GALE ZONA

FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE

Zona Gale
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Friendship Village:

Содержание

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I
THE SIDE DOOR

It is as if Friendship Village were to say: —

"There is no help for it. A telephone line, antique oak chairs, kitchen cabinets, a new doctor, and the like are upon us. But we shall be mediæval directly – we and our improvements. Really, we are so now, if you know how to look."

And are we not so? We are one long street, rambling from sun to sun, inheriting traits of the parent country roads which we unite. And we are cross streets, members of the same family, properly imitative, proving our ancestorship in a primeval genius for trees, or bursting out in inexplicable weaknesses of Court-House, Engine-House, Town Hall, and Telephone Office. Ultimately our stock dwindles out in a slaughter-yard and a few detached houses of milkmen. The cemetery is delicately put behind us, under a hill. There is nothing mediæval in all this, one would say. But then see how we wear our rue: —

When one of us telephones, she will scrupulously ask for the number, not the name, for it says so at the top of every page.

"Give me one-one," she will put it, with an impersonality as fine as if she were calling for four figures. And Central will answer: —

"Well, I just saw Mis' Holcomb go 'crost the street. I'll call you, if you want, when she comes back."

Or, "I don't think you better ring the Helmans' just now. They were awake 'most all night with one o' Mis' Helman's attacks."

Or, "Doctor June's invited to Mis' Sykes's for tea. Shall I give him to you there?"

The telephone is modern enough. But in our use of it is there not a flavour as of an Elder Time, to be caught by Them of Many Years from Now? And already we may catch this flavour, as our Britain great-great-lady grandmothers, and more, may have been conscious of the old fashion of sitting in bowers. If only they were conscious like that! To be sure of it would be to touch their hands in the margins of the ballad books.

Or we telephone to the Livery Barn and Boarding Stable for the little blacks, celebrated for their self-control in encounters with the Proudfits' motor-car. The stable-boy answers that the little blacks are at "the funeral." And after he has gone off to ask his employer what is in then, the employer, who in his unofficial moments is our neighbour, our church choir bass, our landlord even, comes and tells us that, after all, we may have the little blacks, and he himself brings them round at once, – the same little blacks that we meant all along. And when, quite naturally, we wonder at the boy's version, we learn: "Oh, why,

the blacks was standin' just acrost the street, waitin' at the church door, hitched to the hearse. I took 'em out an' put in the bays. I says to myself: 'The corp won't care.'" Someway the Proudfits' car and the stable telephone must themselves have slipped from modernity to old fashion before that incident shall quite come into its own.

So it is with certain of our domestic ways. For example, Mis' Postmaster Sykes – in Friendship Village every woman assumes for given name the employment of her husband – has some fine modern china and much solid silver in extremely good taste, so much, indeed, that she is wont to confess to having cleaned forty, or sixty, or seventy-five pieces – "seventy-five pieces of solid silver have I cleaned this morning. You can say what you want to, nice things are a *rill* care." Yet – surely this is the proper conjunction – Mis' Sykes is currently reported to rise in the night preceding the days of her house cleaning, and to take her carpets out in the back yard, and there softly to sweep and sweep them so that, at their official cleaning next day, the neighbours may witness how little dirt is whipped out on the line. Ought she not to have old-fashioned silver and egg-shell china and drop-leaf mahogany to fit the practice? Instead of daisy and wild-rose patterns in "solid," and art curtains, and mission chairs, and a white-enamelled refrigerator, and a gas range.

We have the latest funeral equipment, – black broadcloth-covered supports, a coffin carriage for up-and-down the aisles, natural palms to order, and the pulleys to "let them down slow";

and yet our individual funeral capacity has been such that we can tell what every woman who has died in Friendship for years has "done without": Mis' Grocer Stew, her of all folks, had done without new-style flat-irons; Mis' Worth had used the bread pan to wash dishes in; Mis' Jeweller Sprague – the *first* Mis' Sprague – had had only six bread and butter knives, her that could get wholesale too… And we have little maid-servants who answer our bells in caps and trays, so to say; but this savour of jestership is authentic, for any one of them is likely to do as of late did Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss's maid, – answer, at dinner-with-guests, that there were no more mashed potatoes, "*or else*, there won't be any left to warm up for your breakfasts." … And though we have our daily newspaper, receiving Associated Press service, yet, as Mis' Amanda Toplady observed, it is "only *very* lately that they have mentioned in the *Daily* the birth of a child, or anything that had anything of a *tang* to it."

We put new wine in old bottles, but also we use new bottles to hold our old wine. For, consider the name of our main street: is this Main or Clark or Cook or Grand Street, according to the register of the main streets of towns? Instead, for its half-mile of village life, the Plank Road, macadamized and arc-lighted, is called Daphne Street. Daphne Street! I love to wonder why. Did our dear Doctor June's father name it when he set the five hundred elms and oaks which glorify us? Or did Daphne herself take this way on the day of her flight, so that when they came to draught the town, they recognized that it *was* Daphne Street,

and so were spared the trouble of naming it? Or did the Future anonymously toss us back the suggestion, thrifty of some day of her own when she might remember us and say, "*Daphne Street!*" Already some of us smile with a secret nod at something when we direct a stranger, "You will find the Telegraph and Cable Office two blocks down, on Daphne Street." "The Commercial Travellers' House, the Abigail Arnold Home Bakery, the Post-office and Armoury are in the same block on Daphne Street." Or, "The Electric Light Office is at the corner of Dunn and Daphne." It is not wonderful that Daphne herself, foreseeing these things, did not stay, but lifted her laurels somewhat nearer Tempe, – although there are those of us who like to fancy that she is here all the time in our Daphne-street magic: the fire bell, the tulip beds, and the twilight bonfires. For how else, in all reason, has the name persisted?

Of late a new doctor has appeared – one may say, has abounded: a surgeon who, such is his zeal, will almost perform an operation over the telephone and, we have come somewhat cynically to believe, would prefer doing so to not operating at all. As Calliope Marsh puts it: —

"He is great on operations, that little doctor. Let him go into any house, an' some o' the family, seems though, has to be operated on, usually inside o' twelve hours. It'll get so that as soon as he strikes the front porch, they'll commence sterilizin' water. I donno but some'll go an' put on the tea-kettle if they even see him drive past."

Why within twelve hours, we wonder when we hear the edict? Why never fourteen hours, or six? How does it happen that no matter at what stage of the malady the new doctor is called, the patient always has to be operated on within twelve hours? Is it that everybody has a bunch and goes about not knowing it until he appears? Or is he a kind of basanite for bunches, and do they come out on us at the sight of him? There are those of us who almost hesitate to take his hand, fearing that he will fix us with his eye, point somewhere about, and tell us, "Within twelve hours, *if* you want your life your own." But in spite of his skill and his modernity, in our midst there persist those who, in a scientific night, would die rather than risk our advantages.

Thus the New shoulders the Old, and our transition is still swift enough to be a spectacle, as was its earlier phase which gave over our Middle West to cabins and plough horses, with a tendency away from wigwams and bob-whites. And in this local warfare between Old and New a chief figure is Calliope Marsh – who just said that about the new doctor. She is a little rosy wrinkled creature officially – though no other than officially – pertaining to sixty years; mender of lace, seller of extracts, and music teacher, but of the three she thinks of the last as her true vocation. ("I come honestly by that," she says. "You know my father before me was rill musical. I was babtized Calliope because a circus with one come through the town the day't I was born.") And with her, too, the grafting of to-morrow upon yesterday is unconscious; or only momentarily conscious, as when she phrased it: —

"Land, land, I like New as well as anybody. But I want it should be put in the Old kind o' gentle, like an *i*-dee in your mind, an' not sudden, like a bullet in your brain."

In her acceptance of innovations Calliope symbolizes the fine Friendship tendency to scientific procedure, to the penetration of the unknown through the known, the explication of mystery by natural law. And when to the bright-figured paper and pictures of her little sitting room she had added a print of the Mona Lisa, she observed: —

"She sort o' lifts me up, like somethin' I've thought of, myself. But I don't see any sense in raisin' a question about what her smile means. I told the agent so. 'Whenever I set for my photograph,' I says to him, 'I always have that same silly smile on my face.'"

With us all the Friendship idea prevails: we accept what Progress sends, but we regard it in our own fashion. Our improvements, like our entertainments, our funerals, our holidays, and our very loves, are but Friendship Village exponents of the modern spirit. Perhaps, in a tenderer significance than she meant, Calliope characterized us when she said: —

"This town is more like a back door than a front – or, givin' it full credit, *anyhow*, it's no more'n a side door, with no vines."

For indeed, we are a kind of middle door to experience, minus the fuss of official arriving and, too, without the old odours of the kitchen savoury beds; but having, instead, a serene side-door existence, partaking of both electric bells and of neighbours with

shawls pinned over their heads.

Only at one point Calliope was wrong. There are vines, with tendrils and flowers and many birds.

II
THE DÉBUT

Mrs. Ricker, "washens, scrubben, work by the day or Our," as the sign of her own lettering announced, had come into a little fortune by the death of her first husband, Al Kitton, early divorced and late repentant. Just before my arrival in Friendship she had bought a respectable frame house in the heart of the village, – for a village will have a heart instead of having a boulevard, – and with her daughter Emerel she had set up a modest establishment with Ingrain carpets and parlour pieces, and a bit of grass in front. Thus Emerel Kitton – we, in our simple, penultimate way, called it Kitten – became a kind of heiress. She had been christened Emma Ella, but her mother, of her love of order, had tidied the name to Emerel, and Friendship had adopted the form, perhaps as having about it something pleasing and jewel-like. Though Emerel was in the thirties at the time of her inheritance, she was still pretty, shy, conformable; and yet there was no disguising that she was nearly a spinster when, as soon as the white house was settled, Mrs. Ricker issued invitations to her daughter's coming-out party.

You aRe Invite to A
Comen Out Recep
Next wenesday Night at eigt

At Her Home
Emma Ella Kitton
Mrs. Ricker and Kitton
Pa

the invitations said, and the "Pa" was divined to imply "Please answer."

"It's Kitton's money an' it's his daughter. I hed to hev him in it somehow," Mrs. Ricker explained her double signature. "You see," she added, "up till now I ain't never been situate' so's Emerel *could* come out. I've always wanted to give her things, too, but 't seems like when I've tried, everything's shook its fist at me. It ain't too late. Emerel looks just like she did fifteen years ago, don't she?"

