GLASGOW EDITION

ELLEN GHOLSON

THE BUILDERS

Ellen Glasgow
The Builders

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The Builders:

Содержание

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BOOK FIRST
APPEARANCES

CHAPTER I
Caroline

THE train was late that day, and when the old leather mail pouch was brought in, dripping wet, by Jonas, the negro driver, Mrs. Meade put down the muffler she was knitting, and received it reluctantly.

"At least there aren't any bills at this time of the month," she observed, with the manner of one who has been designed by Providence to repel disaster.

While she unbuckled the clammy straps, her full, round face, which was still fresh and pretty in spite of her seventy years, shone like an auspicious moon in the dusky glow of the fire. Since wood was scarce, and this particular strip of southside Virginia

grew poorer with each year's harvest, the only fire at The Cedars was the one in "the chamber," as Mrs. Meade's bedroom was called. It was a big, shabby room, combining, as successfully as its owner, an aspect of gaiety with a conspicuous absence of comforts. There were no curtains at the windows, and the rugs, made from threadbare carpets, had faded to indeterminate patterns; but the cracked mahogany belonged to a good period, and if the colours had worn dim, they were harmonious and restful. The house, though scarred, still held to its high standards. The spirit of the place was the spirit of generous poverty, of cheerful fortitude.

The three girls on the hearthrug, knitting busily for the War Relief Association, were so much alike in colouring, shape, and feature, that it was difficult at a casual glance to distinguish Maud, who was almost, if not quite, a beauty, from Margaret and Diana, who were merely pretty and intelligent. They were all natural, kind-hearted girls, who had been trained from infancy to make the best of things and to laugh when they were hurt. From the days when they had played with ears of corn instead of dolls, they had acquired ingenuity and philosophy. For Mrs. Meade, who derived her scant income from a plantation cultivated "on shares" by negro tenants, had brought up her girls to take life gaily, and to rely on their own resourcefulness rather than on fortuitous events.

"Here is a nice fat letter for Caroline, and it looks as if it weren't an advertisement." With one plump hand she held out the

letter, while she handed the dripping mail bag to Jonas. "Bring some wood for the fire, Jonas, and be sure to shut the door after you."

"Dar ain' no mo' wood, ole Miss."

For an instant Mrs. Meade stopped to think. "Well, the garden fence is falling down by the smoke-house. Split up some of the rails. Here is your letter, Caroline."

A woman's figure, outlined against the rocking branches of an old cedar beyond the window, turned slowly toward the group on the hearthrug. In Caroline's movements, while she lingered there for a moment, there was something gallant and free and spirited, which was a part of the world outside and the swaying boughs. Though she was older than the three girls by the fire, she was young with an illusive and indestructible grace of the soul. At thirty-two, in spite of the stern sweetness about her thin red lips, and the defiant courage which flashed now and then from the shadowy pallor of her face, one felt that the flame and ardour of her glance flowed not from inward peace, but from an unconquerable and adventurous spirit. Against the grey rain her face seemed the face of some swiftly changing idea, so expressive of an intangible beauty was the delicate curve of the cheek and the broad, clear forehead beneath the dark hair, which grew low in a "widow's peak" above the arched eyebrows and the vivid blue of the eyes. If there was austerity in the lines of her mouth, her eyes showed gaiety, humour, and tenderness. Long ago, before the wreck of her happiness, her father, who had a taste for the

striking in comparisons, had said that Caroline's eyes were like bluebirds flying.

The letter could wait. She was not interested in letters now, rarely as they came to her. It was, she knew, only the call to a patient, and after nearly eight years of nursing, she had learned that nothing varied the monotonous personalities of patients. They were all alike, united in their dreadful pathos by the condition of illness – and as a mere matter of excitement there was little to choose between diphtheria and pneumonia. Yet if it were a call, of course she would go, and her brief vacation would be over. Turning away from the firelight, she deferred as long as possible the descent from her thoughts to the inevitable bondage of the actuality.

