But it struck into him a sort of terror at himself from which he never recovered. He had trusted humanity for the last time. He still remained amiable, genial, gentle. But despair had turned his heart to lead. Both Claire and Mrs. Twining saw the change, though ignorant of its cause. The Greenpoint epoch had now begun.

In Jersey City Claire had been sent to a public school. Here she had met genuine daughters of the people. Some of them were almost in rags; others represented thrifty home-surroundings; all were very different from the sleek children of wealth and caste whom she had known at Mrs. Arcularius's. At first she suffered torments of disgust. But by degrees the slow, continual pressure of habit wore away the edge of her distaste, as a constant sea-wash will blunt the rim of a shell. She absorbed herself in study, made rapid progress, and learned much that a fashionable school would have left untaught.

Her fastidiousness in a measure vanished. A good deal of the old acquired nicety stayed, but her age was impressionable, and ceaseless contact with rough manners and crude opinions wrought its certain effect. She was now rubbing against taffetas, and before it had been against silk. She was hearing the boorish laugh and the slovenly idiom to-day, when yesterday she had heard the mirth of culture and the phrase of decorum. Her young life had thus far been a strange discord of opposing influences. She felt this in periods of half-bewildered retrospect, and sometimes with moods of passionate melancholy as well. The intense contrast of the changes through which she had passed, disheartened while it stimulated her. She meant to try her best; she wanted with all her energy to gain secure and permanent elevation; she had no intent of sitting down and resting before she reached the top of the hill, for her father's heated words of admonition and entreaty yet swept their insistent echo through her spirit.

But the hill seemed a sheer steep, defiant of any foothold. If she was eager to ascend, loath to rest, full of splendid activity, what mattered these favoring conditions when circumstances turned them to mockery?

They were at Greenpoint, now. They had been there three years. Claire was nineteen. Her school days had ended. They could no longer afford to keep a servant; she had to help her mother in all menial domestic offices. She had to bake, to sweep, to wash, to sew. She hated the place; she hated the life. But she saw her father's hidden despair, and so hid her own. More than this, she trembled at

certain signs that his health was failing. He would have seizures of sudden weakness at morning or night; she feared to ask him whether they also occurred when he was absent at his business, lest he might suspect the acute nature of her anxiety, and so acquire new cause for worriment.

She loved him more than ever. The dread of his loss would steal with ghastly intrusion along her dreams at night. She thought of her grim, acrimonious mother, and said to herself: 'If he should die! It would be terrible! I should be worse than alone!' Every kiss that she gave him took a more clinging fondness.

He never spoke of his future. He never spoke of hers. She understood why. Each always met the other with a smile. There was something beautiful in their reciprocal deceit. They heard the dead leaves crackle under their footsteps, but they strove to talk as if the boughs were in bud.

And so the weeks went on. The bitterness of their second winter in Greenpoint had now yielded to the mildness of a second spring. But the vernal change brought no cheer to Claire. In the little yellowish-drab wooden house where they dwelt, with lumber-yards and sloop-wharves blocking all view of the river, with stupid, haggling neighbors on either side of them, with ugliness and stagnation and poverty at arm's-reach, was a girl so weighed upon and crushed by the stern arbitraments of want, that she often felt herself as much a captive as if she could not have moved a limb without hearing the clank of a chain.

IV

One afternoon Claire said to her mother: "I intend to take a little holiday. I am going out for a walk." Mrs. Twining and her daughter were in the kitchen when this very novel announcement was made. The elder lady had just taken her preliminary steps toward the getting of supper. She let her big knife remain bedded in the side of a large, soggy potato that she was peeling, and glanced up at Claire with her quick black eye. A long spiral of skin hung from the half-pared vegetable. It seemed to denote with peculiar aptness the paralyzing effect of Mrs. Twining's astonishment.

"Going to take a holiday, are you?" she exclaimed, with the favorite jerky, joyless laugh. "And what am *I* going to do, if you please? Stay at home, no doubt, and slave over this stove till supper's cooked. Hey?"

"I cooked the supper yesterday," said Claire, "and you vowed that everything I had done was bad, and that I should never make myself so smart again. I recollect your exact words – 'make myself so smart,'" continued Claire, with cutting fidelity of quotation. "I would readily do the whole cooking every afternoon, on Father's account. For he likes the food I prepare better than he likes what you prepare. There's no doubt about that."

"Oh, not a bit," returned Mrs. Twining, who could never cow her daughter nowadays, and avoided all open skirmishes with Claire, preferring to fire her volleys under cover of ambiguous sneers, being sure of rout in any fair-fought engagement. "Not a bit, certainly. When he knows you've pottered away at anything, he'll eat it and smack his lips over it whether it's roasted to a cinder, or as raw as a fresh clam."

"I'm very glad to hear you say so," returned Claire, with a weary little smile. "It's pleasant to think Father loves me like that."

Mrs. Twining vigorously resumed work on her potato, speaking at the same time. "Pity about both o' you two, I *do* declare," she retorted, lapsing into the vernacular with which she loved to accompany her worst gibes. "'Pears to me that if he's so fond o' *you* he mightn't have made you the poor mean fag at nineteen that he's made o' me at forty-four; and if you are so fond o' *him*, why, you might try and catch a decent husband, with a few dollars in his pocket, to raise up the family out o' the mud and muck Francis Twining's got it in."

Claire's eyes flashed a little; but she was not specially angered; she was so used to this kind of verbal savagery.

"Father never meant anything but good to either of us," she said, "and you know it. I don't want to hear you speak against him when he is away and can't defend himself. *I* am able to defend him, if I choose. I think you know that, Mother, by this time. I'm going out, as I told you. I shall be back rather soon, I suppose."

She left the kitchen, and presently the house as well. She might have stayed to wrangle; but she knew that would be for no purpose. She had stood up for her loved father so often, and always with the same results. Her wit was quicker than her mother's; it could thrust deeper and parry more dexterously; but she was very tired of this aimless warfare, where she got wounds that she hid and gave wounds that it cost her only pain to deal. She had no definite idea whither she would go, on quitting the house. At first she took her way through the cheap and vulgar main street of Greenpoint. It was the first real day of Spring; the air was bland; something had called her forth to breathe it, even here in this dreary spot. She did not quite know whence the silent summons had come. She was by no means sure if it were her own youth that had called her, conspiring in some subtile way with the push of leaves and grasses out toward the strengthened sunshine. She had felt old and tired, of late; the monotony of toil had dulled her spirits; her mother's arrowy slurs had pierced and hurt her more than she guessed. But the mild atmosphere, stirred by tender breezes, made it pleasant to be abroad, even in this malodorous thoroughfare.

Everything was dull and common. It seemed a sort of beautiful outrage that the pure, misty blue of the afternoon sky should arch so contentedly over these slimy gutters, shabby tenements, dirty children, and neglected sidewalks. A German woman jostled against her as she pressed onward; the woman carried a pail of liquid refuse, and issued from a near doorway. She had a tawdry red bow at her throat, one or two smaller bows to match it in her tossed blonde hair, and an immense flat water-curl glued against either temple, with the effect of some old hieroglyph. She was a beer-seller's wife, and she was about to empty her vessel of stale malt upon the neighboring cobble-stones. But the random speed of her gait caused her to collide abruptly with Claire's passing figure, and some of the contents of her pail shot out upon the latter's dress, making an instant stain. Claire paused, and looked at the woman with a slight annoyed motion of the head. The offender was a high-tempered person; it was currently whispered by members of their special Teuton clique that her husband was a rank socialist who had been forced to fly the police of his native town overseas, and that she shared in secret his rebellious opinions. This may or may not have been truth; but the woman flung her pailful fiercely into the street, and then as fiercely confronted Claire.

"Vell, vat you got to say?" she cried, shrilly. "You looks at me as if I vass to blame for you running against me, ain't it? I see you before. You ain't much, annerhow. You got a big lot uf airs; you valks shust like a grant laty." Here the virago dropped her pail, set a hand on either hip, and attempted, with sad lack of success, while two long, tarnished ear-rings oscillated in her big, flushed ears, to imitate Claire's really graceful walk. "Sho," she continued, in sarcastic explanation of her parody. "You valks jush sho! Bud you ain't much. You ain't no laty. You better stop ride avay treing to be one. Dot's too thin, dot iss. Aha, you're off. I t'ought I'd freiden you!"

Claire was indeed "off," and moving somewhat briskly, too. She had grown rather white. This rude encounter left a harsh memory behind it. For some time she could not dissipate the recollection of the German jade's insolence.

"Perhaps she was right," her set lips at length murmured. "I am *not* a lady. I *had* better stop right away trying to be one."

A little later she had quitted the main street of the town, and gained an open expanse at whose verge the houses stood with wide gaps between them, as though a forlorn effort had been made to conquer vacancy by ugliness. But vacancy had won the fight; space never resisted time with more complete conquest. An immense drab plain, shorn of the least green feature, now stretched before Claire's gaze. On one hand, like a slow, interminable snake, wound a black thread of slimy creek, flanked by ragged embankments of crumbling clay. On the other hand was a dull, bare sweep, unrelieved by even a single hut. Far to the eastward, facing Claire, gleamed a wide assemblage of cottages; this was a settlement that some wag or optimist, whichever he may have been, had long ago named Blissville.