It was at once observed that if Emerel shared her mother's enthusiasm for the project, she did not betray it. But then no one knew much about Emerel save that she was engaged, and had been so for some years, to big Abe Daniel, the Methodist tenor, a circumstance wholly unconsidered in the scheme of her début.

Quite simply and with happy pride, Mrs. Ricker and Kitton issued her invitations to every one in the village who had ever employed her. And the village was divided against itself.

"How can we?" Mis' Postmaster Sykes demanded, "I ask you. There's things to omit an' there's things to observe. We should be The Laughing Stock."

"The Laughing Stock," variously echoed her followers.

On the other hand: —

"Land, o' course we'll all go," Mis' Amanda Toplady comfortably settled it, "an' take Emerel a deboo present, civilized. The dear child."

And to that many of us gladly assented, Timothy, big Amanda's little husband, going so far as to add:

"I do vum, the Sykeses feels the post-office like it was that much oats."

A day later Timothy's opinion seemed, he thought, to be verified. Mis' Postmaster Sykes issued "written invites to an evening party, hot supper and like that," as Friendship communicated it, to be given on the very night of Emerel's début.

Friendship was shaken. Never in the history of the village had two social affairs been set for the same hour. Indeed, more than one hostess had postponed an impending tea-party or thimble party or "afternoon coffee" or "five o'clock supper" on hearing that another was planned for the same day. And now, when there were those of us anxious to "do something nice" for hard-working little Mrs. Ricker, the Sykeses had deliberately sought the forbidden ground. And Society dare not deny Mis' Sykes, for besides "being who she was" ("She's the leader in Friendship if they *is* a leader," we said, emphatically implying that there was none), she kept two maids, – little young thing and a *rill* hired girl, – entertained "above the most," put out her sewing and wore, we kept in the back of our minds, a bar pin, solid, with "four solitaires" in it. And, "Oh, you know," Calliope Marsh admitted to me later, "Mis' Sykes is rilly a great society woman. They isn't

anybody's funeral that she don't get to ride to the cemet'ry."

Mrs. Ricker and Kitton accepted the situation with fine philosophy.

"Of course," she said, "the whole town can dance to the Sykeses' fiddlin' if they want. But it's a pretty pass if they do let anybody step in before me that's washed for 'em an' cleaned their houses years on end."

My own course was pleasantly simple. Mrs. Ricker and Kitton had included me on her list, accredited, no doubt, because a few weeks earlier she had helped me to settle my belongings in Oldmoxon house, and since then had twice swept for me, and was to come in a day or two to do so again. As I had instantly accepted her invitation, I had no choice when Mis' Sykes's "written invite" came, even though when it arrived Mis' Sykes herself was calling on me.

"Well said," she observed, when she saw a neighbour's little girl, her temporary servitor, coming up my walk with the invitations in a paper bag to be kept clean, "I meant to get my call made on you before your invite got here. I hope you'll overlook taking us both together. I've meant to call on you before, but I declare it looked like a mountain to me to get started out. Don't you find your calls a rill chore?"

But Mis' Sykes's visit was, she confessed, "Errand as well as Call."

"The Friendship Married Ladies' Cemetery Improvement Sodality," she told me, as she rose to go, "is to our wits' end to

get up a new entertainment. We want to give something, and we want it should be rill new and spicey, but of course it has to be pretty quiet, owing to the Cause – the Dead, so. It bars us from home-talent evenings or festivals or like that. And the minute I saw the inside o' your house it come to me: of course you know your house is differ'nt from Friendship. If I'd been shot out of a gun into it, I wouldn't 'a' sensed I was in Friendship at all. You've got nice things, all carved an' hard to dust. The Oldmoxons use' to do a lot o' entertainin', an' everybody remembers it, an' the house has been shut quite some time. Well, now, you've been ask' to join the Sodality. An' if you was to announce an Evening Benefit for it, here in your home, the whole town'd come out to it hot-foot. We're owin' Zittelhof on Eph Cadoza's coffin yet, an' I shouldn't wonder an' that one evening would pay him all off *and*, same time, get you rill well acquainted. Don't you think it's a nice *i*-dea?"

As I had come to Friendship chiefly to get away from everywhere, I thought that I had never heard such a bad plan. But inasmuch as I was obliged to refuse outright one invitation of my visitor's, about the other I weakly temporized and promised to let her know. And she went away, deploring my hasty acceptance of Mrs. Ricker and Kitton, although, "How could you tell?" she strove to excuse me. "A person coming to a strange town so, *of course* they accept all their invitations good faith. And then her signing her name that way might mislead you. It gives a rill sensation of a hyphen. But still, the spelling – after all you'd ought

– "

She looked at me with tardy suspicion.

"Some geniuses can't spell very well, you know," I defended my discrimination.

"That's so," she admitted brightly; "I see you're literary."

The next morning the other principal, Mrs. Ricker and Kitton, arrived to keep her engagement with me. She was a little woman, suggesting wire, which gave and sprang when she moved, and paper, which crackled when she laughed. Her speech was all independence, confidence, self-possession; but in her silences I have seldom seen so wistful a face as hers.

In response to my question: —

"Oh," Mrs. Ricker and Kitton said brightly, "everything's goin' fine. I s'pose the town's still decidin' between us, but up to now I ain't had but one regrets that can't come – that's Mis' Stew. She wrote it was on account o' domestic affliction, an' I hadn't heard what, so I went right down. 'Seems nobody had died – she ain't much of any family, anyway. But she'd wrote her letter out of a letter book, an' the only one she could find regrettin' an invite give domestic affliction for the reason. She said she didn't know a letter like that hed to be true, an' I don't know as it does, either."

She stood silent for a moment, searching my face.

"Look-a-here," she said; "they's somethin' I thought of. Mebbe you've heard of it bein' done in the City somewheres. Do you s'pose folks'd be willin' to send Emerel's an' my funeral flowers to the comin' out party *instead*?"

"Funeral…?" I doubted.

"Grave flowers," she explained. "You know, they're a perfect waste so far's the General Dead is concerned. An' land knows, the fam'ly don't sense 'em much more. Anyway, Emerel an' I ain't got any fam'ly. An' if folks'd be willin' to send us what flowers they would send us if we died *now*, then they'd do us some good. We'll never want 'em more'n we do now, dead or alive. 'Least, I won't. Emerel, she don't seem to care. But do you think it'd be all right if I was to mention it out around?"

My desire to have this happen I did my best not to confuse with a disinterested opinion. But indeed Mrs. Ricker and Kitton was seldom in need of an opinion, as was proved that night by the appearance of this notice in the Friendship *Daily*: —

> All that would give flowers when dead please send same anyhow and not expected to send same if we do die afterwards.
> *Mrs. Ricker and Kitton.*

All of Friendship society which intended to accept Mis' Sykes's invitation hastened with relieved eagerness to follow with flowers its regrets to the "comen out recep." For every one was genuinely attached to the little laundress and interested in her welfare – up to the point of sacrificing social interests in the eyes of the Sykeses. Friendship gardens were rich with Autumn, cosmos and salvia and opulent asters, and on the morning of the two parties this store of sweetness was rifled for the débutante. By noon Mrs. Ricker and Kitton was saying in awe, "Nobody

in Friendship ever had this many flowers, dead, or alive, or rich." And although some of us grieved that Mis' Postmaster Sykes had shown what she named her good-will by ordering from the town a pillow of white carnations (but with no "wording"), Mrs. Ricker and Kitton received even this suggestive token with simple-hearted delight.

"It'll look lovely on the lamp shelf," she observed. "I've often planned how nice my parlour'd trim up for a funeral."

In the preparation for the two events, the one unconcerned and unconsulted appeared to be the débutante herself. We never said "Emerel's party"; we all said "Mis' Ricker's party." We knew that Mrs. Ricker and Kitton was putting painstaking care on Emerel's coming-out dress, which was to be a surprise, but otherwise Emerel was seldom even mentioned in connection with her début. And whenever we saw her, it was as Friendship had seen her for two years, – walking quietly with Abe Daniel, her betrothed.

"It's doin' things kind o' backwards," Calliope Marsh said, "engaged first an' comin' out in society afterwards. But I donno as it's any more backwards than ridin' to the cemet'ry feet first. What's what all depends on what you agree on for What. If it ain't your soul you mean about," she added cryptically.

The Topladys and others of us who united to uphold Emerel, and especially to uphold Emerel's mother, could not but realize that the majority of Friendship society had regretted to decline the début party, and had been pleased to accept the hospitality

of the Postmaster Sykeses. I dare say that this may have been partly why, in the usual self-indulgence of challenge, I put on my prettiest frock for the party and prepared to set out somewhat early, hoping for the amusement of sharing in the finishing touches. But as I was leaving my house Calliope Marsh arrived, buttoned tightly in her best gray henrietta, her cheeks hot with some intense excitement.

"Well," she said without preface, "they've done it. Emerel Kitton's married. She's just married Abe at the parsonage to get out o' bein' debooed. They've gone to take the train now."

No one could fail to see what this would mean to Mrs. Ricker and Kitton, and, rather than the newly married Emerel, it was she who absorbed our speculation.

"Mis' Ricker just slimpsed," Calliope told me. "I says to her: 'Look here, Mis' Ricker, don't you go givin' in. Your kitchen's a sight with the good things o' your hand – think o' that,' I told her; 'think how you mortgaged your very funeral for to-night, an' brace yourself up,' An' she says, awful pitiful: 'I *can't*, Calliope,' she says. ''T seems like this slips the pins right out. They ain't nothin' to deboo with now, anyway,' she told me. 'How can I?'"

"Oh, poor Mrs. Ricker!" I exclaimed.

Calliope looked at me intently.

"Well," she said, "that's what I run in about. You're a stranger just fresh come here. You ain't met folks much yet. An' Mis' Sykes, she's just crazy to get a-hold o' you an' your house for the Sodality. An' the only thing I could think of for Mis' Ricker –

well, would you stand up with Mis' Ricker to-night an' shake all their hands? An' sort o' leave her deboo for *you*, you might say?"

I think that I loved Calliope for this even before she understood my assent. But she added something which puzzled me.

"If I was you," she observed, "I'd do somethin' else to-night, too. You could do it – or I could do it for you. You don't expect to let Mis' Sykes hev the Sodality here, do you?"

"I might have had it here," I said impulsively, "if she had not done this to poor little Mrs. Ricker."

"Would – would you give me the lief to say that?" Calliope asked demurely.