Beyond the window, veiled in rain, she could see the pale quivering leaves of the aspens on the lawn, and the bend in the cedar avenue, which led to the big white gate and the private road that ran through the farm until it joined the turnpike at the crossroads. Ever since she was born, it seemed to her, for almost thirty-two years, she had watched like this for something that might come up that long empty road. Even in the years that she had spent away, she had felt that her soul waited there, tense and expectant, overlooking the bend in the avenue and the white gate, and then the road over which "the something different," if it came at all, must come at last to The Cedars. Nothing, not change, not work, not travel, could detach the invisible tendrils of her life from the eager, brooding spirit of the girl who had once watched

there at the window. She had been watching – watching – she remembered, when the letter that broke her heart had come in the old mail pouch, up the road beyond, and through the gate, and on into the shadows and stillness of the avenue. That was how the blow had come to her, without warning, while she waited full of hope and expectancy and the ardent sweetness of dreams.

"My poor child, your heart is broken!" her mother had cried through her tears, and the girl, with the letter still in her hands, had faced her defiantly.

"Yes, but my head and my hands are whole," she had replied with a laugh.

Then, while the ruins of her happiness lay at her feet, she began rebuilding her house of life with her head and her hands. She would accept failure on its own terms, completely, exultantly, and by the very audacity of her acceptance, she would change defeat into victory. She would make something out of nothing; she would wring peace, not from joy, but from the heart of an incredible cruelty; she would build with courage, not with gladness, but she would build her house toward the stars.

"There must be something one can live on besides love," she thought, "or half the world would go famished."

"Come and read your letter, Caroline," called Maud, as she reached the end of a row. "There isn't anything for the rest of us."

"I am so afraid it is a call, dear," said Mrs. Meade; and then, as Caroline left the window and passed into the firelight, the old lady found herself thinking a little vaguely, "Poor child, the hard

work is beginning to show in her face – but she has never been the same since that unfortunate experience. I sometimes wonder why a just Providence lets such things happen." Aloud she added, while her beaming face clouded slightly, "I hope and pray that it isn't anything catching."

As Caroline bent over the letter, the three younger girls put down their knitting and drew closer, while their charming faces, brown, flushed, and sparkling, appeared to catch and hold the glow of the flames. They were so unlike Caroline, that she might have been mistaken, by a stranger, for a woman of a different race. While she bent there in the firelight, her slender figure, in its cambric blouse and skirt of faded blue serge, flowed in a single lovely curve from her drooping dark head to her narrow feet in their worn russet shoes.

"It is from an old friend of yours, mother," she said presently, "Mrs. Colfax."

"Lucy Colfax! Why, what on earth is she writing to you about? I hope there isn't anything wrong with her."

"Read it aloud, Caroline," said Diana. "Mother, this fire will go out before Jonas can fix it."

"He has to split the wood, dear. Look out on the back porch and see if you can find some chips. They'll be nice and dry." Mrs. Meade spoke with authority, for beneath her cheerful smile there was the heart of a fighter, and like all good fighters, she fought best when she was driven against the wall. "Now, Caroline, I am listening."

"She wants me to take a case. It sounds queer, but I'll read you what she says. 'Dear Caroline' – she calls me 'Caroline.'"

"That's natural, dear. We were like sisters, and perhaps she took a fancy to you the time she met you in Richmond. It would be just like her to want to do something for you." The sprightly old lady, who was constitutionally incapable of seeing any prospect in subdued colours, was already weaving a brilliant tapestry of Caroline's future.

"'Dear Caroline:

"'My cousin, Angelica Blackburn, has asked me to recommend a trained nurse for her little girl, who is delicate, and I am wondering if you would care to take the case. She particularly wishes a self-reliant and capable person, and Doctor Boland tells me you have inherited your mother's sweet and unselfish nature (I don't see how he knows. Everybody is unselfish in a sick-room. One has to be.)'"

"Well, I'm sure you have a lovely nature," replied Mrs. Meade tenderly. "I was telling the girls only yesterday that you never seemed to think of yourself a minute." In her own mind she added, "Any other girl would have been embittered by that unfortunate experience" (the phrase covered Caroline's blighted romance) "and it shows how much character she has that she was able to go on just as if nothing had happened. I sometimes think a sense of humour does as much for you as religion."