Claire had a fanciful thought, now, as she walked along the hard macadamized road which the incessant trains of funerals took toward Calvary, that Blissville, seen so distantly at the end of this treeless, herbless waste, was like the mirage glimpsed by a wanderer on a desert. But she might more aptly have compared the lonely desolation which encompassed her to those classic fields where the Greek and Roman dead found their reputed bourne. The shocking creek would have made an excellent Styx, and even the most barren imagination could have traced ready analogy between these monotonous levels of sun-baked mud and the flowerless lands where disconsolate shades were supposed to wander.

The tender amethyst sky, arching over this hideous spot, alone saved it, to-day, from the last sort of infernal suggestiveness. An enormous funeral presently appeared in sight, just as Claire reached a certain uncouth bridge that spanned a curve of the impure current. The slow procession of dark carriages uncoiled itself, so to speak, from the massed habitations of Greenpoint, and drew gradually nearer without yet revealing its final vehicle. It was a mortuary cavalcade of phenomenal length, even for the present place, where New York quite often sends some of her worst reprobates to their graves

under conditions of the most imposing solemnity. The whole retinue was at last unfurled upon the smooth roadway, along which it crawled with something of the same serpentine stealthiness as that of the almost parallel creek. A sombre rivalry seemed evident, now, between the two differing streams. This blank tract of repulsive land, so strangely dedicated to death, had lost every hint of Lethean likeness. The arrival of the funeral had wrought striking change. Here we had the modern mode of dealing with death. It seemed to make paganism wither and vanish. An old, half-rotten barge, moored in a slushy cove, might have served for an emblem of the decay and contempt now fallen upon antique legend. Was this the melancholy boat that once ferried the ghosts to Hades? Ah! but if so, the oars were lost, the planks leaked wofully, and the grim pilot had gone permanently away into the great shadow-land of all the dead gods! Claire looked toward the coming funeral, and shuddered in silence. There seemed so unholy a contrast between her own fresh, vital maidenhood and this ghastly, morbid domain. How had her healthful young spirit ever courted death, that it should thus force upon her its continual grisly fellowship? She placed both elbows on the rough balustrade of the bridge, leaned her fair girlish chin against both hands, and stared straight before her across the bleak heath. Not far off several venturesome swine were waddling; they were near enough for their absurd grunts now and then to reach her, and for her to see the pink flush of their cumbrous bodies between coarse, soiled hairs, and the earthward thrust of their long, gray, cylindrical noses. But a moment later a flock of pigeons suddenly lighted just at the foot of the bridge, on a little loamy flat. The sight gave her a thrill of pleasure. It was so odd to get any bit of beauty here, and each bird was a true bit of beauty, with its flexible irised neck, its rounded sleekness, and its rosy feet. Presently the flock began their rich peculiar coo, and the sound fascinated Claire as much as their shapes had done. She quite forgot the advancing funeral; here were color, grace, and a sort of music. They had fallen to her, as might be said, from the skies. In a dumb, unformulated way she wished that more of all three charms would so fall to her. It was such a wretched doom to dwell in this abominable suburb. All her youth was being wasted here. She was already getting rather old. She was already nearly twenty – four months of her twentieth year had gone – and she had been accustomed to think people quite old when they were twenty. Would it last years longer? Ah! to fly as those lovely birds could! Why had they come hither, of all places in the world? If she were a green-and-purple thing, with strong wings, like any of them, she would soar away to the window of some rich lady's house on Fifth Avenue, and be taken inside some handsome chamber, perhaps, and fed and petted – yes, even put into a cage, if the lady chose. A cage there would be better than one's full freedom here, where the dead were always going to their graves.

From a reverie which may or may not have resembled this if it had been made into actual language, the sudden spontaneous flight of the whole charming flock roused poor ruminative Claire. She now perceived that the funeral train had drawn much nearer. A sort of metallic resonance sounded from the many horse-hooves on the hard surface of the road. But another sound, at this point, turned her attention elsewhere. It was a cracked, thin, piping voice, and its utterances were delivered only a short distance from her side. She discovered that an old man had joined her on the bridge during her absorbed preoccupation with the pigeons. He was a very old man; he leant on a staff, and was clad in an evident holiday-attire of black, whose rusty broadcloth hung about his shrunken shape with tell-tale looseness; it had too evidently been cut for a far more portly person. He had a wrinkled face, and yet one of rubicund plumpness; a spot of red flushed each cheek, centring in a little crimson net-work of veins there, while the same peculiarity cropped out a third time, as it were, on the ball-like lump at the end of his irregular nose. Claire had a feeling, as she looked at him, that he was a reformed toper. Everything about him told of present sobriety, but he was like a colored lantern seen without the illuminative candle; you had a latent certainty, as you regarded him, that only a few glasses of sufficiently bad liquor were needed to warm up those three red spots into their old auroral splendor. While speaking, he put forth a brown hand that trembled a good deal. The tremor came, no doubt, from senile feebleness, and the hand was so gnarled and knotty that it might almost have

been one of those rough excrescences which sometimes bulge from tree-trunks, instead of the sad rheumatic member that it really was. The new-comer spoke with an extremely strong Irish accent, and in a hollow, husky voice that implied, on first hearing it, a kind of elfin and subterranean origin.

"Begorra, ma'am, here it is, ma'am! I'm alludin' to the funeral, ma'am. Shure I made th' ould woman dresh me up in mee besht clothes thish day, ma'am, so I did. Fur it's Mishter Bairned McCafferty that's to be buried thish day, I sez, ma'am, sez I to th' ould woman, I sez, an' sez I, ever since I haird he wasn't expected, I sez, it's his wake I wants to be goin' to. An' if I wus too ould, I sez, to crossh over an' pay mee respechts when they waked him in the city, sez I, it'll be meeself, I sez, that'll shtand here an' watch 'em parade 'im to Calvary, ma'am, sez I."

Claire had a pity for the old man, at first. But before his speech ended he had roused in her a repulsion. He appeared quietly hilarious; he had produced several distinct chuckles, and his watery, peering eyes, which one of his misshapen hands soon shaded, revealed an actually gay twinkle.

"I don't see why you wanted to come out and watch the person go to his grave," said Claire. "What pleasure can that possibly give you?"

"Pleasure, ma'am, is it, ma'am?" was the startled response. "Why, shure, ma'am, it's the foinest funeral that's been seen in these parts, ma'am, fur manny a day! An' it's mee own son, Larry, that's drivin' the hairse, ye'll understand, ma'am, an' it's a proud day for Larry, so it is. Excuse me, ma'am, but do ye take sight o' the hairse yet?"

"Oh, yes; very well," said Claire. "It has a number of wooden ornaments along its top, that are gilded and look like large black cabbages." She gave a little burst of weary laughter as she finished the last sentence, whose irony was quite lost on her dim-sighted companion. "And its sides are glass," she continued, "and you can see the large coffin within quite plainly, and there are four horses with white and black plumes."

"An' – an' – the carriages, ma'am, if ye plaise, ma'am?" eagerly questioned the old man. "Shure there should be forty if there's wan, ma'am, an' a few loight wagons thrown in behoind as well. How's that, ma'am?"

"I think there must be forty," said Claire, turning a curious look on the questioner, as he bent excitedly forward to hear her answer. "And there are several light wagons, also."

The old man rubbed his weird hands together in gleeful ecstasy, nearly toppling over as he did so, because the act necessitated a transient disregard of the needful prop lent by his staff. "Shure I towld th' ould woman jusht that!" he cried, in great triumph. "Shure I sez to her, sez I, Barney McCafferty's too daicent a man, I sez, to go to his grave, sez I, anny less daicenter nor that, I sez. It'll be forty carriages, I sez, if it's wan. An' there'll be a shport or so, sez I to her, ma'am (bee thish shtick in mee hand, ma'am, I sed it, ma'am!) there'll be a shport or so that'll bring a buggy or so, sez I, for a woind up at the end, I sez, like the laugh that comes, ye mind, at the tail of a joke, I sez. An' it's you I'm thankful to, ma'am, fur the loan o' your two broight eyes, ma'am, that lets me see the soight that God's denied me, ma'am: an' I mean, wid a blessin' to yer, the shtyle o' the hairse an' the gineral natur o' the intertainmint altogether, ma'am, the Lord love yer fur yer frindly assistance!"

"Perhaps you can see the funeral better when it gets in front of the bridge," said Claire, somewhat kindly, but with a shocked sense still remaining. Her varied past, that had shown her so many differing human phases, had not till now presented to her the extraordinary fact of how positively festal are the associations with which the Irish, as our shores find them, are wont to accompany death. At the same time, she felt interested, and rather curious. She could always manage, on brief notice, to feel interested and curious regarding any fellow-creature; and this trait (one that has grown historic among the most noted charmers of her own sex) was now tested to perhaps its last limits.

"Does your son always drive hearses?" she continued, unconsciously looking at the old man as if he were something in a museum, to be marveled at for antiquity and strangeness, but not, on pain of expulsion, to be touched.