I had no objection in the world to any one knowing my opinion of Mis' Postmaster Sykes's proceeding, – "one of her preposterousnesses," Calliope called it, – and I said so, and set off for Mrs. Ricker's, while Calliope herself flew somewhere else on some last mission. And, "Mis' Sykes'd ought to be showed," she called to me over-shoulder. "That woman's got a sinful pride. She'd wear fur in August to prove she could afford to hev moths!"

The Ricker parlour was a garden which sloped gently, as a garden should, for the house was old and the parlour floor sagged toward the entrance so that the front of the organ was propped on wooden blocks. The room was bedizened with flowers, in dishes, tins, and gallon jars, so that it seemed some way an alien thing, like a prune horse. On the lamp shelf was the huge white carnation pillow, across which the hostess had inscribed

"welcom," in stems.

Within ten minutes of the appointed hour all those who had been pleased to accept were in the rooms, and Mrs. Ricker and Kitton and I, standing among the funeral flowers, received the guests while Calliope, hovering at the door, gave the key with: "Ain't you heard? Emerel's a bride instead of a debbytant. Ain't it a rill joke? Married to-night an' we're here to celebrate. Throw off your things." Then she hopelessly involved them in a presentation to me, and between us we contrived to elide Mrs. Ricker and Kitton from all save her perfunctory office, until her voice and lips ceased their trembling. Poor little hostess, in her starched lawn which had seemed to her adequate for her unpretentious rôle of mother! All her humour and independence and self-possession had left her, and in their stead, on what was to have been her great night, had settled only the immemorial wistfulness.

Although I did not then foresee it, the guests that evening were destined to point me to many meanings, like sketches in the note-book of a patient Pen. I am fond of remembering them as I saw them first: the Topladys, that great Mis' Amanda, ponderous, majestic, and suggesting black grosgrain, her beaming way of whole-hearted approval not quite masking the critical, house-wife glances which she continually cast; and little Timothy, her husband, who, in company, went quite out of his head and could think of nothing to say save "Blisterin' Benson, what I think is this: ain't everything movin' off nice?" Dear Doctor June, pastor

emeritus of Friendship, since he was so identified with all the village interests that not many could tell from what church he had retired. (At each of the three Friendship churches he rented a pew, and contributed impartially to their beneficences; and, "seems to me the Lord would of," he sometimes apologized for this.) Photographer Jimmy Sturgis, who stood about with one eye shut, and who drove the 'bus, took charge of the mail-bags, conducted a photograph gallery, and painted portraits. ("The Dead From Photos a specialty," was tacked on the risers of the stairs leading to his studio.) And Mis' Photographer Sturgis, who was an invalid and "very, very seldom got out." (Not, I was to learn, an invalid because of ill health, but by nature. She was an invalid as other people are blond or brunette, and no more to be said about it.) Miss Liddy Ember, the village seamstress, and her beautiful sister Ellen, who was "not quite right," and whom Miss Liddy took about and treated like a child until the times when Ellen "come herself again," and then she quite overshadowed in personality little busy Miss Liddy. Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, and Eppleby Holcomb, and the "Other" Holcombs; Mis' Doctor Helman, the Gekerjecks, who "kept the drug store," and scented the world with musk and essences. ("Musk on one handkerchief and some kind o' flower scent on your other one," Mis' Gekerjeck was wont to say, "then you can suit everybody, say who who will.") – These and the others Mrs. Ricker and Kitton and I received, standing before the white carnation pillow. And I, who had come to Friendship to get away from everywhere,

found myself the one to whom they did honour, as they were to have honoured Emerel.

When the hour for supper came, Mrs. Ricker and Kitton excused herself because she must "see to gettin' it on to the plates," and Mis' Toplady, Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, Calliope, and I "handed." We had all lent silver and dishes – indeed, save at Mis' Sykes's (and of course at the Proudfits' of Proudfit estate), there is rarely a Friendship party at which the pantries of the guests are not represented, an arrangement seeming almost to hold in anticipation certain social and political ideals. (If the telephone yields us an invitation from those whom we know best, we always answer: "Thank you. I will. What do you want me to send over?" Is there such a matter-of-course federation on any boulevard?) And after the guests had been served and the talk had been resumed, we four who had "handed" sat down, with Mrs. Ricker and Kitton, at meat, at a corner of the kitchen table.

"Everything tastes like so much chips to me when I hev company, anyhow," the hostess said sadly, "but to-night it's got the regular salt-pork taste. When I'm nervous or got delegates or comin' down with anything, I always taste salt pork."

"Well, everything's all of a whirl to me," Calliope confessed, "an' I should think your brains, Mis' Ricker, 'd be fair rarin' 'round in your head."

"Who didn't eat what?" Mrs. Ricker and Kitton asked listlessly. "I meant to keep track when the plates come out, but I

didn't. Did they all take a-hold rill good?"

"They wa'n't any mincin' 't *I* see," Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss assured her. "Everything you had was lovely, an' everybody made 'way with all they got."

We might have kept indefinitely on at these fascinating comparisons, but some unaccountable stir and bustle and rise of talk in the other rooms persuaded our attention. ("Can they be goin' *home*?" cried that great Mis' Amanda Toplady. "If they are, I'll go bail Timothy Toplady started it." And, "I bet they've broke the finger bowl," Mrs. Ricker and Kitton prophesied darkly.) And then we all went in to see what had happened, but it was what none of us could possibly have forecast: Crowding in the parlour, overflowing into the sitting room, still entering from the porch, were Postmaster and Mis' Postmaster Sykes and *all* their guests.

It was quite as if Wishes had gathered head and spirited them there. I remember the white little face of Mrs. Ricker and Kitton, luminously gratified to the point of triumph; and Mis' Sykes's brisk and cordial "No reason why we shouldn't go to two receptions in an evening, like they do in the City, Mis' Ricker, is they?" And the aplomb of the hostess's self-respecting, corrective "*An'* Kitton. 'Count of Al bein' so thoughtful in death." And then to my amazement Mis' Postmaster Sykes turned to me and held out both hands.

"I *am* so *glad*," she said, almost in the rhythm of certain exhausts, "that you've decided to hev Sodality at your house. You

must just let me take a-hold of it for you and *run* it. And I'm going to propose your name the very next meeting we hev, can't I?"

I walked home with Calliope when we had left Mrs. Ricker and Kitton, tired but triumphant. ("Land," the hostess said, "now it's turned out so nice, I donno but I'm rill pleased Emerel's married. I'd hate to think o' borrowin' all them things over again for a weddin'.") And in the dark street Calliope said to me: —

"You see what I done, I guess. I told you Mis' Sykes was reg'lar up-in-arms about usin' your house – though I think the rill reason is she wants to get upstairs in it. You know how some are. So I marched myself up there before the party, an' I told her you wasn't goin' to hev Sodality sole because you thought she'd been so mean to Mis' Ricker. An' I give her to understand sharp off 't she'd better do what she did do if she wanted you in the Sodality at all. 'An',' s'I, 'I donno what she'll think o' you anyway, not knowin' enough to go to two companies in one evenin', like the City, even if one is your own.' She see reason. You know, Mis' Sykes an' I are kind o' connections, but you can make even your relations see sense if you go at 'em right. I donno," Calliope ended doubtfully, "but I done wrong. An' yet I feel good friends with my backbone too, like I'd done right!"

And it was so that having come to Friendship Village to get away from everywhere, I yet found myself abruptly launched in its society, committed to its Sodality, and, best of all, friends with Calliope Marsh.

III
NOBODY SICK, NOBODY POOR

Two days before Thanksgiving the air was already filled with white turkey feathers, and I stood at a window and watched until the loneliness of my still house seemed like something pointing a mocking finger at me. When I could bear it no longer I went out in the snow, and through the soft drifts I fought my way up the Plank Road toward the village.

I had almost passed the little bundled figure before I recognized Calliope. She was walking in the middle of the road, as in Friendship we all walk in winter; and neither of us had umbrellas. I think that I distrust people who put up umbrellas on a country road in a fall of friendly flakes.

Instead of inquiring perfunctorily how I did, she greeted me with a fragment of what she had been thinking – which is always as if one were to open a door of his mind to you instead of signing you greeting from a closed window.

"I just been tellin' myself," she looked up to say without preface, "that if I could see one more good old-fashion' Thanksgivin', life'd sort o' smooth out. An' land knows, it needs some smoothin' out for me."

With this I remember that it was as if my own loneliness spoke for me. At my reply Calliope looked at me quickly – as if I, too,

had opened a door.

"Sometimes Thanksgivin' *is* some like seein' the sun shine when you're feelin' rill rainy yourself," she said thoughtfully.

She held out her blue-mittened hand and let the flakes fall on it in stars and coronets.

"I wonder," she asked evenly, "if you'd help me get up a Thanksgivin' dinner for a few poor sick folks here in Friendship?"

In order to keep my self-respect, I recall that I was as ungracious as possible. I think I said that the day meant so little to me that I was willing to do anything to avoid spending it alone. A statement which seems to me now not to bristle with logic.

"That's nice of you," Calliope replied genially. Then she hesitated, looking down Daphne Street, which the Plank Road had become, toward certain white houses. There were the homes of Mis' Mayor Uppers, Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, and the Liberty sisters, – all substantial dignified houses, typical of the simple prosperity of the countryside.

"The only trouble," she added simply, "is that in Friendship I don't know of a soul rill sick, nor a soul what you might call poor."

At this I laughed, unwillingly enough. Dear Calliope! Here indeed was a drawback to her project.

"Honestly," she said reflectively, "Friendship can't seem to do anything like any other town. When the new minister come here, he give out he was goin' to do settlement work. An' his second

week in the place he come to me with a reg'lar hang-dog look. 'What kind of a town is this?' he says to me, disgusted. 'They ain't nobody sick in it an' they ain't nobody poor!' I guess he could 'a' got along without the poor – most of us can. But we mostly like to hev a few sick to carry the flowers off our house plants to, an' now an' then a tumbler o' jell. An' yet I've known weeks at a time when they wasn't a soul rill flat down sick in Friendship. It's so now. An' that's hard, when you're young an' enthusiastic, like the minister."

"But where are you going to find your guests then, Calliope?" I asked curiously.

"Well," she said brightly, "I was just plannin' as you come up with me. An' I says to myself: 'God give me to live in a little bit of a place where we've all got enough to get along on, an' Thanksgivin' finds us all in health. It looks like He'd afflicted us by lettin' us hev nobody to do for.' An' then it come to me that if we was to get up the dinner, – with all the misery an' hunger they is in the world, – God in His goodness would let some of it come our way to be fed. 'In the wilderness a cedar,' you know – as Liddy Ember an' I was always tellin' each other when we kep' shop together. An' so to-day I said to myself I'd go to work an' get up the dinner an' trust there'd be eaters for it."