"'I remember my poor father used to say,'" Caroline read on smoothly, "'that in hard dollars and cents Carrie Warwick's

disposition was worth a fortune.'"

"That's very sweet of Lucy," murmured Mrs. Meade deprecatingly.

"'As you are the daughter of my old friend, I feel I ought not to let you take the case without giving you all the particulars. I don't know whether or not you ever heard of David Blackburn – but your mother will remember his wife, for she was a Fitzhugh, the daughter of Champ Fitzhugh, who married Bessie Ludwell.'"

"Of course I remember Bessie. She was my bosom friend at Miss Braxton's school in Petersburg."

"Let me go on, mother darling. If you interrupt me so often I'll never get to the interesting part."

"Very well, go on, my dear, but it does seem just like Providence. When the flour gave out in the barrel last night, I knew something would happen." For Mrs. Meade had begun life with the shining certainty that "something wonderful" would happen to her in the future, and since she was now old and the miracle had never occurred, she had transferred her hopes to her children. Her optimism was so elastic that it stretched over a generation without breaking.

"'Mrs. Blackburn – Angelica Fitzhugh, she was – though her name is really Anna Jeannette, and they called her Angelica as a child because she looked so like an angel – well, Mrs. Blackburn is the cousin I spoke of, whose little girl is so delicate.' She is all tangled up, isn't she, mother?"

"Lucy always wrote like that," said Mrs. Meade. "As a girl she

was a scatterbrain."

"'I do not know exactly what is wrong with the child,'" Caroline resumed patiently, "'but as long as you may go into the family, I think I ought to tell you that I have heard it whispered that her father injured her in a fit of temper when she was small.'"

"How horrible!" exclaimed Diana. "Caroline, you couldn't go there!"

"'She has never been able to play with other children, and Doctor Boland thinks she has some serious trouble of the spine. I should not call her a disagreeable child, or hard to manage, just delicate and rather whining – at least she is whenever I see her, which is not often. Her mother is one of the loveliest creatures on earth, and I can imagine no greater privilege than living in the house with her. She is far from strong, but she seems never to think of her health, and all her time is devoted to doing good. Doctor Boland was telling me yesterday that he had positively forbidden her undertaking any more charitable work. He says her nerves are sensitive, and that if she does not stop and rest she will break down sooner or later. I cannot help feeling – though of course I did not say this to him – that her unhappy marriage is the cause of her ill health and her nervousness. She was married very young, and they were so desperately poor that it was a choice between marriage and school teaching. I cannot blame anybody for not wanting to teach school, especially if they have as poor a head for arithmetic as I have, but if I had been Angelica, I should have taught until the day of my death before I should have

married David Blackburn. If she had not been so young it would be hard to find an excuse for her. Of course he has an immense fortune, and he comes of a good old family in southside Virginia – your mother will remember his father – but when you have said that, you have said all there is to his credit. The family became so poor after the war that the boy had to go to work while he was scarcely more than a child, and I believe the only education he has ever had was the little his mother taught him, and what he managed to pick up at night after the day's work was over. In spite of his birth he has had neither the training nor the advantages of a gentleman, and nothing proves this so conclusively as the fact that, though he was brought up a Democrat, he voted the Republican ticket at the last two Presidential elections. There is something black in a man, my dear old father used to say, who goes over to the negroes – '"

"Of course Lucy belongs to the old school," said Mrs. Meade. "She talks just as her father used to – but I cannot see any harm in a man's voting as he thinks right."

"'I am telling you all this, my dear Caroline, in order that you may know exactly what the position is. The salary will be good, just what you make in other cases, and I am sure that Angelica will be kindness itself to you. As for David Blackburn, I scarcely think he will annoy you. He treats his wife abominably, I hear, but you can keep out of his way, and it is not likely that he will be openly rude to you when you meet. The papers just now are full of him because, after going over to the Republicans, he does

not seem satisfied with their ways.