"Oh, no, ma'am. Larry's wan o' the hands to a livery shtable, ma'am; but yer see, ma'am, he's timperance, an' so they gives 'im the hairse at mosht o' the high-toned funerals, bekase they're shure, then, that there'll be no dishrespect showed to the corpse, y' undershtand. An' it's always the behavior o' the hairse that's mosht cruticized, fur if that goes an' comes quiet, wid no singin' nur shkylarkin' on the part o' him that drives it, d' y' undershtand, why there's lesh talk nur if all the mourners an' relashuns should come home shtavin' drunk, ma'am, d' ye mind?"

"And who is this Bernard McCafferty?" asked Claire.

"Is it Barney McCafferty that ye're ashkin' about?" was the old man's amazed response, a sharp falsetto note piercing through his usual huskiness. "Why, shure, ma'am, he run six places acrosh in the city fur tin year all to wanst, so he did, an' that ain't countin' the wan he kep' in Harlem, naythur."

This explanation was delivered with an air of astonished rebuke, as though one should enumerate the possessions of some slighted prince.

"What sorts of places do you mean?" inquired Claire.

The old man put his head on one side and looked at her with uneasy suspicion, as though he feared she was making sport of him.

"Places? Why, liquor-sthores, to be sure."

"Oh," said Claire. "And what did he die of? Drink?"

Her companion brightened noticeably, and seemed to gain confidence in his questioner. He scratched one cheek, where the unshorn beard showed in white, bristly patches along the fleshless jaw, and winked at Claire as though she had at once put the matter upon a basis of mutual and intimate comprehension.

"I guess it *wus* the drink ash laid 'im out at lasht, ma'am. Manny is the good glass I had wid Barney afore he went into politics an' got shut of his besht frinds, bad luck to 'im. But he shtood well up to his liquor fur nigh forty year, though I'm thinkin' it fetched 'im in the end, ma'am."

This was said with the manner and tone of a person who might have alluded to some rather genteel foible in the deceased, like a fondness for chess or whist. Claire found herself confronting another fact in the lower Irish nature, hitherto but half surmised: the enormous indulgence and sympathetic tolerance with which this unique race regards every form and feature of drunkenness.

"If he sold liquor all his life and died of it himself," she exclaimed, with heat and force, "he doesn't deserve to have half so large a funeral. And I think it's dreadful," she went on, with a little angry stamp of the foot, while she lifted one finger and shook it at the old man in a way with which her sex had doubtless familiarized him at an earlier stage in his long career – "yes, I think it's perfectly horrible that you people should ever dare to get drunk at funerals as you do! I often see the carriage-loads come back from the cemetery through Greenpoint, laughing and smoking, and sometimes yelling and swearing as well! Oh, I don't know how you *can* do it! There is something so grand, so terrible about death! You ought to be ashamed, all of you! Such actions make this place more sad and wretched than it really is. It is a miserable place enough, Heaven knows!"

She moved away from the old man as she spoke the last sentence. Going forth upon the road, she retraced her steps in the direction of the town, and thus met each separate vehicle of the long funeral as it stole laggingly onward. First came the black-and-gilt hearse, flaunting its interior coffin with horrid ostentation, as though it wanted you to see how many wreaths and crosses had been lavished upon the remains of Mr. McCafferty by his bereaved constituents. Then followed a carriage to whose driver had been confided a capacious wooden box which would doubtless receive the coffin before its interment, and into which the driver, having placed its glaring unpainted mass on a line with the dashboard, had thrust his feet, and by the act engulfed, as it were, nearly half his person. He was a man of sallow, cadaverous visage and very gaunt frame; he looked as if he might possess some eerie fellowship with the corpse itself; he seemed to alter the popular phrase about having a foot in the grave, and to make it quite thinkable that life could exist under still more moribund conditions. In the conveyance which he drove was a group of four people. Two of them were stout Irishwomen, swathed

in crape, and two were middle-aged Irishmen, dressed with a holiday smartness. In this vehicle silence appeared to reign; its occupants, all four, sat with lowered eyes. But in the other carriages, as one by one passed Claire, not a sign of grief was manifest. There was a good deal of audible conversation; there was considerable leaning of heads out of windows; there were not a few querulous children of various ages, some of whom had been given oranges to suck or sticks of striped candy to munch; there were buxom women and spare women, massive men and slim men, little girls and little boys, all huddled together, quite often three or even more on a seat. But in the whole long panorama of human visages, as it glided past her, Claire could not discern a single trace of solemnity. The impression of mere hollow and senseless form was produced, by this crude *cortège*, with complete and dismal success. Nobody – with the slight exceptions recorded – seemed to be sorry that Mr. McCafferty had made a permanent departure from the liquor-business.

"I wonder why they come, if they are not sorry," Claire said to herself, as she reëntered the town, leaving the great serpentine funeral behind her. "I suppose it is because of the ride. They seize on even this grim excuse for getting a little pastime." … Then her thoughts took a new, self-questioning turn. "And what reason have I to pity them and call them 'poor'? They come here only in the way of holiday, but I never get a glimpse of anything better or worse, month after month. I dare say there *are* worse places than this. I should like to see one, if there really are, just for the change."

Passing back through the unlovely streets again, Claire had a desire to be near the water before she returned in-doors. She now regretted not having gone thither at first, instead of taking her dolorous inland walk. It was nearly sunset; the twilight had not yet learned to loiter, as it does in maturer Spring, and a gloom had already crept, with purplish effect, into the sweet pale azure of the heavens. Claire made as short a cut toward one special place at the water's edge as her regretted familiarity with Greenpoint would permit, and presently stood on a raised spot close beside the river. It was a bare scarp of earth, touched faintly, here and there, with the most meagre intervals of struggling green. Its site commanded the delightful view beyond, and now, at the ruddy but transient advent of evening, this view was peculiarly delightful. You saw the wrinkled river, drab and tremulous, under a stretch of sky which the sinking sun had made from verge to zenith a turmoil of little rosy and feathery clouds. Each cloud had the damask glow, without its fleetness, that we see in the scales of a darting trout. The whole ember-colored array arched over the wide stream in brief, unusual brilliancy, and stole now and then from the gray waves beneath it a slight gleam, no larger than the bud of a carnation, but quite as rich-hued. Just beneath Claire was a low, uncouth, many-patched hut, near to the muddy strand, and looking not unlike something that had drifted up from aqueous recesses with the intent of making itself habitable for men. A ragged contiguous wharf had been built here, at whose edge, when summer came, small boats would be grouped to let. A little northward, great yellowish piles of lumber loomed, tier after tier, with big sloops moored beside them, and with one acute red pennon, on one slim mast, blown out bright against the darkening air. Steamboats and sail-boats were slipping over the ruffled river, these urged by their steady mechanic push, those winning the capricious breeze to favor their full-stretched canvas. Beyond, in dusky, irregular semicircle, lay the opposite city. Its many church-spires pierced the dimness, but all its other traits of architecture, viewed at this distance, had a flat, massed look. There was something symbolic in the isolated saliency of these spires; they seemed to typify the permanence of a faith which had already defied centuries. But still more, their vague group merged every detail of creed into one pictorial whole; you forgot, as you gazed, what various paths toward salvation this or that steeple might be supposed to point. The whole effect was simply and powerfully Christian.

Claire fixed her eyes upon the shadowy city. A few early lights already dotted its expanse with gold, as if to outspeed the tardier stars overhead. It spread away, for the gaze that watched it, like a huge realm of fascinating mystery. Claire forgot how much sin it hid; perhaps she scarcely knew if it hid any. She thought only of the diversions, relaxations, festivities that would soon hold sway there. Odd memories of her old school-fellows crossed her mind. Doubtless Ada Gerrard was there now,

thinking of some new robe in which she would show her plump white neck with the little freckles on it, that very evening. It should be a pale-blue dress, Claire decided; that would suit Ada's red hair the best. How full was the big city, yonder, of happy, handsome, prosperous people! And so many of them were saying, now that the nightfall had begun, "I shall go to this ball to-night," or "I shall go to that theatre." They were getting the theatres ready for the plays, now; the entrances were being lighted. She could see Wallack's and the Union Square, each with its small court and the baize doors beyond. Oh, how pleasant it would be to do something, to look at something, to hear something, to-night, that she had not done and looked at and heard, again and again, for weeks and months past! The girl's blood and bone hungered for a holiday. She must go back home, soon. And there was only one thought to make the prospect of return endurable; that thought was meeting her father. But he would be tired; he was always more tired nowadays than in other times. When he lay upon the lounge in the basement, and she got the stool and sat down beside him, he would smile to have her put both arms round his neck and press her cheek up close to his, but he would go to sleep very soon afterward; he would be so tired that he would forget even to ask her if she had had a hard time with her mother that day. And then her mother would grumble a hint that the dishes were yet to be washed, and she would take her arms away from the beloved neck, and scrape and clean for quite a long time; and then she would get sleepy, more because she remembered how early she must rise to-morrow than because a very little diversion would not have made the alert young lids loath to shade her eyes for hours to come.

It would all be the same as on other nights. It was always, every new night, the same as on that which went before. There was the dull burden of it. When would the burden be shifted? Would it ever be shifted? Would it not merely grow heavier, and slowly crush her down, till her back should get the crook of age, and so bear it with better ease?