"Why, Calliope," I said, "Calliope!"

"I ain't got much to do with, myself," she added apologetically; "the most I've got in my sullar, I guess, is a gallon jar o' watermelon pickles. I could give that. You don't think it sounds

irreverent – connectin' God with a big dinner, so?" she asked anxiously.

And, at my reply: —

"Well, then," she said briskly, "let's step in an' see a few folks that might be able to tell us of somebody to do for. Let's ask Mis' Mayor Uppers an' Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, an' the Liberty girls."

Because I was lonely and idle, and because I dreaded inexpressibly going back to my still house, I went with her. Her ways were a kind of entertainment, and I remember that I believed my leisure to be infinite.

We turned first toward the big shuttered house of Mis' Mayor Uppers, to whom, although her husband had been a year ago removed from office, discredited, and had not since been seen in Friendship, we yet gave her old proud title, as if she had been Former Lady Mayoress. For the present mayor, Authority Hubblethwaite, was, as Calliope said, "unconnect'."

I watched Mis' Uppers in some curiosity while Calliope explained that she was planning a dinner for the poor and sick, – "the lame and the sick that's comfortable enough off to eat," – and could she suggest some poor and sick to ask? Mis' Uppers was like a vinegar cruet of mine, slim and tall, with a little grotesquely puckered face for a stopper, as if the whole known world were sour.

"I'm sure," she said humbly, "it's a nice i-dea. But I declare, I'm put to it to suggest. We ain't got nobody sick nor nobody poor

in Friendship, you know."

"Don't you know of anybody kind o' hard up? Or somebody that, if they ain't down sick, feels sort o' spindlin'?" Calliope asked anxiously.

Mis' Uppers thought, rocking a little and running a pin in and out of a fold of her skirt.

"No," she said at length, "I don't know a soul. I think the church'd give a good deal if a real poor family'd come here to do for. Since the Cadozas went, we ain't known which way to look for poor. Mis' Ricker gettin' her fortune so puts her beyond the wolf. An' Peleg Bemus, you can't *get* him to take anything. No, I don't know of anybody real decently poor."

"An' nobody sick?" Calliope pressed her wistfully.

"Well, there's Mis' Crawford," admitted Mis' Uppers; "she had a spell o' lumbago two weeks ago, but I see her pass the house to-day. Mis' Brady was laid up with toothache, too, but the *Daily* last night said she'd had it out. An' Mis' Doctor Helman did have one o' her stomach attacks this week, an' Elzabella got out her dyin' dishes an' her dyin' linen from the still-room – you know how Mis' Doctor always brings out her nice things when she's sick, so't if she should die an' the neighbours come in, it'd all be shipshape. But she got better this time an' helped put 'em back. I declare it's hard to get up anything in the charity line here."

Calliope sat smiling a little, and I knew that it was because of her secret certainty that "some o' the hunger" would come her way, to be fed.

"I can't help thinkin'," she said quietly, "that we'll find somebody. An' I tell you what: if we do, can I count on you to help some?"

Mis' Mayor Uppers flushed with quick pleasure.

"Me, Calliope?" she said. And I remembered that they had told me how the Friendship Married Ladies' Cemetery Improvement Sodality had been unable to tempt Mis' Uppers to a single meeting since the mayor ran away. "Oh, but I couldn't though," she said wistfully.

"No need to go to the table if you don't want," Calliope told her. "Just bake up somethin' for us an' bring it over. Make a couple o' your cherry pies – did you get hold of any cherries to put up this year? Well, a couple o' your cherry pies an' a batch o' your nice drop sponge cakes," she directed. "Could you?"

Mis' Mayor Uppers looked up with a kind of light in her eyes.

"Why, yes," she said, "I could, I guess. I'll bake 'em Thanksgivin' mornin'. I – I was wonderin' how I'd put in the day."

When we stepped out in the snow again, Calliope's face was shining. Sometimes now, when my faith is weak in any good thing, I remember her look that November morning. But all that I thought then was how I was being entertained that lonely day.

The dear Liberty sisters were next, Lucy and Viny and Libbie Liberty. We went to the side door, – there were houses in Friendship whose front doors we tacitly understood that we were never expected to use, – and we found the sisters down cellar, with shawls over their heads, feeding their hens through the cellar

window, opening on the glassed-in coop under the porch.

In Friendship it is a point of etiquette for a morning caller never to interrupt the employment of a hostess. So we obeyed the summons of the Liberty sisters to "come right down"; and we sat on a firkin and an inverted tub while Calliope told her plan and the hens fought for delectable morsels.

"My grief!" said Libbie Liberty, tartly, "where you goin' to *get* your sick an' poor?"

Mis' Viny, balancing on the window ledge to reach for eggs, looked back at us.

"Friendship's so comfortable that way," she said, "I don't see how you can get up much of anything."

And little Miss Lucy, kneeling on the floor of the cellar to measure more feed, said without looking up: —

"You know, since mother died we ain't never done anything for holidays. No – we can't seem to want to think about Thanksgiving or Christmas or like that."

They all turned their grave lined faces toward us.

"We want to let the holidays just slip by without noticin'," Miss Viny told us. "Seems like it hurts less that way."

Libbie Liberty smiled wanly.

"Don't you know," she said, "when you hold your hand still in hot water, you don't feel how hot the water really is? But when you move around in it some, it begins to burn you. Well, when we let Thanksgiving an' Christmas alone, it ain't so bad. But when we start to move around in 'em – "

Her voice faltered and stopped.

"We miss mother terrible," Miss Lucy said simply.

Calliope put her blue mitten to her mouth, but her eyes she might not hide, and they were soft with sympathy.

"I know – I know," she said. "I remember the first Christmas after my mother died – I ached like the toothache all over me, an' I couldn't bear to open my presents. Nor the next year I couldn't either – I couldn't open my presents with any heart. But – " Calliope hesitated, "that second year," she said, "I found somethin' I could do. I saw I could fix up little things for other folks an' take some comfort in it. Like mother would of."

She was silent for a moment, looking thoughtfully at the three lonely figures in the dark cellar of their house.

"Your mother," she said abruptly, "stuffed the turkey for a year ago the last harvest home."

"Yes," they said.

"Look here," said Calliope; "if I can get some poor folks together, – or even *one* poor folk, or hungry, – will you three come over to my house an' stuff the turkey? The way – I can't help thinkin' the way your mother would of, if she'd been here. An' then," Calliope went on briskly, "could you bring some fresh eggs an' make a pan o' custard over to my house? An' mebbe one o' you'd stir up a sunshine cake. You must know how to make your mother's sunshine cake?"

There was another silence in the cellar when Calliope had done, and for a minute I wondered if, after all, she had not failed,

and if the bleeding of the three hearts might be so stanched. It was not self-reliant Libbie Liberty who spoke first; it was gentle Miss Lucy.

"I guess," she said, "I could, if we all do it. I know mother would of."

"Yes," Miss Viny nodded, "mother would of."

Libbie Liberty stood for a moment with compressed lips.

"It seems like not payin' respect to mother," she began; and then shook her head. "It ain't that," she said; "it's only missin' her when we begin to step around the kitchen, bakin' up for a holiday."

"I know – I know," Calliope said again. "That's why I said for you to come over in my kitchen. You come over there an' stir up the sunshine cake, too, an' bake it in my oven, so's we can hev it et hot. Will you do that?"

And after a little time they consented. If Calliope found any sick or poor, they would do that.

"We ain't gettin' many i-dees for guests," Calliope said, as we reached the street, "but we're gettin' helpers, anyway. An' some dinner, too."

Then we went to the house of Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss – called so, of course, to distinguish her from the "Other" Holcombs.

"Don't you be shocked at her," Calliope warned me, as we closed Mis' Holcomb's gate behind us; "she's dreadful diff'r'nt an' bitter since Abigail was married last month. She's got hold o'

some kind of a Persian book, in a decorated cover, from the City; an' now she says your soul is like when you look in a lookin'-glass – that there ain't really nothin' there. An' that the world's some wind an' the rest water, an' they ain't no God only your own breath – oh, poor Mis' Holcomb!" said Calliope. "I guess she ain't rill balanced. But we ought to go to see her. We always consult Mis' Holcomb about everything."

Poor Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss! I can see her now in her comfortable dining room, where she sat cleaning her old silver, her thin, veined hands as fragile as her grandmother's spoons.

"Of course, you don't know," she said, when Calliope had unfolded her plans, "how useless it all seems to me. What's the use – I keep sayin' to myself now'-days; what's the use? You put so much pains on somethin', an' then it goes off an' leaves you. Mebbe it dies, an' everything's all wasted. There ain't anything to tie to. It's like lookin' in a glass all the while. It's seemin', it ain't bein'. We ain't certain o' nothin' but our breath, an' when that goes, what hev you got? What's the use o' plannin' Thanksgivin' for anybody?"

"Well, if you're hungry, it's kind o' nice to get fed up," said Calliope, crisply. "Don't you know a soul that's hungry, Mame Bliss?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said, "I don't. Nor nobody sick in body."

"Nobody sick in body," Calliope repeated absently.

"Soul-sick an' soul-hungry you can't feed up," Mis' Holcomb added.

"I donno," said Calliope, thoughtfully, "I donno but you can."

"No," Mis' Holcomb went on; "your soul's like yourself in the glass: they ain't anything there."

"I donno," Calliope said again; "some mornin's when I wake up with the sun shinin' in, I can feel my soul in me just as plain as plain."

Mis' Holcomb sighed.

"Life looks dreadful footless to me," she said.

"Well," said Calliope, "sometimes life *is* some like hearin' firecrackers go off when you don't feel up to shootin' 'em yourself. When I'm like that, I always think if I'd go out an' buy a bunch or two, an' get somebody to give me a match, I could see more sense to things. Look here, Mame Bliss; if I get hold o' any folks to give the dinner for, will you help me some?"

"Yes," Mis' Holcomb assented half-heartedly, "I'll help you. I ain't nobody much in family, now Abigail's done what she has. They's only Eppleby, an' he won't be home Thanksg'vin this year. So I ain't nothin' else to do."

"That's the *i*-dee," said Calliope, heartily; "if everything's foolish, it's just as foolish doin' nothin' as doin' somethin'. Will you bring over a kettleful o' boiled potatoes to my house Thanksgivin' noon? An' mash 'em an' whip 'em in my kitchen? I'll hev the milk to put in. You – you don't cook as much as some, do you, Mame?"