"'Give my fondest love to your mother, and tell her how thankful I am that she and I are not obliged to live through a second war. One is enough for any woman, and I know she will agree with me – especially if she could read some of the letters my daughter writes from France. I feel every hour I live how thankful we ought to be to a kind Providence for giving us a President who has kept us out of this war. Robert says if there were not any other reason to vote for Mr. Wilson, that would be enough – and with Mr. Hughes in the White House who knows but we should be in the midst of it all very soon. David Blackburn is making fiery speeches about the duty of America's going in, but some men can never have enough of a fight, and I am sure the President knows what is best for us, and will do what he thinks is right.

"'Be sure to telegraph me if you can come, and I will meet your train in Angelica's car.

"'Your affectionate friend,

LUCY COLFAX.

"'I forgot to tell you that Doctor Boland says I am prejudiced against David Blackburn, but I do not think I am. I tell only what I hear, for the stories are all over Richmond.'"

As Caroline finished the letter she raised her head with a laugh.

"It sounds like a good place, and as for Bluebeard – well, he can't kill me. I don't happen to be his wife."

Her figure, with its look of relaxed energy, of delicate yet inflexible strength, straightened swiftly, while her humorous smile played like an edge of light over her features. The old lady, watching her closely, remembered the way Caroline's dead father had laughed in his youth. "She is as like him as a girl could be," she thought, with her eyes on her daughter's wide white brow, which had always seemed to her a shade too strong and thoughtful for a woman. Only the softly curving line of hair and the large radiant eyes kept the forehead from being almost masculine. "She might be as pretty as Maud if only she had more colour and her brow and chin were as soft as her eyes. Her mouth isn't full and red like Maud's, and her nose isn't nearly so straight, but the girls' father used to say that the best nose after all is a nose that nobody remembers." Smiling vaguely at the recollection, Mrs. Meade readjusted her mental processes with an effort, and took up her work. "I hope Lucy is prejudiced against him," she observed brightly. "You know her father was once Governor of Virginia, and she can't stand anybody who doesn't support the Democratic Party."

"But she says he treats his wife abominably, and that it's all over Richmond!" exclaimed Maud indignantly.

Before this challenge Mrs. Meade quailed. "If she is prejudiced about one thing, she may be about others," she protested helplessly.

"Well, he can't hurt me," remarked Caroline with firmness. "People can't hurt you unless you let them." Nothing, she felt,

in an uncertain world was more certain than this – no man could ever hurt her again. She knew life now; she had acquired experience; she had learned philosophy; and no man, not even Bluebeard himself, could ever hurt her again.

"There was something about him in the paper this morning," said Margaret, the serious and silent one of the family. "I didn't read it, but I am sure that I saw his name in the headlines. It was about an independent movement in politics."

"Well, I'm not afraid of independent movements," rejoined Caroline gaily, "and I'm not like Mrs. Colfax – for I don't care what he does to the Democratic Party."

"I hate to have you go there, my dear," Mrs. Meade's voice shook a little, "but, of course, you must do what you think right." She remembered the empty flour barrel, and the falling fence rails, and the habit of a merciful Providence that invariably came to her aid at the eleventh hour. Perhaps, after all, there was a design working through it, she reflected, as she recovered her sprightliness, and Providence had arranged the case to meet her necessities. "It seems disagreeable, but one never knows," she added aloud.

"It isn't the first time I've had a disagreeable case, mother. One can't nurse seven years and see only the pleasant side of people and things."

"Yes, I know, my child, I know. You have had so much experience." She felt quite helpless before the fact of her daughter's experience. "Only if he really does ill treat his wife,

and you have to see it – "

"If I see it, perhaps I can stop it. I suppose even Bluebeard might have been stopped if anybody had gone about it with spirit. It won't be my first sudden conversion." Her eyes were still laughing, but her mouth was stern, and between the arched black eyebrows three resolute little lines had appeared. Before her "unfortunate experience," Mrs. Meade thought sadly, there had been no grimness in Caroline's humour.

"You have a wonderful way of bringing out the good in people, Caroline. Your Uncle Clarence was telling me last Sunday that he believed you could get the best out of anybody."