She went nearer to the edge of the hillock, and set her eyes once more upon the city, as if for a farewell view. Its lights had become more numerous; the tips of its spires were lost in tender vapor. Above, the tiny scraps of luminous cloud had begun to fade; the river had roughened and grown dull, and there was a damp keenness in the freshening breeze. That exquisite melancholy which is sure to breathe from evening when it sheds a spell over the triple charm of blended sky, land, and water, was now in the full tide of its lovely power.

Claire lifted her hand to her lips, and waved a kiss toward the glooming city. It was a pretty gesture, and so furtive and stealthy that it might have fled the notice of any one who stood quite close at her side. And the low words that now succeeded it, too, were just low enough to escape such heed, though their sense might easily have met a possible listener with the effect of broken and half-audible speech.

"Good-night," she said to the city. "Good-night, and be merry for hours to come. You seem just like something alive and breathing, but I know that if you had one mind and one heart to think and to feel with, instead of the thousands and thousands that you have got, you would pity me because I'm so sorry that this big, cold river is always between us!"

Claire nearly broke into a laugh at her own soft and quaint little apostrophe. Like most lonely people who dislike their solitude, she often felt the temptation to soliloquize; especially since her imagination was vigorous, and sometimes loved, as well, to let mount from its wrist the agile falcon of fancy. But a practical bent, as we call it, and a rather sharp sense of the humor of things besides, usually mingled to repress this volatile impulse. As it was, she gave a strong, tired sigh instead of a laugh, and turned her face homeward, though not her steps quite yet, for she still remained standing on the mound beside the water.

"My holiday," she thought, "is over." She did not know that it was just beginning.

Her last action had brought her into abrupt contact with a girlish figure, whose countenance she might have recognized had not the dusk so deepened.

V

"I was mos' sure '*twas* you, Miss Twining," said the new-comer, holding out a hand to Claire, "so I run a little further up the hill, jus' to make reel *certain* sure."

"Well, you were not wrong, Josie," said Claire, giving her own hand. It did not occur to her that she had been called "Miss Twining" and had answered by "Josie." In this case she took her rights of superiority without thinking; she did not stop to consider their soundness; it had always been to her an accepted fact that she was an alien and an exile, here in Greenpoint, and that the few residents whom she knew must of necessity admit her claim to having existed under better previous conditions. There was no taint of arrogance in this unargued assumption.

"You ain't often out's late's this, Miss Twining," said Josie, with a little burst of laughter. "Are you, now?"

"No, indeed," answered Claire. "I am not often out at all." She sighed again, quite unconsciously. "Well, Josie," she went on, "I must be getting back home. I've been away too long, as it is. You seem to be dressed in your very finest. Does it mean that you are going to enjoy yourself somewhere?"

Josie gave another laugh. "I expect so, Miss Twining," she said, with a touch of mysterious piquancy in her manner. She turned herself quickly about, looking over her shoulder all the while with the air of waiting for some one to appear. Claire watched her closely during the unconscious but significant by-play.

The name of this young girl was Josephine Morley. She was of Irish parents, but felt ashamed of the fact. Perhaps consciously, perhaps not, she had banished from her speech all hereditary traces. She spoke in a rattling way, and every now and then she would heap massive emphasis on one special word. Her talk made you think of a railway that is all broken up with *dépôts*, none of which the engine discountenances. Her widowed mother kept a grocery store, not amply patronized, and of moderate prices. By pre-arrangement with the Twinings on a basis of the most severe economy, Josie would bring them their needed supply of vegetables thrice a week. She was not so jaunty-looking on those occasions as she now appeared. Then she would be clad in any flotsam and jetsam of apparel that charity might have drifted toward her. But to-night she was smartly dressed. Now that Claire scanned her closer in the dimness, it was plain that she wore very unusual gear. Josie was not much over twenty. She was extremely thin, but still rather shapely, and endowed with a good deal of grace. Her face would have been pretty but for its high cheek-bones and the hectic blotch of color that was wont to flush them, in sharp contrast with her remaining pallor. She had had several sisters who had died of a speedy consumption. Her eyes were black, and would glitter as she moved them; she was always moving her eyes; like herself, they never seemed at rest. She constantly smiled, and the smile would have had a charm of its own if it had failed to reveal somewhat ruinous teeth. Claire had always liked her vivacity, though it had seemed to possess a spur that came from an unhealthy impulse, like the heat of internal fever. She wore a wide-brimmed hat of dark straw, with a great crimson feather, and a costume of some cheap maroon stuff, violently relieved by trimmings of broad white braid. The *ensemble* was very far from ugly. She had copied its effect from a popular weekly journal, whose harrowing fiction would sometimes be supplemented by prints of the latest fashions, "given away" to its devoted patrons.

Claire, having drawn nearer to Josie, took in all her details of costume with ready swiftness. This fleet sort of observation was always an easy matter for Claire. In most cases of a like sort, she would both see and judge before others had accomplished even the first process.

"You seem to be waiting for somebody, Josie," she now said.

"Yes, I am," returned Josie, with another laugh. She put one slim hand to her mouth as she laughed; she nearly always employed this gesture at such a time; it came, no doubt, from a consciousness of dental deficiencies. "I ain't goin' to be *shy*, Miss Twining," she pursued. "Why

should I? I'm expectin' a gent'man friend o' mine. We was goin' over t' the city together. We was goin' to *Niblo's*. There's an el'gant play there, they *say*." … Here Josie paused, drew backward for an instant, and then impulsively seized one of Claire's hands in both of her own. "Oh, Miss Twining!" she suddenly exclaimed, "I know I hadn't ought to ask you if *you'd* come along, too, but I do wish you just *would*! You ain't the same kind as me a bit, and there's more'n me in Greenpoint – now, 'pon my word there is – that's said when they see you that you *was* a reel lady. But still, you might come with me and my friend, Mr. MacNab, and just get a spell of *'musement*. I know you ain't had any 'musement in goodness sakes *how* long! It's a reel el'gant play! Do say you will! Now I ain't a bit *soft* on Mr. MacNab. P'aps he'd *like* me to be, but I ain't. So three won't spoil comp'ny. Now, *do*! Oh, Miss Twining, I'd be awful glad if you *would!*"

Josie's tones, like her words, were warmly persuasive. She still retained Claire's hand. Nor did Claire withdraw it. She was tempted. She turned her head toward the darkling city, in whose realm of deepened shadow many new lights had begun to burn.

"Ah, Josie," she said, "you are very kind to ask me. But I'm quite shabby beside you, you know."

"Pshaw!" flatly objected Josie; "you look fust rate. That ain't *no* sort of reason… Do! Now, *do*!"

Claire laughed nervously. She was thinking how pleasant it would be to hear an orchestra play, to see a curtain rise, to watch a drama roll its story out, behind vivid footlights, between painted scenes.

"I am sure Mr. MacNab wouldn't like," she said. And then she thought of how her father would soon come home and miss her, and have to be told, when they next met, that she had been to the theatre over in New York with the girl who brought them vegetables thrice a week. She seemed quite to have made up her mind, presently. She withdrew her hand from Josie's with a good deal of placid force.

"No, Josie, I can't," she said.

"Yes, you *can*!" was the fervid reply. "Yes, you just *shall*, Miss Twining; now *there*! I ain't goin' t' let you *off*! When I get my mind set right *onto* anything, I'm as stubb'n as ever I can *be*! An' I'm sure you'd *like* to come. There ain't no doubt of 't – not one single *grain*!"

Josie was laughing while she thus spoke, and had again caught Claire's unwilling hand with more of entreaty than boldness.

"What makes you sure?" Claire asked. She smiled now, though the smile was sad.

Josie's laughter became a high treble ripple. She put both feet, visible beneath her short skirt, suddenly very close together, and curved her lithe body in an abrupt burlesque bow. The trick was graceful, though vulgar; it savored of the cheaper variety entertainments, where Josie had no doubt found it. She still held Claire's hand, and she was looking straight into the eyes of her companion with her own dark, brisk eyes.

"What *makes* me sure you'd like to go?" she said. "Why, sakes alive, Miss Twining, I can see the need of a little fun oozin' right out of your *face*– now, 'pon my word and sacred honor I just *can*! Oh, pshaw! We'll be home early 'nough. It won't be *much* more'n quarter past 'leven, I guess. B'sides, who'll *know*? 'Tain't anybody's business but *ours*."

'Father would know. It would be his business,' Claire thought. But she did not answer aloud, as yet. She permitted Josie to retain her hand, while she turned and gave another glance toward the city across the river.

The rapid darkness had thickened. Where New York had lain, dim as a mirage, hundreds of lights had clustered; their yellow galaxy more than rivaled the pale specks of fire now crowding with silent speed into the heavens domed so remotely above them.

She faced Josie again. She trembled, though imperceptibly. Drooping her eyes, at first, she then raised them. "Well," she said, "I will let you persuade me. I will go with you, Josie."