Did Calliope ask her that purposely? I am almost sure that she did. Mis' Holcomb's neck stiffened a little.

"I guess I can cook a thing or two beside mash' potatoes," she said, and thought for a minute. "How'd you like a pan o' 'scalloped oysters an' some baked macaroni with plenty o' cheese?" she demanded.

"Sounds like it'd go down awful easy," admitted Calliope, smiling. "It's just what we need to carry the dinner off full sail," she added earnestly.

"Well, I ain't nothin' else to do an' I'll make 'em," Mis' Holcomb promised. "Only it beats me who you can find to do for. If you don't get anybody, let me know before I order the oysters."

Calliope stood up, her little wrinkled face aglow; and I wondered at her confidence.

"You just go ahead an' order your oysters," she said. "That dinner's goin' to come off Thanksgivin' noon at twelve o'clock. An' you be there to help feed the hungry, Mame."

When we were on the street again, Calliope looked at me with her way of shy eagerness.

"Could you hev the dinner up to your house," she asked me, "if I do every bit o' the work?"

"Why, Calliope," I said, amazed at her persistence, "have it there, of course. But you haven't any guests yet."

She nodded at me through the falling flakes.

"You say you ain't got much to be thankful for," she said, "so I thought mebbe you'd put in the time that way. Don't you

worry about folks to eat the dinner. I'll tell Mis' Holcomb an' the others to come to your house – an I'll get the food an' the folks. Don't you worry! An' I'll bring my watermelon pickles an' a bowl o' cream for Mis' Holcomb's potatoes, an' I'll furnish the turkey – a big one. The rest of us'll get the dinner in your kitchen Thanksgivin' mornin'. My!" she said, "seems though life's smoothin' out fer me a'ready. Good-by – it's 'most noon."

She hurried up Daphne Street in the snow, and I turned toward my lonely house. But I remember that I was planning how I would make my table pretty, and how I would add a delicacy or two from the City for this strange holiday feast. And I found myself hurrying to look over certain long-disused linen and silver, and to see whether my Cloth-o'-Gold rose might be counted on to bloom by Thursday noon.

IV
COVERS FOR SEVEN

"We'll set the table for seven folks," said Calliope, at my house on Thanksgiving morning.

"Seven!" I echoed. "But where in the world did you ever find seven, Calliope?"

"I found 'em," she answered. "I knew I could find hungry folks to do for if I tried, an' I found 'em. You'll see. I sha'n't say another word. They'll be here by twelve, sharp. Did the turkey come?"

Yes, the turkey had come, and almost as she spoke the dear Liberty sisters arrived to dress and stuff it, and to make ready the pan of custard, and to "stir up" the sunshine cake. I could guess how the pleasant bustle in my kitchen would hurt them by its holiday air, and I carried them off to see my Cloth-o'-Gold rose which had opened in the night, to the very crimson heart of it. And I told them of the seven guests whom, after all, Calliope had actually contrived to marshal to her dinner. And in the midst of our almost gay speculation on this, they went at their share of the task.

The three moved about their offices gravely at first, Libbie Liberty keeping her back to us as she worked, Miss Viny scrupulously intent on the delicate clatter of the egg-beater, Miss Lucy with eyes downcast on the sage she rolled. I noted how

Calliope made little excuses to pass near each of them, with now a touch of the hand and now a pat on a shoulder, and all the while she talked briskly of ways and means and recipes, and should there be onions in the dressing or should there not be? We took a vote on this and were about to chop the onions in when Mis' Holcomb's little maid arrived at my kitchen door with a bowl of oysters which Mis' Holcomb had had left from the 'scallop, an' wouldn't we like 'em in the stuffin'? Roast turkey stuffed with oysters! I saw Libbie Liberty's eyes brighten so delightedly that I brought out a jar of seedless raisins and another of preserved cherries to add to the custard, and then a bag of sweet almonds to be blanched and split for the cake o' sunshine. Surely, one of us said, the seven guests could be preparing for their Thanksgiving dinner with no more zest than we were putting into that dinner for their sakes.

"Seven guests!" we said over and again. "Calliope, how did you do it? When everybody says there's nobody in Friendship that's either sick or poor?"

"Nobody sick, nobody poor!" Calliope exclaimed, piling a dish with watermelon pickles. "Land, you might think that was the town motto. Well, the town don't know everything. Don't you ask me so many questions."

Before eleven o'clock Mis' Mayor Uppers tapped at my back door, with two deep-dish cherry pies in a basket, and a row of her delicate, feathery sponge cakes and a jar of pineapple and pie-plant preserves "to chink in." She drew a deep breath and stood

looking about the kitchen.

"Throw off your things an' help, Mis' Uppers," Calliope admonished her, one hand on the cellar door. "I'm just goin' down for some sweet potatoes Mis' Holcomb sent over this morning, an' you might get 'em ready, if you will. We ain't goin' to let you off now, spite of what you've done for us."

So Mis' Mayor Uppers hung up her shawl and washed the sweet potatoes. And my kitchen was fragrant with spices and flavourings and an odorous oven, and there was no end of savoury business to be at. I found myself glad of the interest of these others in the day and glad of the stirring in my lonely house. Even if their bustle could not lessen my own loneliness, it was pleasant, I said to myself, to see them quicken with interest; and the whole affair entertained my infinite leisure. After all, I was not required to be thankful. I merely loaned my house, cosey in its glittering drifts of turkey feathers, and the day was no more and no less to me than before, though I own that I did feel more than an amused interest in Calliope's guests. Whom, in Friendship, had she found "to do for," I detected myself speculating with real interest as in the dining room, with one and another to help me, I made ready my table. My prettiest dishes and silver, the Cloth-o'-Gold rose, and my yellow-shaded candles made little auxiliary welcomes. Whoever Calliope's guests were, we would do them honour and give them the best we had. And in the midst of all came from the City the box with my gift of hothouse fruit and a rosebud for every plate.

"Calliope!" I cried, as I went back to the kitchen, "Calliope, it's nearly twelve now. Tell us who the guests are, or we won't finish dinner!"

Calliope laughed and shook her head and opened the door for Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, who entered, followed by her little maid, both laden with good things.

"I prepared for seven," Mis' Holcomb said. "That was the word you sent me – but where you got your seven sick an' poor in Friendship beats me. I'll stay an' help for a while – but to me it all seems like so much monkey work."

We worked with a will that last half-hour, and the spirit of the kitchen came upon them all. I watched them, amused and pleased at Mis' Mayor Uppers's flushed anxiety over the sweet potatoes, at Libbie Liberty furiously basting the turkey, and at Miss Lucy exclaiming with delight as she unwrapped the rosebuds from their moss. But I think that Mis' Holcomb pleased me most, for with the utensils of housewifery in her hands she seemed utterly to have forgotten that there is no use in anything at all. This was not wonderful in the presence of such a feathery cream of mashed potatoes and such aromatic coffee as she made. *There* was something to tie to. Those were real, at any rate, and beyond all seeming.

Just before twelve Calliope caught off her apron and pulled down her sleeves.

"Now," she said, "I'm going to welcome the guests. I can – can't I?" she begged me. "Everything's all ready but putting on.

I won't need to come out here again; when I ring the bell on the sideboard, dish it up an' bring it in, all together – turkey ahead an' vegetables followin'. Mis' Holcomb, you help 'em, won't you? An' then you can leave if you want. Talk about an old-fashion' Thanksgivin'. My!"

"Who *has* she got?" Libbie Liberty burst out, basting the turkey. "I declare, I'm nervous as a witch, I'm so curious!"

And then the clock struck twelve, and a minute after we heard Calliope tinkle a silvery summons on the call-bell.

I remember that it was Mis' Holcomb herself – to whom nothing mattered – who rather lost her head as we served our feast, and who was about putting in dishes both her oysters and her macaroni instead of carrying in the fair, brown, smoking bake pans. But at last we were ready – Mis' Holcomb at our head with the turkey, the others following with both hands filled, and I with the coffee-pot. As they gave the signal to start, something – it may have been the mystery before us, or the good things about us, or the mere look of the Thanksgiving snow on the window-sills – seemed to catch at the hearts of them all, and they laughed a little, almost joyously, those five for whom joy had seemed done, and I found myself laughing too.

So we six filed into the dining room to serve whomever Calliope had found "to do for." I wonder that I had not guessed before. There stood Calliope at the foot of the table, with its lighted candles and its Cloth-o'-Gold rose, and the other six chairs were quite vacant.

"Sit down!" Calliope cried to us, with tears and laughter in her voice. "Sit down, all six of you. Don't you see? Didn't you know? Ain't we soul-sick an' soul-hungry, all of us? An' I tell you, this is goin' to do our souls good – an' our stomachs too!"

Nobody dropped anything, even in the flood of our amazement. We managed to get our savoury burden on the table, and some way we found ourselves in the chairs – I at the head of my table where Calliope led me. And we all talked at once, exclaiming and questioning, with sudden thanksgiving in our hearts that in the world such things may be.

"I was hungry an' sick," Calliope was telling, "for an old-fashion' Thanksgivin' – or anything that'd smooth life out some. But I says to myself, 'It looks like God had afflicted us by not givin' us anybody to do for.' An' then I started out to find some poor an' some sick – an' each one o' you knows what I found. An' I ask' myself before I got home that day, 'Why not them an' me?' There's lots o' kinds o' things to do on Thanksgivin' Day. Are you ever goin' to forgive me?"

I think that we all answered at once. But what we all meant was what Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss said, as she sat flushed and smiling behind the coffee-cups: —

"I declare, I feel something like I ain't felt since I don't know when!"

And Calliope nodded at her.

"I guess that's your soul, Mame Bliss," she said. "You can always feel it if you go to work an' act as if you got one. I'll take

my coffee clear."

V
THE SHADOW OF GOOD THINGS TO COME

The Friendship accommodation reaches the village from the City at six o'clock at night, and we call the train the Dick Dasher, because Dick Dasher is its engineer. We "come out on the Dick Dasher" and we "go in on the Through"; but the Through is a kind of institution, like marriage, while the Dick Dasher is a thing more intimate, like one's wedding. It was one winter night on the latter that I hardly heeded what I overheard.

"The Lord will provide, Delia," Doctor June was saying.

"I ain't sure," came a piping answer, "as they is any Lord. An' don't you tell anybody 'bout seein' me on this train. I'm goin' on through – west."

> "Thy footfall is a silver thing,
> West – west!"

I said over to the beat of the wheels, but the words that I said over were more insistent than the words that I heard. I was watching the eyes of a motor-car carrying threads of streaming light, moving near the track, swifter than the train. It belonged, as I divined, to the Proudfits of Friendship, and it was carrying

Madame Proudfit and her daughter Clementina, after a day of shopping and visiting in the town. And when I saw them returning home in this airy fashion, – as if they were the soul and I in the stuffy Dick Dasher were the body, – I renewed a certain distaste for them, since in their lives these Proudfits seemed goblin-like, with no interest in any save their own picturesque flittings. But while I shrugged at myself for judging them and held firmly to my own opinion, as one will do, I was conscious all the time of the gray minister in the aisle of the rocking coach, holding clasped in both hands his big carpet-bag without handles. Over it I saw him looking down in grieved consternation at the little woman huddled in the rush seat.

"No Lord!" he said, "no Lord! Why, Delia More! You might as well say there ain't no life in your own bones."

"So they isn't," she answered him grimly. "They keep on a-goin' just to spite me."

"Delia More —*De*-lia More," the wheels beat out, and it was as if I had heard the name often. Already I had noticed the woman. She had a kind of youth, like that of Calliope, who had journeyed in town on the Through that morning and who had somewhat mysteriously asked me not to say that she had gone away. But Calliope's persistent youthfulness gives her a claim upon one, while on this woman whom Doctor June perplexedly regarded, her stifled youth imposed a forlorn aloofness, made the more pathetic by her prettiness.

No one but the doctor himself was preparing to leave the

train at Friendship. He balanced in the aisle alone, while the few occupants of the car sat without speaking – men dozing, children padding on the panes, a woman twisting her thin hair tight and high. Doctor June looked at those nearest to be sure of their tired self-absorption, but as for me, who sat very near, I think he had long ago decided that I kept my own thoughts and no others, since sometimes I had forgotten to give him back a greeting. So it was in a fancied security which I was loath to be violating, that he opened his great carpet-bag and took out a book to lay on the girl's knee.

"Open it," he commanded her.

I saw the contour of her face tightened by her swiftly set lips as she complied.

"Point your finger," he went on peremptorily. She must have obeyed, for in a kind of unwilling eagerness she bent over the page, and the doctor stooped, and together in the blurring light of the kerosene lamp in the roof of the coach they made out something.

"… the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things …" I unwillingly caught, and yet not wholly unwillingly either. And though I watched, as if much depended upon it, the great motor-car of the Proudfits vanishing before us into the dark, I could not forbear to glance at the doctor, who was nodding, his kind face quickening. But the girl lifted her eyes and laughed with deliberate scepticism.

"I don't take any stock," she said, and within me it was as if

something answered to her bitterness.

"No – no. Mebbe not," Doctor June commented with perfect cheerfulness. "Some folks take fresh air, and some folks like to stay shut up tight. But – 'the shadow of good things to come.' I'd take that much stock if I was you, Delia."

As he laid the book back in his bag, the train was jolting across the switches beside the gas house, and the lights of Friendship were all about the track.

"Why don't you get off?" he reiterated, in his tone a descending scale of simple hospitality. "Come to our house and stop a spell. Come for tea," he added; "I happen to know we're goin' to hev hot griddle-cakes an' sausage gravy."

She shook her head sharply and in silence.

Doctor June stood for a moment meditatively looking down at her.

"There's a friend of yours at our house to-day, for all day," he observed.

"I ain't any friends," replied the girl, obstinately, "without you mean *use'* to be. An' I don't know if I had then, either."

"Yes. Yes, you have, Delia," said Doctor June, kindly. "He was asking about you last time he was here – kind of indirect."

"*Who?*" she demanded, but it was as if something within her wrung the question from her against her will.

"Abel Halsey," Doctor June told her, "Abel Halsey. Remember him?"

Instead of answering she looked out the window at the

Friendship Depot platform, and: —

"Ain't he a big minister in the City?" I barely heard her ask.

"No," said Doctor June; "dear me, no. Abel's still gypsyin' it off in the hills. I expect he's out there by the depot with the busses now, come to meet me in his buggy. Better let him take us all home to griddle-cakes, Delia?" he pressed her wistfully.

"I couldn't," she said briefly. And, as he put out his hand silently, "Don't you let *any*body know't you saw me!" she charged him again.

When he was gone, and the train was slackening in the station, she moved close to the window. If I had been lonely… I must have caught a certain cheer in the look of the station and in the magnificent, cosmic leisure of the idlers: in Photographer Jimmy Sturgis, in his leather coat, with one eye shut, stamping a foot and waiting for the mail-bag; in old Tillie, known up and down the world for her waffles, and perpetually peering out between shelves of plants and wax fruit set across the window of the "eating-house"; in Peleg Bemus, wood-cutter, stumping about the platform on his wooden leg, wearing modestly the prestige he had won by his flute-playing and by his advantage of New York experience – "a janitor in the far east, he was," Timothy Toplady had once told me; in Timothy Toplady himself, who always meets the trains, but for no reason unless to say an amazed and reproachful – "Blisterin' Benson! not a soul wants off here"; and in Abel Halsey, that itinerant preacher, of whom Doctor June had spoken. Abel was a man of grace, Bible-taught, passioning

for service, but within him his gentle soul burned to travel, and his white horse, Major Mary, and his road wagon and his route to the door of many a country church were the sole satisfactions of his wanderlust; and next to these was his delight to be at a railway station when any train arrived, savouring the moment of some silent familiarity with distance. I delighted in them all, and that night, as I looked, I wondered how it would seem to me if I were returning to it after many years; and I could imagine how my heart would ache.

As the train moved on, the girl whom Doctor June had called Delia More turned her head, manifestly to follow for a little way each vanishing light and figure; and as the conductor came through the car and she spoke to him, I saw that she was in a tingle of excitement.

"You sure," she asked, "that you stop to the canal draw?"

"Uh?" said the conductor, and when he comprehended, "Every time," he said, "every time. You be ready when she whistles." He hesitated, manifestly in some curiosity. "They ain't a house in a mile f'om there, though," he told her.

"I know that," she gave back crisply.

When I heard her speaking of the canal draw, I found myself wondering; for a woman is not above wonder. There, where the trains stopped just perceptibly I myself was wont to leave them for the sake of the mile walk on the quiet highroad to my house. That, too, though it chanced to be night, for I am not afraid. But I wondered the more because other women do fear, and

also because mine was the only house between the canal draw and Friendship Village; and manifestly the shortest way to reach the village would have been to alight at the station. But I held my peace, for the affairs of others should be to those others an efficient disguise; and moreover, the greater part of one's wonder is wont to come to naught.

Yet, as I seemed to follow this woman out upon the snow and the train kept impersonally on across the meadows, I could not but see that her bags were many and looked heavy, and twice she set them down to rearrange. I think a ghost of the road could have done no less than ask to help her. And I did this with an abruptness of which I am unwilling master, though indeed I had no need to assume impatience, for I saw that my quiet walk was spoiled.

When I spoke to her, she started and shrank away; but there was an austerity in the lonely white road and in the country silence which must have chilled a woman like her; and her bags were many and seemed heavy.

"Much obliged to you," she said indistinctly. "I'd just as li've you should take the basket, if you want."

So I lifted the basket and trudged beside her, hoping very much that she would not talk. For though for my own comfort I would walk far to avoid treading on a nest, or a worm, or a magenta flower (and I loathe magenta), yet I am often blameful enough to wound through the sheerest bungling those who talk to me when I would rather be silent.

The night was one clinging to the way of Autumn, and as yet with no Winter hinting. The air was mild and dry, and the sky was starry. I am not ashamed that on a quiet highroad on a starry night I love to be silent, and even to forget concerns of my own which seem pressing in the publicity of the sun; but I am ashamed, I own, to have been called to myself that night by a little choking breath of haste.

"I can't go – so fast," my companion said humbly; "you might jest – set the basket down anywheres. I can – "

But I think that she can hardly have heard my apology, for she stood where she had halted, staring away from me. We were opposite the cemetery lying in its fence of field stone and whitewashed rails.

"O my soul, my soul!" I heard her say. "I'd forgot the graveyard, or I couldn't never 'a' come this way."

At that she went on, her feet quickening, as I thought, without her will; and she kept her face turned to me, so that it should be away from that whitewashed fence. And now because of the wound she had shown me, I walked a little apart in the middle of the road for my attempt at sympathy. So we came to the summit of the hill, and there the dark suddenly yielded up the distance. The lamps of the village began to signal, lights dotted the fields and gathered in a cosey blur in the valley, and half a mile to westward the headlight that marked the big Toplady barn and the little Toplady house shone out as if some one over there were saying something.

"You live here in Friendship?" the girl demanded abruptly.

I could show her my house a little way before us.

"Ever go inside the graveyard?" she asked.

Sometimes I do go there, and at that answer she walked nearer to me and spoke eagerly.

"Air all the tombstones standin' up straight, do you know?" she said. "Hev any o' their headstones fell down on 'em?"

This I could answer too, definitely enough; for Friendship Cemetery, by the vigilance of the Married Ladies' Cemetery Improvement Sodality, is kept in no less scrupulous order than the Friendship parlours.

"Well, that's a relief," she said; "I couldn't get it out o' my head." Then, because she seemed of those on whom silence lays a certain imaginary demand, "My mother an' father an' sister's buried there," she explained. "They're in there. They all died when I was gone. An' I got the notion that their headstones had tipped over on to 'em. Or Aunt Cornie More's, maybe."

Aunt Cornie More. I knew that name, for they had told me about her in Friendship, so that her name, and that of the Oldmoxons, in whose former house I lived, and many others were like folk whom one passes often and remembers. I had been told how Aunt Cornie More had made her own shroud from her crocheted parlour curtains, lest these fall to a later wife of her octogenarian husband; and how as she lay in her coffin the curtain's shell-stitch parrot "come right acrost her chest." This woman beside me had called her "Aunt" Cornie More. And then

I remembered the name which Doctor June had spoken on the train and the wheels had measured.

"Delia More!" I said, involuntarily, and regretted it as soon as I had spoken. But, indeed, it was as if some legend woman of the place walked suddenly beside me, like the quick.

Who in Friendship had not heard the name, and who, save one who keeps her own thoughts and forgets to give back greeting, would not on the instant have remembered it? Delia More's stepsister, Jennie Crapwell, had been betrothed to a carpenter of Friendship, and he was at work on their house when, a month before the wedding-day, Delia and that young carpenter had "run away." Who in Friendship could not tell that story? But before I had made an end of murmuring something —

"I might 'a' known they hadn't done talkin' yet," Delia More said bitterly. "They say it was like that when Calliope Marsh's beau run off with somebody else, – for ten years the town et it for cake. Well, they ain't any of 'em goin' to get a look at me. I don't give anybody the chance to show me the cold shoulder. You can tell 'em I was here if you want. They can scare the children with it."