It was the first time she had ever made a resolve whose fulfillment she felt sure would displease her father. The certainty that he would not sanction her going in companionship of this proposed sort

made Claire's decision a sacrilege to herself, even while she perversely took it. She trampled on her own filial loyalty, and she seemed to feel it tremble in pained protest under the outrage. It was in vain that a troop of self-excusing pleas sprang to battle against her shamed afterthought. She knew that remorse was already whetting for her its poniard. The gloom of her father's future rebuke had already made itself a part of the increasing nightfall.

"Oh, ain't I glad, though!" Josie broke forth, gleefully. Her triumph was one of pure good-natured impulse, but at the same time she had a flattered sense that her evening's amusement would now gain a stamp of distinction. One or two girls in Greenpoint had derided her for encouraging Mr. MacNab as a devotee. She herself secretly derided the young man in that same tender office. For this reason she had arranged that they should meet here to-night at the foot of the little hillock near the river, and invest their purposed trip with enough clandestine association to defeat the couchant raillery of certain unsparing neighbors.

Almost immediately Mr. MacNab made his appearance below, and Josie tripped lightly down toward him, followed by Claire at a much more sober pace. The introduction promptly followed, and Josie's glib, matter-of-course explanation soon succeeded that. The reason of Claire's presence was given Mr. MacNab by Josie with a handsome, off-hand patronage. "It's awful nice o' Miss Twining to *consent* to go along with us," she ended. "*Aint* it, now?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Mr. MacNab.

The young man was inwardly tortured by this abrupt announcement. He was very much in love with Josie, and he had felt deeper and deeper thrills of anticipation all day long, as the hour of their rendezvous drew near. He was a youth of about two-and-twenty. His stature was so low as to be almost dwarfish; both Claire's and Josie's well overtopped it. He was very stout, however; the breadth of his shoulders and the solid girth of his limbs might have suited six feet of clean height. He had a large, smooth, moon-like face, a pair of little black eyes, and a pair of huge red ears. He was immoderately ugly, but with an expression so simply amiable as quite to escape repulsiveness. You felt that his ready smile possessed vast hidden funds of geniality; there was no telling what supple resources that long slit of big-lipped mouth might draw upon, at a really mirthful emergency. One glance at his abnormal hands, where every joint was an uncouth protuberance and every nail a line of inky darkness, left it certain that they held no dainty share of the world's manual requirements. Mr. James MacNab was an oyster-opener for about eight months in the year, and a clam-opener through the remaining four. The narrow window of his employer's shop looked upon Greenpoint Avenue, wedged between the stores of a butcher and a candy-seller. Like Josie Morley, James was of Irish parentage; like her, he abjured the accent of his ancestors, having been born here, and having breathed into his being at an early age that peculiar shame of Celtic origin which belongs among our curiosities of immigration. His wages were meagre, and his hours of work numerous. To-night was a precious interval of relaxation. He had been released at three o'clock that afternoon, and had gone heavy-lidded to a tiny cot in a garret-room, where he had slept the exhausted sleep of one who is always in arrears to the drowsy god. Not long ago he had waked, highly refreshed, and pierced with the expectation of soon meeting his beloved Josie. He had four dollars and seventy-five cents in his pocket, and the possession of this sum gave him a firm sense of pecuniary security. The strong faith that he was finely dressed, too, increased his confidence. He had a little low hat of black felt, tipped sideways on his ungainly head; an overcoat of muddy cinnamon-brown, with broad black binding along its lappels and edges; and a pair of boots so capably polished that their lustre dissuaded you from too close scrutiny of the toe-joint bulging from either clumsy foot. He was entirely satisfied with his general effect. He knew that nature had not made him comely, but he felt complete repose of conscience in the matter of having atoned artistically for this personal slight.

Josie's tidings left him almost speechless. In a trice his glowing hopes had crumbled to ashes. He had long known Claire by sight. He had, in a way, admired her. But she was not of his *monde*, and he saw with woe and dismay that for this reason her company would prove all the more burdensome. As

a matter of expense, too, it presented the most painful objections. New drafts must be made upon his limited capital. All his past calculations were suddenly rendered null. Who could say what financial disaster might overtake him, if he should now aspire to three oyster-stews after three seats at the theatre? Would his four dollars and seventy-five cents not pass its powers of elasticity if subjected to this unforeseen stretching-process? Claire, meanwhile, was wholly unconscious of his distress. It was not till they had embarked on the ferry-boat that the thought of her escort's possible poverty occurred to her flurried mind. "Oh, Josie," she soon found a chance to whisper, "I am afraid I shall be a great expense to your friend! I would have thought of it sooner if you had not pressed me so, without any warning beforehand. And I have only a little change in my pocket, so I can't" —

But here Josie interrupted her with a magnificent murmured fiction to the effect that they were under the protection of a young man who "jus' made money hand over fist"; and Claire, believing this handsome falsehood, let Josie talk with her gallant while she relapsed into silence.

They were all on the forward deck of the steamboat, close against its wooden railing. Claire was a little apart from her companions; she had instinctively withdrawn from them. The night had now woven its web to the full. Overhead the stars beamed more richly; below, the black river shimmered with glassy lustre where it met the sides of the speeding vessel, and then rolled off again into darkness with great swollen waves. Long points of light pierced the gloom below the opposite shore, like golden plummets that were slowly fathoming its opaque tide. Here and there scarlet or green lights moved over the waters, given by the viewless barks that bore them the look of weird, wandering jack-o'-lanterns. These were simply fantastic; they held no human analogies. A sloop, thus brilliantly decked, hove on a sudden into sight, not many yards from Claire's peering gaze. Its expanse of canvas, tense in the sharp breeze, caught a momentary unearthly pallor; it slipped into view like a monstrous phantom, and like a phantom it vanished again. This, too, was a merely elfin and quaint apparition; no sense of vital reality lay behind it. But the journeying ferry-boats, that voyaged to their several goals on either side the river, took, with their curved lines of small, keen-lit windows and their illuminations at various other points, the likeness of stately galleys gliding after nightfall to some opulent port. All their horrors of nautical architecture were deadened by merciful shadow. Claire felt the quiet splendor of the suggestion. Her varied educational past made this fully possible. But the whole effect of transformation, of magic, of mystery, and of beauty, which follows the advent of night along all the watery environs of our great metropolis, appealed to her with deep force.

She had a fancy that the hard prose had left her life forever; that she was now being softly swept into luxurious and romantic surroundings; that the festal and poetic look of city and river symbolized a fairer and kindlier future. The indulgence of this fancy thrilled her delightfully; it was a sort of intoxication; she no longer felt culpable, unfilial; she leaned her graceful young head far over the boat-rail, as though to gain by this act a stronger intimacy with the sweet, drowsy sorceries that encompassed her.

"*My*! ain't it *reel* chilly out here, though?" said Josie. "We'd ought to 'a stayed inside, *hadn't* we, Miss Twining?"

This half broke the spell with Claire. "I like it so much better out here," she answered. "The air isn't too sharp for me, and then everything is so beautiful and strange." She slightly waved one hand toward the brilliant city as she spoke.

Josie did not understand at all. How could there be anything beautiful in a lot of boats screaming to each other after dark with steam-whistles? But she said "yes," and cast a glance at Mr. MacNab, which was meant to veto in him the first symptom of surprise. Claire's superiority must not have the least slight cast upon it. It would never do to encourage Mr. MacNab in undervaluing the compliment of her companionship.

The boat soon landed, and all Claire's lovely illusions fled. Still, here was the city, noisy, populous, alluring. After disembarking at the ferry they were yet far away from Niblo's, and a long

ride ensued, in a car crowded and of ill odor. Then came a walk of considerable length, fleetly taken, for they were a little late by Mr. MacNab's silver time-piece, which afterward proved to be fast.

Mr. MacNab was meanwhile in a sort of nervous trance. He had made what for him was a *tour de force* in mental arithmetic, though he still remained insecure about the exactitude of his calculation. However, he felt confident of one thing: three seats, of a certain kind, would cost three dollars. A dollar would solidly remain to him, though the precise amount of surplus change now in his pocket defied all his mathematical modes of discovery. Pride forbade that he should take out the silver bits and count them. But his residual dollar could at least pay the homeward fares. Cold as this comfort may have been, it took, no doubt, a certain relative warmth when contrasted with dire pecuniary exposure.

They at length reached the theatre, and easily procured upstairs seats that commanded an excellent view of the stage. The curtain had not yet risen. Claire was glad of that; she had the desire not to miss a single detail of the coming performance. She was intently examining her play-bill, when, on a sudden, a man's voice, close at her right, spoke to this effect: —

"Hello, Jimmy, is that yerself?"

The next moment Claire perceived a hand and arm to have been unceremoniously thrust in front of her, while a young man leaned his body very much sideways indeed. She receded, herself, not without annoyance.

Josie sat next to her, and then came Mr. MacNab, who now permitted himself to be shaken hands with across the laps of the two girls.

"Hello, Jack," he responded, at the same time. "What you doin' here?"

"Come t' see the show," said the person called Jack.

"Is that so?"

"'Course. Nuthin' strange 'bout it, is there?"

"That's all right."

"S'pose you're on the same racket yerself. Hey?"

"You bet, ole boy."

All these utterances were exchanged in tones of the most easy cordiality. The two young men had ceased to shake hands, but were leaning each toward the other, apparently quite unconscious of the inconvenience which they inflicted upon both Josie and Claire.