"I won't tell," I said.

She looked at me.

"Well, I can't help it if you do," she returned. "I'm glad enough to speak to somebody, gettin' back so. It's fourteen year. An' I was fair body-sick to see the place again."

At this she asked about Friendship folk, and I answered as

best I might, though of what she inquired I knew little, and what I did know was footless enough for human comfort. As to the Topladys, for example, I had no knowledge of that one who had earned his money in bricks and had later married a "foreigner"; but I knew Mis' Amanda, that she had hands dimpled like a baby giant's, and that she carried a blue parasol all winter to keep the sun from her eyes. I could not tell whether Liddy Ember had been able to afford skilled treatment for her poor, queer, pretty little sister, but I knew that Ellen Ember, with her crown of bright hair, went about Friendship streets singing aloud, and leaping up to catch at the low branches of the curb elms, and that she was as picturesque as a beautiful grotesque on a page of sober text. I had not learned where the Oldmoxons had moved, but I knew of them that they had left me a huge fireplace in every room of my house. I could have repeated little about Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, save that her black week-day cloak was lined with wine broadcloth, and that she wore it wrong side outward for "best." And of whether Abigail Arnold's children had turned out well or ill, I was profoundly ignorant; but I remembered that she had caused a loaf of bread to be carved on the monument of her husband, the home baker. And so on. But these were not matters of which I could talk to the hungry woman beside me.

Then, to my amazement, when I mentioned the Proudfits, – those great and rich Proudfits whose motor had raced by our train, – Delia More would have none of them.

"I do' want to hear about 'em," she said. "I know about 'em. I

use' to play with Miss Clementina an' Miss Linda when we were little things. I use' to live with the Proudfits then, an' go to school. They were good to me – time an' time again they've told me their home was mine, too. But *now*– it wouldn't be the same. I know 'em. They always were cruel proud an' cruel pious. Mis' Proudfit, she use' to set up goodness an' worship it like a little god."

This judgment startled me, and yet to its import I secretly assented. For though I barely had their acquaintance, Madame Proudfit and her daughter Clementina were thorns to me too, so that I had had no pleasure in giving them back their greetings. Perhaps it was that they alone in Friendship sounded for me a note of other days – but whatever it was, they were thorns to me; and I remember how, once more, something within me seemed to answer to this woman's bitterness.

None the less, since of the Proudfits I could give her some fragment of account, I did so, to forge for Delia More what link I might between her present and her past. And it was knowledge which all Friendship shared.

"You knew," I said, "that Miss Linda does not come here now, because she married against the wish of her family."

Delia More looked up at me. But though I saw that now she softened somewhat, I had no relish for giving to her anything of the sad romance of beautiful Linda Proudfit (as they said) and the poor young clerk of nobody knew where, who, a dozen years before, had fled away together "into the storm."

"Then there is Calliope Marsh," I ventured, to turn my thought

not less than hers. But Delia More did not answer, and at this I was puzzled, for I think that Calliope has lived in Friendship since the beginning, when she and Liddy Ember were partners in their little "modiste" shop. "You will recall Calliope?" I pressed the matter.

And at that, "Yes. Oh, yes," she said, and would say no more. And because Calliope had forbidden me, I did not mention that I had seen her on the train that morning, and that she was absent from Friendship, but it grieved me that this stranger should be indifferent to anything about her.

I would have passed my own gate, because the basket was heavy and because I knew that the girl was crying. But she remembered how I had shown her my house, and there she detained me and caught at her basket, in haste to be gone. So I, who feel upon me a weak necessity to do a bidding, watched her go down the still road; yet I could not let her go away quite like that, and before I had meant to do so I called to her.

"Delia More!" I said – as familiarly as if she had been some other expression of myself.

I saw her stop, but I did not go forward. I lifted my voice a little, for by the distance between us I was less ill at ease than I am in the usual personalities of comfort.

"I heard that on the train," I said then awkwardly, – and I was the more awkward that I was not persuaded of any reason in my words, – "that about 'the shadow of good things to come.' Maybe it meant something."

Delia More's thin, high-pitched voice came back to me, expressing all my unvoiced doubt.

"Tisn't like," she said. "I never take any stock."

Then I looked at my dark house in a kind of consternation lest it had heard me trying to give comfort, for within those walls I had sometimes spoken almost as this woman spoke. But it occurred to me that even the drowned should throw immaterial ropes to any who struggle in dark waters.

It will not be necessary, I hope, to say that I followed Delia More that night from no faintest wish to know what might happen to her. For I have a weak desire for peace of mind, and I would rather have forgotten her story. I followed because the quiet highroad was so profoundly lonely, and the country silence is ambiguous, and I cannot bear to think of a woman abroad alone in the dark. I cannot bear to think of myself abroad alone in the dark, though I go quite without fear; but certain other women have fear, and this one was crying. I kept well behind her, and as soon as she reached the village, I meant to lose sight of her and return, for a village is guardian enough. But when we had passed the bleak meadow of the slaughter-house and the wide, wet-smelling wood yard and had reached the first cottage on Daphne Street, I was startled to see her unlatch that cottage gate and enter the yard. And I was suddenly sadly apprehensive, for the cottage was the home of Calliope, who that morning had left the village and had asked me to say nothing about it. What if this poor creature had fled to Calliope for sanctuary, only to find

locked doors? So I waited in the shadow of a warehouse like a bandit; and I raged at the thought of having possibly to harbour this stranger among the books of my quiet home.

Then suddenly I saw a light shining brightly in Calliope Marsh's cottage, and some one wearing a hat came swiftly and drew down a shade. On the instant the matter was clear to me, who have a genius for certain ways of a busybody. Calliope must have known that this poor girl was coming; Calliope's warning to me to keep silence must have been a way of protection to her. And here to Calliope's cottage Delia More had come creeping, whom all Friendship would hold in righteous distaste. But I alone of all Friendship knew that she was here, "fair body-sick to see the place again."

I turned back to the highroad, pretending great wrath that I should be so keen over the doings of any, and that my walk should have been spoiled because of her. But there are times when wrath is difficult. And do what I would, there came some singing in my blood, and like a busybody, I found myself standing still in the road fashioning a plan.

VI
STOCK

It was as if Time and the Hour were my allies, for at once I was aware of a cutter driven smartly from the village, and I recognized the Topladys' sorrel. At my signal the cutter drew up beside me, and it held Timothy Toplady on his way home from the station. I asked him what o'clock it was, and when he had found a match to light his huge silver watch —

"Blisterin' Benson!" he said ruefully, "it's ha'-past six, an' me late with the chores again. I'm hauled an' sawed if it hain't *always* ha' past six. They don't seem to be no times in between."

"Mr. Toplady," I said boldly, "let us get up a surprise party on Calliope Marsh – you and Mrs. Toplady and me."

I had learned that he was loath to oppose a suggestion and that he always preferred to agree, but I had not hoped for enthusiasm.

"That's the *i*-dea," said Timothy, heartily. "I do admire a surprise. But what I think is this," he added, "when'll we hev it?"

"To-night," I proposed boldly.

"Whew!" Timothy whistled. "Sudden for General – eh? Suits me – suits me. Better drive out home with me an' break it to Amanda," he cried.

I smiled as I sat beside him, noting that his enthusiasm was very like relief. For if any one was present, he well knew that his

masterful Amanda would say nothing of his tardiness. And so it was, for as we entered the kitchen she entirely overlooked her husband in her amazement at seeing me.

"Forevermore!" that great Amanda said, turning from her stove of savoury skillets; "ain't you the stranger? Timothy says only to-day, speakin' o' you, 'She ain't ben here for a week,' s'e. 'Week!' s'I; 'it's goin' on *two*.' I'm a great hand to keep track. Throw off your things."

At that I began to feel her influence. Mis' Toplady is so huge and capable that her mere presence will modify my judgments; and instantly I fell wondering if I was not, after all, come on a fool's errand. She is like Athena. For I can think about Athena well enough, but if I were really to stand before her, I am certain that the project in which I implored her help would be sunk in my sudden sense of Olympus.

Not the less, I made my somewhat remarkable proposal with some show of assurance, and I should have counted on Mis' Toplady's sympathy, which ripens at less than a sigh. In Friendship you but mention a possible charity, visit, or new church carpet, and the enthusiasm will react on the possibility, and the thing be done. It is the spirit of the West, the pioneer blood in the veins of her children, expressing itself (since there are of late no forests to conquer) in terms of love of any initiative. We love a project as an older world would approve the civilizing reasons for that project. Mis' Amanda plunged into the processes of the party much as she would have felled a tree. It warmed my

heart to hear her.

"We'd ought to hev a hot supper – what victuals'll we take?" she said. "Land, yes, oysters, o' course, an' we'll all chip in an' take plenty-enough crackers. We might as well carry dishes from here, so's to be sure an' hev what we want to use. At Mis' Doctor Helman's su'prise we run 'way short o' spoons, an' Elder Woodruff finally went out in the hall an' drank his broth, an' hid his bowl in the entry. Mis' Helman found it, an' knew it by the nick. That reminds me – who'll we ask?"

"Mrs. Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss," said I, promptly, "and Abigail Arnold, and Doctor June, and Abel Halsey."

"An' the Proudfits," Mis' Amanda went on.

"Suppose," said I, with high courage, "that we do not ask the Proudfits at all?"

Mis' Amanda threw up her giant hands.

"Not ask the Proudfits?" she said. "Why, my land a' livin', the minister hardly has church in the church without the Proudfits get an invite."

"Calliope mends their fine lace for them," I reminded her, feeling guilty. "They wouldn't care to come, Mrs. Amanda, would they?"

But of course I was remembering Delia More's "But *now*– I know 'em. They worship goodness like a little god." And that night I was not minded to have them about, for it might befall that it would be necessary to understand other things as well.

"Miss Linda would 'a' cared to," said Mis' Amanda,

thoughtfully, "but I donno, myself, about Mis' Proudfit an' Miss Clementina – for sure."

So bold an innovation as the Proudfits' omission, however, moved Timothy Toplady to doubt.

"They might not come," he said, frowning and looking sidewise, "but what I think is this, will they like bein' left out?"

His masterful Amanda instantly took the other side.