"I got sold t'night," Jack continued, with a blended wink and giggle.

"How's that?"

Jack gave a demonstrative jerk of the elbow, meant to indicate a vacant seat on his further side. "Me an' my gal was comin' t'gether, but she gimme the slip after I'd got mer seats. Sent word she had the headache. Well, I dunno how 'tis, but I reckon I'll have to punch some feller's head, 'fore long. Hey, Jimmy?"

This hostile prophecy was hailed by Jimmy with a laugh whose repressed enjoyment took the semblance of a goose's hiss, except that its tone was more guttural and its volume more massive.

"I guess that's 'bout the size of it, Jack," he replied. The next moment he straightened himself in his seat, having received an exasperated nudge from Josie.

Mr. MacNab's friend followed his example. Claire felt relieved. She examined her programme again. She had already managed to see quite as much as she wished of the person seated next her.

His name was Slocumb. He had a cousin in Greenpoint, an undertaker's son, whom he would occasionally visit of a Sunday, bringing across the river to the doleful quarters of his kinsfolk a demeanor of high condescension and patronage. He was in reality a loafer of very vicious sort, feeding his idleness upon the alms of an infatuated woman, whose devotion he did not repay with even the saving grace of fidelity. He had contrived to hide his real badness of life and lowness of repute from both uncle and cousin, and had won the latter to believe him a superior kind of metropolitan product. Together MacNab and he had partaken of refreshment at the shop of the former's employer, and

from such events had sprung an intimacy with the oyster-opener which had found its most active development in a near drinking-shop. Mr. John Slocumb had a dull, brownish complexion, a light-brown eye, and a faint brown mustache. His face was not ugly, judged by line and feature, but it had a hardness that resembled bronze; you fancied that you might touch its cheek and meet no resistance. There was a look of vice and depravity about it that was not to be explained; the repulsive element was there, but it eluded direct proof; it was no more in eyelid than in nostril, but it was as much in forehead and chin as in either. Claire felt the repelling force almost instantly. Mr. Slocumb's dress was not designed in a fashion to decrease its effect. He wore a suit of green-and-blue plaid, each tint being happily moderated, like evil that prefers to lurk in ambush. The collar of his shirt sloped down at the breast, leaving an unwonted glimpse of his neck visible. But you saw a good deal of his cravat, which was green, barred with broad yellow stripes, and pierced by a pin that appeared to be a hand of pink coral clutching a golden dumb-bell. His figure was slender almost to litheness, but his shoulders outspread two such long and bulky ridges that you at once placed their athletic proportions among the most courageous frauds of tailoring.

The orchestra had now begun to play a lively and rather clangorous prelude. And meanwhile Claire was gradually made to learn that Mr. John Slocumb was keeping up a cool, persistent stare at her half-averted face. She soon became troubled by this unrelaxing scrutiny, as minutes slipped by. Mr. Slocumb had a slim black cane that looked like a polished and rounded whalebone and ended in the head of a bull-dog, with two white specks of ivory for its eyes. Holding this between his knees, he flung it from one hand to another in nervous oscillation, while continuing his stare.

He had decided that Claire was a damned good-looking girl. He had a secret contempt for her escort, Mr. MacNab. He judged all men by the capabilities of their muscle, and he had practical reasons for feeling sure that his own wiry frame held easy resources for the annihilation of "poor little Jimmy." 'She looks putty high-toned,' he was reflecting, 'but I guess that's on'y a put-up job to tease a feller. She can't be much if she's along with that young un. I'll say somepn.'

He was on the verge of carrying out this resolve and addressing Claire, when an event occurred which had the effect of thwarting his meditated impertinence.

The mind of James MacNab was dull and sluggish. But he had seen a way of perhaps securing for himself the undivided attention of Josie. He did not wait for the latter to sanction his design; he feared her opposition to it, and suddenly spoke, leaning forward again with his look directed full upon Claire.

"Miss Twinin'," he said, "'low me t' intrerdooce a friend o' mine, Mr. Slocumb. Mr. Slocumb, Miss Twinin'; Miss Twinin', Mr. Slocumb."

During this ponderous formula of presentation Claire had started, colored, turned toward the neighbor thus pointedly named, and finally bowed with extreme coldness, at once re-averting her face after doing so.

She seized the chance of whispering to Josie: "Why did he do that? I don't want to meet any strangers to-night. I hoped he would understand."

"He'd *ought* to," replied Josie, in swift aside. "I do declare it's *too* bad!"

The next moment she addressed Mr. MacNab. Claire could not hear what she said to him, but her brisk asperity of gesture somewhat plainly denoted reprimand. Her remarks, whatever their nature, were met in stolid silence. He who received them rather enjoyed being scolded by Josie. Her wrath had the charm of exclusiveness; for the time, at least, it vouchsafed to him her unshared heed.

Slocumb made prompt use of his new opportunity. "I guess we'll have a putty decent show to-night," he said. "They say it lays over most ev'rything that's been here fur a year or two."

Claire was now forced to turn and look at the speaker. To ignore him was no longer to preserve dignity. He had received his right of way beyond the barriers of her disregard; he had become an authorized nuisance; civility from herself had taken the instant shape of a debt, due her present escort.

"I shall be glad if it is a good play," she said. Her tones were chill and forced; her manner was repellent because so restrained. Immediately after speaking she looked at the stage. The orchestra had just stopped its brassy tumults. The green width of curtain was slowly rolling upward.

The play began. It was one of those melodramas that are the despair of reformatory critics, yet reach the protective approval of the populace through scenic novelty, swift action, and vivid, if coarse-lined, portraitures. Claire was too infrequent a theatre-goer not promptly to fall under the spell wrought by a playwright deft enough for the capture of others far more experienced than she in tricks of climax, dialogue, and situation.

Occasionally, during the progress of this act, she would murmur pleased comments to Josie. She betrayed an interest that was childish; she had forgotten the proximity of Slocumb. He still stared at her; he had not been effectually repulsed by her suppressed, colorless demeanor. Her refined accent and the musical quality inseparable at all times from her voice had affected him like a new sensation. He failed to follow the actors while they diligently stored up material for future agony. He had enormous confidence in his own powers of fascination with women. It did not occur to him that Claire might be a lady. He knew nothing of ladies. He had met some women who disliked him at sight, who would have none of him, whose fortresses of prejudice he could not storm. But these incidents of disfavor were rare; his list of conquests far outnumbered them.

"She's playin' off," sped his further reflections, once more shaped in the vernacular of actual speech. "I'll let up on her fur a spell. When the fust act's through I'll tackle her agin. *She* aint 's offish as she looks. Bet she ain't!"

The act progressed, and at length ended. Its *finale* foretold a plentitude of woe and disaster; a great deal of pipe, so to speak, had been laid for future calamity; everything promised to be inclement and tempestuous. The audience exchanged murmurs of grim approbation; it was going to get its money's worth of horror.

But now an event abruptly took place which for lurid reality far eclipsed all within the limits of canvas and calcium. Just as the drop-curtain had reached half-way in its descent, a sudden burst of flame was seen to issue from one of the wings. It may at once be said that the fire was completely extinguished soon after the curtain had touched the boards, and that nothing more serious had caused it than the momentary conflagration of some gauze side-scene which was to serve in a coming effect of misty moonlight.

But the large mass of people who witnessed the blaze, and who saw and smelt the smoke as it curled and eddied in black spirts forth from behind the edges of the fallen curtain, had no knowledge of their own slight peril. Here, in the upper tiers, they rose impetuously; it was a prompt and general panic. Dashes were made on every hand toward the staircases. Cries of "fire" sounded from many throats. Claire felt herself swept by sheer bodily pressure at least twenty yards. A few seconds before this she had heard a sort of whimpering shriek from Josie Morley, and then had seen a sidelong wedge of close-packed humanity pry itself between her own form and that of the girl. Josie was clinging with both hands to the arm of James MacNab at the moment of her disappearance.

Claire was more shocked than frightened. She had never before found herself in physical danger; to-night was a crucial test for her nerve and coolness. Both stood the test well. John Slocumb, who had kept close at her side, with his stout arm firmly clasped about her waist, now felt a thrill of admiration as she turned to him and quietly said, while they stood jammed together in the panting throng, whose very fierceness of impetus had produced for it a brief, terrible calm, "I wish you would not hold me like that, please. There's no need of it."

We sometimes hear of the ruling passion that is strong in death. Claire knew there was danger of her being crushed. But she had not lost her head, as the phrase goes. She could still prefer solitary extinction to the fate of being annihilated while in the embrace of Mr. John Slocumb.

He removed his arm. "All right," he muttered, "if you'd rather go it alone."

"I would, thank you," said Claire.