"Land, Timothy!" she said, "you *be* one!"

I have heard her say that to him again and again, and always in a tone so skilfully admiring that he looked almost gratified. And we mentioned the Proudfits no more.

So Calliope Marsh's surprise party came about. When supper was over, the table was "left setting," while pickles and cookies and "conserve" were packed in baskets; and presently the Topladys and I were stealing about the village inviting to festivity. I love to remember how swiftly Daphne Street took on an air of the untoward. Kitchens were left dark, unaccustomed lights flashed in upper chambers, some went scurrying for oysters before the post-office store should be closed, and some spread the news, eager to share in the holiday importance. I love to remember our certainty, so reasonably established, that they would all join us as infallibly as children will join in jollity. No one refused, no one hesitated; and when, at eight o'clock, the Topladys and I reached the rendezvous in the Engine-House entry, every one was there before us – save only, of course, the Proudfits.

"Where's the Proudfits? Ain't we goin' to wait for the Proudfits?" asked more than one; and some one had seen the Proudfit motor come flashing through the town from the Plank Road, empty. At all of which I kept a guilty silence; and I had by then not a little guilt to bear, since I was becoming every moment more doubtful of my undertaking. For at heart these people are the kindly of earth, and yet they are prone, as Delia More had said of the Proudfits, "to worship goodness like a little god," nor do they commonly broaden their allegiance without distinguished precedent. And how were we to secure this?

Every one was there – the little gray Doctor June, flitting about as quietly as a moth, and all those of whom Delia More had asked me: Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, wearing her cloak wine broadcloth side out to honour the occasion; Abigail Arnold, with a huge basket of gingerbread and jumbles from her home bakery; Photographer Jimmy Sturgis, and even Mis' Sturgis, in a faint aroma of caraway which she nibbled incessantly; Liddy Ember, and poor Ellen, wearing her magnificent hair like a coronet, and standing wistfully about, with her hand, palm outward, persistently covering her mouth; and Abel Halsey, who was to leave at midnight for a lonely cross-country ride into the hills. And as they stood, gossiping and eager, the women bird-observant of one another's toilettes, I own myself to have felt like an alien among them, remembering how I alone knew that Calliope Marsh was not even in the village.

Very softly we lifted the latch of Calliope's gate and trooped

in her little dark yard.

"Blisterin' Benson!" Timothy Toplady whispered, "ef the house hain't pocket-dark, front *and* back. What ef she's went in the country?"

"Sh – h!" whispered his great Amanda, masterfully. "It's the shades down. I'm nervous as a witch. My land! if the front door ain't open a foot!"

Though there are no locked doors in Friendship, I had feared that Calliope's cottage door would now be barred, and that Delia More would answer no formal summons. At sight of the unguarded entrance I had a sick fear that she had in some way heard of our coming and fled away, leaving the door ajar in her haste. But when we had footed softly across the porch and peered in the dark passage, we saw at its farther end a crack of light.

"Might as well step ri' down to the dinin' room – that's where she sets," Mis' Amanda said in her whisper, which is gigantic too.

The passage smelled of the oilcloth on the floor and of a rubber waterproof which I brushed. And I shrank back beside the waterproof and let the others go on. For, after all, to that woman within I was a stranger, and these were her friends of old time. So it was Mis' Amanda who opened the dining-room door.

I could see that the room was cheery with a red-shaded hanging-lamp, and shelves of plants, and a glowing fire in the great range. A table was covered with red cotton and laid with dishes. Also, there was the fragrance of toast, so that one wished to enter. And in a rocking-chair sat Delia More. She stared up in

a kind of terror at the open door, and then turned shrinkingly to some one who sat beside her. But at that one beside her I looked and looked again, for her rich fur cloak had fallen where she had let it fall; and there, sitting with Delia More's hand in hers, was that great Madame Proudfit of the Proudfit estate.

"For the land!" Mis' Amanda said. "For the land…"

But she was not looking at Madame Proudfit. And hardly seeing her, as I could guess, that great Mis' Amanda went forward, holding out her arms.

"Delia More!" she cried, "Delia More!"

I saw Abel Halsey's pale, luminous face as he pushed past Timothy and strode within and crossed to her; and I remember Abigail Arnold and Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, and how they followed Abel with little sharp cries which must have been a kind of music. And with them went Ellen Ember, as if, secretly, she were wiser than we knew. And while the others blocked the passage or crowded into the room, according to the nature which was theirs, some one came from the cellarway and paused, smiling, on the threshold. And it was Miss Clementina Proudfit, with eggs in her hands.

"Wait!" I heard Delia's sharp, piping voice then; "wait!"

She rose, one thin little hand pressed tensely along her cheek. But the other hand Madame Proudfit held in both her own as she, too, rose beside her. And with them Abel stood, facing the rest.

"O, Abel Halsey – Abel Halsey …" Delia said, "an' Mame Bliss – nor you, Abigail, don't you, any of you, come in yet. I got

somethin' to tell you."

"But shake hands first, Delia," cried Abel Halsey, and Delia looked up at him, in her face a sudden, incredulous thankfulness which flushed it, brow and cheek, and won it to a way of beauty. But she did not give him her hand. And before she could speak again Miss Clementina put down the eggs, and, with some little stir of silk, she took a step or two steps toward us.

"Ah," she said, "let us not wait for anything – it has been so long since we have met! Delia has just told mother and me all about these years – and you don't know how splendid we think she has been and how brave in great trouble. Come in, everybody, and let's make her welcome home!"

Madame Proudfit said nothing, but she nodded and smiled at Delia More, and it seemed to me that in the Proudfits' way with Delia, their beautiful Linda had won a kind of presence with them after all. And in the moment's hush the toast, propped on a fork before the coals in the range, suddenly blazed up in blue flame at the crust.

"Somebody save the toast!" cried Clementina and smiled very brightly.

They needed no more. Timothy Toplady sprang at the toast, and already Abel Halsey and Doctor June were shaking Delia's hand; and Mis' Amanda, throwing her shawl back over her shoulders from its pin at her throat, enveloped Delia in her giant arms. And the others came pushing forward, on their faces the smiles which, however they had faltered in the passage seeking a

precedent, I make bold to guess bodied forth the gentle, hesitant spirit which informed them.

As for me, I waited without, even after the others had entered. And as I lingered, the outer door was pushed open to admit some late comer who whisked down the passage and stood in the dining-room doorway. It was Calliope.

"Delia More!" she cried; "didn't I tell you how it'd be if you'd only let 'em know? An' Mis' Proudfit, you here? I been worried to death on account o' forgettin' to take home your cream lace waist I mended."

Madame Proudfit's voice lowered the high key of the others talking in chorus.

"We drove over to get it, Calliope," she said. "And here we found our Delia More."

At eleven o'clock that night, as I sat writing a letter in which the spirit of what had come to pass must have breathed – as a spirit will breathe – Calliope Marsh tapped at my door; and she had a little basket.

"Here," she said, "I brought you this. It's some o' everything we hed. An' – I'm obliged for my s'prise," she added, squeezing my hand in the darkness. "I surmised first thing, most, when Delia described you. No; land, no! – Delia don't suspicion you got it up. She don't think of it bein' anybody but just God – an' I donno's 'twas. An' that's what Abel thinks – wa'n't Abel splendid? You know 'bout Abel – an' Delia? You know he use' to – he wanted to – that is, he was in – oh, well, no. Of course you

wouldn't know. Well, Delia don't suspicion you – but she said I should tell you something. 'You tell her,' she says to me, 'you tell her I say I guess I take stock now,' she says; 'tell her that: I guess I take stock now.'"

At this my heart leaped up so that I hardly know what I said in answer.

"Delia's out here now," Calliope called from the dark steps. "The Proudfits brought us. Delia's goin' home with 'em – to stay."

Thus I saw the eyes of the Proudfits' motor, with the threads of streaming light, about to go skimming from my gate. And in that kindly security was Delia More.

"Calliope," I cried after her because I could not help it, "tell Delia More I take stock, too!"

VII
THE BIG WIND

Of Abel Halsey, that young itinerant preacher, I learned more on a December day when Autumn seemed to have come back to find whether she had left anything. Calliope and I were resting from a racing walk up the hillside, where the squat brick Leading Church of Friendship overlooks the valley pastures and the village. Calliope walks like a girl, and with our haste and the keen air, her wrinkled cheeks were as rosy as youth.

"Don't it seem like some days don't belong to any month, but just whim along, doin' as they please?" Calliope said. "Months that might be snowin' an' blowin' the expression off our face hev days when they sort o' show summer hid inside, secret an' holy. That's the way with lots o' things, ain't it? That's the way," she added thoughtfully, "Abel feels about the Lord, I guess. Abel Halsey, – you know."

They had told me how Abel, long ordained a minister of God, had steadfastly refused to be installed a pastor of any church. He was a devout man, but the love of far places was upon him, and he lived what Friendship called "a-gypsyin'" off in the hills, now to visit a sick man, now to preach in a country schoolhouse, now to marry, or bury, or help with the threshing. These lonely rides among the hills and his custom of watching a train come in or

rush by out of the distance were his ways of voyaging. Perhaps, too, his little skill at the organ gave him, now and then, an hour resembling a journey. But in his first youth he had meant to go away in earnest – far away, to the City or some other city. Also, though Calliope did not speak of it again, and I think that the others kept a loyal silence because of my strangerhood, I had known, since the home coming of Delia More, that Abel Halsey had once had another dream.

"You wasn't here when the new church was built," Calliope said, looking up at the building proudly. "That was the time I mean about Abel. You know, before it was built we'd hed church in the hall over the Gekerjeck's drug store; an' because it was his hall, Hiram Gekerjeck, he just about run the church, – picked out the wall paper, left the stair door open Sundays so's he could get the church heat, till the whole service smelt o' ether, an' finally hed church announcements printed as a gift, *but* with a line about a patent medicine o' his set fine along at the bottom. He said that was no differ'nt than advertisin' the printin'-offices that way, like they do. But it was that move made Abel Halsey – him an' Timothy Toplady and Eppleby Holcomb an' Postmaster Sykes, the three elders, set to to build a church. An' they done it too. An' to them four I declare it seemed like the buildin' was a body waitin' for its soul to be born. From the minute the sod was scraped off they watched every stick that went into it. An' by November it was all done an' plastered an' waitin' its pews – an' it was a-goin' to be dedicated with special doin's – music from off,

an' strange ministers, an' Reverend Arthur Bliss from the City. I guess Abel an' the elders hed tacked printed invites to half the barns in the county.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.