VI

But, as it happened, they were not separated. The crowd, pouring down either staircase, soon thinned. There was better breathing-space, and a fairer chance as well, for the more demoralized to push and struggle. Slocumb kept close behind Claire. He warded off from her a number of desperate thrusts. She was not aware of these defensive tactics; she paid no further heed to her former champion; as her sense of danger lessened, the idea of re-meeting Josie took shape and strength. When the first step of the staircase was reached, she stumbled, and then regained herself. She had no suspicion, at this moment, what actually doughty work Slocumb was doing, just in her rear. He was a man of unusual muscular power, and, like not a few of his rough, pugnacious species, endowed with dogged physical courage. At sight Claire had keenly attracted him; her recent aversion had piqued him into liking her still more. If the occasion had grown one of sharper immediate jeopardy, it is by no means doubtful that he might have shown intrepid heroism as her rescuer. He was gross, coarse, unprincipled, but he had that quality of stubbornly defending what he liked which we often see in the finest of brutes and sometimes in the least fine of men.

Up to this time the prevailing affright had meant bitter ill to all whom it had seized. The threat of a hideous destruction had by no means passed when the crowd about Claire grew less dense; for not far behind her were two opposite streams of life that had met and were each destroying the other's progress by their very madness of encounter. Below stairs, and at one of the intermediate landings, numerous people had already been severely hurt; limbs had been broken, and acute injuries of other kinds had been dealt. The cries heard here and there were made as much by pain as fear.

But powers of good were working with ardor among the lower quarters of the building. A man had sprung forth upon the stage, and was imploring order amid the smoke which partly enveloped him, while at the same time he shouted to the multitude that the fire was now under perfect control. Two policemen and two ushers were abetting him further on, where neither his entreaties nor explanations could reach. Suddenly, with the same speed shown by the panic at its origin, an orderly lull was manifest in its haphazard turmoil. A few caught the sense of the cheering intelligence, and these spread it swiftly from tongue to tongue. At the moment when this change began to be clearly assertive, Claire and Slocumb had almost gained the last landing of the stairs. By the time they were in the lower part of the theatre, not a few persons who desired to air their bravery, now that safety seemed certain, were returning to their seats in dress-circle or parquette. "It's on'y a hoax, after all," said Slocumb. "There's a heap more scared nor hurt. S'pose we git upstairs again? Hey? What d'yer think?"

Claire shook her head. "No, I want to find Josie," she answered. "I don't care to go back. I think she will not, either."

"All right," said Slocumb; "jus' take my hook, an' we'll git out o' here, an' watch fur Jim an' her where they're mos' likely to be."

He extended an arm to Claire as he spoke, and pointed at the same time toward a spacious outer hallway, in which the terrified multitude had already become much more tractable. But Claire resolutely refused to see the offered arm. She had begun to tremble; now that the cause for fright had passed, she was made to realize with how strong a wrench she had screwed her nerves to the sticking-point. A touch of giddiness came upon her; then a knot rose in her throat, and she fought transiently, but with silent success, against a novel sensation that only slight self-surrender might have encouraged into turbid hysteria. Still, she preserved her repugnance, as it were. She would not accept Slocumb's arm. She had made up her mind that he was a vulgar and worthless creature, and moreover she had a distressing instinct that he had thus stayed at her side because of some new-born personal enticement.

He saw plainly her rebuff, though she did not put it in any salient way, choosing to let him suppose it a mere unconscious omission. But he preferred not to let it pass unnoticed.

"Oho," he said, with surly force, while still keeping his arm crooked, and shoving it so prominently toward her that no further subterfuge was possible. "So y' ain't goin' to ketch on, hey? W'at's the reason? We can git 'long better. Come, now, *let's*."

"No," said Claire, driven to bay. "I am very much obliged to you, but I don't need any help."

"Oh! You'll go it alone. All right."

But Mr. Slocumb did not look as if he thought it by any means right. His hard, brown face had clouded with sulky disapprobation. A little gleam of teeth had stolen out under his crisp, short mustache, with an effect not unlike what we see when an angry dog snarls. He felt offended, and this meant that he should either sting with his tongue or smite with his fists. But in the present case a fresh glance at Claire, whose profile was turned to him, made his spleen swiftly perish. Her cheek had got a deep tint of rose; he saw the liquid sparkle of one dark-blue eye, and the dense, rippling hair, chestnut threaded with gold, flowing above one faint-veined temple.

'*Ain't* she a stunner!' he thought. After that he forgot to be offended. They were now in a spacious hallway leading directly to the street. The panic had quite subsided. Knots of people were standing here and there, loudly discussing their late alarms. Some of the women looked and acted as if they were midway between mirth and tears. Most of the men seemed grave; a few were laughing, but in a nervous, furtive way. Along the centre of the broad passage pressed a line of people whom the shock had left too dispirited for further sojourn in the house.

Claire, with her adherent, was among these latter. In quest of Josie, she scanned every face within her field of vision. She had already caught sight of more than one injured unfortunate, further back, where the rush on the lower floor had been most disastrous, and just before she and Slocumb had gained their present open quarters. On this account, rather than because of the wild stampede itself, she had quite lost desire to wait through the rest of the play. It was now her fixed design to regain Josie and urge the plan of an immediate return to Greenpoint. Her sense of having met her father's known wishes with overt disrespect had become an assailant self-reproach. The very harshness of the event which had so rudely broken in upon her enjoyment seemed to have borrowed its disrelish from the rebuke that she had known as waiting all along to shame her. Providence, for the time, had gone with her father; it had abetted him; it had been telling her, in stern terms of personal threat, how flagrant was her filial disloyalty.

She searched for Josie, but found her nowhere visible. She had soon reached the limit of the large passage. A gate now confronted her, where a man waited, ready to give those who sought egress a strip of cardboard insuring their readmission.

Claire took this guarantee of further diversion unconsciously. The man had stood at his post through all the furor that had just ended. He was a sort of new Horatius at the bridge, though possibly with less sublime motive, his wage being a permanent annuity, and his position one of easy proximity to Broadway.

Claire stood in the vestibule of the theatre, and felt the breeze from the street blow on her heated face, before she was well aware just what vantage of exit she had secured. Still she had not seen Josie. And she now began to realize that there was a very strong chance of not seeing Josie. True, the girl might have returned with Mr. MacNab to their former seats in the second gallery of the theatre. But Claire's reluctance to place herself again within the walls of the building had by this time grown a fierce distaste. Meanwhile, Slocumb had maintained an unrelenting nearness to her. She knew this perfectly well. If possible, a more meagre means than the extreme corner of each eye had told her of it; for so great was her repugnance that she had thus far grudged him even the knowledge of receiving the most minute regard. But now she was forced to turn and look at him.

"Do you think Josie can have gone back into the theatre?" she asked, not being herself aware just what frost and distance she had put into voice and manner.

"Dunno," said Slocumb. "Guess she ain't, though. Guess her an' him's out there in the crowd." The crowd to which he referred was already dense, and every moment increasing. It flooded the flag-

stones and a portion of the middle street. Three or four policemen were stirring it to the needful sense of decorum, no less by application than menace of their clubs.

"I am afraid I should never find her there," Claire said, hopelessly.

"That's so," quickly returned Slocumb. "You'd better come inside agin. The scare'll be over in a minnit. The piece'll go on, 'fore long, certain sure."

"I don't care for the piece," replied Claire, with a little toss of the head, more anxious than imperious. "I don't want to see the rest of it. I want to find Josie, and have her take me home at once."

"All right. Jus' step inside an' wait fur 'em both."

Claire looked straight at the speaker. She did not know of the droop in each full-fringed lid of her beautiful eyes. It was an unconscious token of her abhorrence.

"Suppose that they should not return," she said.

"All right," replied Slocumb, brutally impervious. "*I'll* take yer home, if they don't."

"Thank you," faltered Claire. This view of the question gave her a new shock. It was like hearing that the ferry-boats between New York and Greenpoint had stopped running for the night. "But I won't trouble you," she added, trying to make her voice and mien indifferently calm. "I will wait here a little while, and then, if I don't find Josie, I will go home alone."

"Go home alone?" repeated Slocumb, with a sort of sympathetic interrogation that was detestable to her. "Why, how far is it?"

"Oh, not very far," she replied, turning her back on him, and feeling that in another moment she might treat his offensive persistence with the blunt rigor it deserved.

"I thought you was livin' over to Greenpoint," said Slocumb, shifting with tough pertinacity round to her side.

What a man of cleaner life and thought would simply have praised as sweet and chaste about her fired in this corrupt oaf his one gross substitute for sentiment. She could no more appeal to him by her fineness of line, coloring, or movement than the field-flower when cropped by the brute mouth whose appetite its very grace and perfume may perhaps whet. And Claire divined this. Pure things know impure ones, all through the large scheme of nature. There are nicer grades of intelligence, of course, as we move along the upward scale of such antagonisms. The milk will not cloud till we dilute it with the ink-drop, but a white soul can usually note a black one by earlier and wiser signals of alarm.

"Why should I not go home alone?" Claire had been saying to herself. "No one would know me – I could reach the Tenth Street Ferry – I could ask some one, and get the right car – Yes, I will try no more to find Josie – I will break away from this low creature – I have enough money to bring me safely home – I don't care; I will take my chances and slip off – he will not follow me when he sees me shun him like that."

She ignored his last remark. She did not even glance at him where he now stood. Her gaze was fixed on the crowd, and she was watching to find a brief break in its edge, through which she might flit and be lost. The next instant such a chance came. Claire seized it. She made an oblique dart through the large doorway, slanted her nimble steps across the pavement, and was soon breasting the adverse tide, so to speak, of a little human sea. Each man or woman stood in the place of a choppy, obstructive wave. At every moment poor Claire found herself gently buffeting a new impediment, male or female, as the case might be. Since she wanted to move in a course different from that of nearly every one before or beside her, the carrying out of her object involved a good amount of determined propulsion. But she at length gained the open, as it were. She had now only to strike along in a northerly direction until she reached the point at which a certain line of small cars crossed Broadway. She was not sure at just what street this intersection occurred; she knew that it was by no means near by. A cumbrous omnibus rolled clamorously toward her, and for a moment she was inclined to hail it; but a swift look into its lighted space, well freighted with passengers, made her shrink from the concentration of stares that her sex and loneliness must equally provoke. The publicity of the long, lamp-fringed sidewalk, with its incidents of potential if not always tangible policemen, expressed, after all, a more

secure privacy. When she took one of the little trundling cars which would bring her eastward to the ferry, she would not be forced to clamber and stoop and stagger before getting a seat. Their mode of conveyance, too, would be somehow more safely plebeian; they would hold their last fragments of the work-a-day world going back to Greenpoint; in case of insult, she might have her final appeal to some reputable occupant bound for the same destination as herself.

Meanwhile, the big-bodied omnibus clattered by. Claire had resolved to walk. The high-perched driver had not seen her pause, hurry to the curbstone, and then lift a hand which was straightway dropped at the bidding of her changed mood. But this action, while it wrought delay in her progress, rendered somewhat earlier her meeting with one who still obstinately pursued her. Just as she had again started, with slightly quickened pace, the inexterminable Slocumb appeared at her side. He seemed to have used no effort in catching up with her. There was a terrible ease in the way his length of limb accommodated its free stride to Claire's more repressed motions. He had not immediately given chase. She had got rather deep into the crowd about the theatre-doors before his impudence, positive as it always was, had trumped up sufficient real nerve to follow her. Claire continued walking; but she looked at him with fixity as she said, "I suppose you saw that I wanted to go alone."

"'T aint right, nohow," he replied, peering into her face with his bad, hard eyes. "A putty gal like you hadn't ought t' walk the streets all by herself after dark. You lemme go along. Don' look scared; I wouldn't hurt ye fur a cent."

"Oh, I am not afraid of you," said Claire, between her teeth. "Why should I be?"

"That's the ticket. W'y should ye be?"

"I don't want your company. I have shown this to you, and now I tell it to you."

Slocumb laughed. It seemed to Claire that his laugh had the cold of ice and the thrust of steel in it. His lowered arm touched hers with intentional pressure, but she swerved sideways, at once thwarting the contact. He, however, promptly narrowed the distance thus made between them.

"Say!" he now broke forth, in peculiar, confidential undertone, as though a third party were listening. "W'at ye mad fur, hey? You was along with Jimmy MacNab, wasn't ye? An' wasn't we intrerdooced all reg'lar? I'm a better feller 'n Jim, any day in the year. Jus' gimme a show. Won't ye? Say, now, *won't* ye? I took a dead shine to you the minnit I clapped eyes on them two nice pink cheeks – blowed if I didn't! I sez to myself, 'She can walk round any gal I've seen fur a devil of a time,' I sez."

Claire looked straight ahead. She still went quickly along. Her feet and limbs felt light, almost void of sense. Fear had to do with this, and she was keenly frightened. For the first time in her life she knew the terror that feminine honesty has when fronted with the close chance of physical insult.

Slocumb justified her dread. He had no more regard for common laws of restraint than the majority of untamed brutes, when conscious, as in his case, of firm thews and active bulk. As for moral bravery, his nature harbored no concern with such nicer elements. The only vices he did not possess were those for which he had never known an hour of temptation. His father had drank himself to death, and he inherited what was perhaps an embryo taste in the same direction. He got drunk once a fortnight, now, in his twenty-seventh year, whereas, two years ago, these diversions had been much rarer; in a decade, under his uncontrolled conditions, there was a fair chance of his becoming a sot. To speak more generally, the vast social momentum of heredity, which seems to be so plainly understood and so ill appreciated in our golden century, had Slocumb well in its stern grip. There were no outward incident forces, as the philosophic phrase goes, to make his case in any way a hopeful one. He had seen Claire; he had exchanged a word with her; he had liked her. If his liking were put in the baldest form of explanation it would have to deal with rather darksome realisms. And it is always preferable that the pursuant satyr and the unwilling nymph be treated wholly from the poetic and picturesque point of view.

Claire would not speak. She was very frightened, as before has been recorded: she seemed to see, between the gloomy interspaces of the lamps, a phantasmal semblance of her father, looking

untold rebuke at her, and then vanishing only to reappear. She walked onward with fleet energy. An idea shot through her mind that she might call a policeman to rid her of this incubus. But she dismissed the idea at once. It was too savagely desperate even for the confronting dilemma.

By this time Slocumb had begun to see plainly that Claire was proof against all his known methods of conquest. But she was unprotected, and he had a dogged dislike of giving up the siege. The silence continued for nearly five blocks. During this time his eyes scarcely once left her face, gleaming distinct or dim as the lamplight waxed or waned.

"Say!" he at length re-addressed her. "Ain't ye hungry? I was thinkin' a stew would go putty good, just now, or a dish o' ice-cream. P'r'aps ye'd rather tackle sumpn sweet. Hey?"

She made no answer. He peered closer into her face, and repeated the last odious little interrogative monosyllable a good many times. But Claire remained as mute and irresponsive as though it had fallen on stone-deaf ears.

This lure suddenly held out to appetite was his last persuasive stroke. It sprang naturally enough from the man who dealt it. It expressed in the most exhaustive terms just how narrow and barren his conception was of Claire's reasons for shunning him. He stood as the hideous result of a hideous phase of society; and he could no more divine or imagine higher and richer levels of life than if to know of these had meant to be familiar with the soil and climates of a remote star.

He was disappointed and chagrined, but not angry. Anger could not consort with his present state; another kind of heat already filled his veins; one flush kept the other aloof. He had now decided that Claire was not to be conciliated, and yet the perfect lawlessness of his past made him in a manner unable to snap the bond of attraction and leave her. Self-control was a sealed book to him; he had not even opened its cover, apart from learning its rudimentary lessons.

When they had gone five or six blocks further, and the street at which Claire would take the cross-town car was by no means far away, he abruptly caught her arm and drew it close to his side, so holding it with an exertion of purely muscular strength, beside which her own resistance counted for little more than the flutter of a bird.

Even at this most trying juncture she still moved on. He continued to walk, as well. She veered her face toward his, however, forced out of all her previous pitiful disdain, and he saw that she had grown pale as death.

"Let me go," she said. "Don't dare to hold me like this!"

"Look here!" he returned, his tones taking a nasal whisper, and his breath sweeping so close to her nostrils that she caught in it a stale taint, as of liquor drank some time ago. "I wouldn't harm a hair o' your head; you can jus' bet on that. I've took a likin' to you, an' I'll treat ye good. If you wus a lady livin' up t' Fifth Avenyer, ye wouldn't git more respectfuller behaved to nur I'll do."

"If you don't let me go," said Claire, gasping a little as she got out the words, "I'll complain to the first policeman we meet."

He dropped her arm at once, stopping short. "D' ye mean it?" he asked, with great show of reproach. "Say! d' ye mean it?"

But Claire hurried on. She had a wild momentary hope that she had hit at random upon a blessed source of deliverance. Here, however, she had quite miscalculated. Slocumb's outburst had merely formed a bit of the cheap sentimentality which one of his race and stamp would select as the lame makeshift in a forlorn cause.

It chanced that when Claire reached the desired corner a car was opportunely passing. She signaled to it; the driver saw her; it stopped, and she entered it. Meanwhile Slocumb had kept at her side, though with the distance between them materially widened. She paid no heed to the question of whether or not he entered with her. The car was entirely empty as she took her seat. A little later she slipped a five-cent piece into the small glass repository for passengers' fares – that touching proof of the confidence reposed in drivers by those who employ them. Shortly afterward she saw Slocumb standing on the outer platform. Her heart and courage almost failed her, then. He presently walked

inside the car, and paid his fare, as she had done. She expected him to sit down and resume his persecutions, but he did neither. He went out again and stood on the platform.

The little car jingled along Eighth Street. It passed the grim, bastard architecture of the Mercantile Library, once, long ago, an opera house, in which Steffenone sang to assemblages where a gentleman in evening-dress or a lady without her bonnet was a rare enough incident, and nothing prophesied the horse-shoe of resplendent boxes before which Patti and Nilsson have since revealed their vocal charms. Soon afterward it came to Third Avenue, easily betrayed by the flare of gaslight in beer-saloon or liquor-shop, and a thoroughfare in which night revelry seems to have claimed especial stronghold. Near at hand, that hideous monument of philanthropy, the Cooper Union, frowns its unavailing displeasure upon the malt of Schneider and the alcohol of Moriarty, both of which project their noxious forces southward through the Bowery to the City Hall, and northward across many reputable side streets on to the shabby vulgarity of Harlem.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.