"Then granting that Bluebeard has a best, I'd better begin to dig for it as soon as I get there."

"I am glad you can take it like that. If you weren't so capable, so resourceful, I'd never be easy about you a minute, but you are too intelligent to let yourself get into difficulties that you can't find a way out of." The old lady brightened as quickly as she had saddened. After all, if Caroline had been merely an ordinary girl she could never have turned to nursing so soon after the wreck of her happiness. "If a man had broken my heart when I was a girl, I believe I should have died of it," she told herself. "Certainly, I should never have been able to hold up my head and go on laughing like that. I suppose it was pride that kept her up, but it is queer the way that pride affects people so differently. Now a generation ago pride would not have made a girl laugh and take up work. It would have killed her." And there flashed through

her thoughts, with the sanguine irrelevance of her habit of mind, "What I have never understood is how any man could go off with a little yellow-haired simpleton like that after knowing Caroline. Yet, I suppose, as Clarence said, if she hadn't been a simpleton, it would have been that much worse."

"Well, I'm going," said Caroline so briskly that her mother and sisters looked at her in surprise. "Jonas will have to saddle Billy and take the telegram to the station, and then you can stop knitting and help me finish those caps. This is my war and I'm going to fight it through to the end."

She went out with the telegram, and a little later when she came back and turned again to the window, Mrs. Meade saw that her eyes were shining. After all, it looked sometimes as if Caroline really liked a battle. Always when things went wrong or appeared disastrous, this shining light came to her eyes.

Outside an eddying wind was driving the rain in gusts up the avenue, and the old cedar dashed its boughs, with a brushing sound, against the blurred window panes. As Caroline stood there she remembered that her father had loved the cedar, and there drifted into her thoughts the words he had spoken to her shortly before his death. "I haven't much to leave you, daughter, but I leave you one good thing – courage. Never forget that it isn't the victory that matters, it is the fight."

She heard Mrs. Meade telling Jonas, who was starting to the station, that he must haul a load of wood from Pine Hill when the rain was over, and while she listened, it seemed to her that she

had never really known her mother until this instant – that she had never understood her simple greatness. "She has fought every minute," she thought, "she has had a hard life, and yet no one would know it. It has not kept her from being sweet and gay and interested in every one else. Even now in that calico dress, with an apron on, she looks as if she were brimming with happiness." Out of the wreck of life, out of poverty and sacrifice and drudgery, she realized that her mother had stood for something fine and clear and permanent – for an ideal order. She had never muddled things under the surface; she had kept in touch with realities; she had looked always through the changing tissue of experience to the solid structure of life. Like the old house she had held through all vicissitudes to her high standards.

Then her thoughts left her mother, and she faced the unknown future with the defiant courage she had won from disillusionment. "If we were not so poor I'd go to France," she reflected, "but how could they possibly do without the hundred dollars a month I can earn?" No, whatever happened she must stick to her task, and her task was keeping the roof from falling in over her mother and the girls. After a month's rest at The Cedars, she would start again on the round of uninspiring patients and tedious monotony. The place Mrs. Colfax offered her seemed to her uninteresting and even sordid, and yet she knew that nothing better awaited her. She hated darkness and mystery, and the house into which she was going appeared to her to be both dark and mysterious. She was sure of her own strength; she had

tested her courage and her endurance, and she was not afraid; yet for some vague and inexplicable reason she shrank from the position she had accepted. Mrs. Colfax's picture of the situation she thought tinged with melodrama, and her honest and lucid intelligence despised the melodramatic. They might all have been on the stage – the good wife, the brutal husband, and the delicate child; they seemed to her as unrelated to actual life as the sombre ghost that stalked through Hamlet.

"Angelica! It is a lovely name," she mused, seizing upon the one charming thing in Mrs. Colfax's description, "I wonder what she is like?" Fair, graceful, suffering, she saw this unknown woman against the background of the unhappy home, in an atmosphere of mystery and darkness. "She must be weak," she thought. "If she were not weak, she would not let him hurt her." And she longed to pour some of her own strength of will, her own independence and determination and philosophy, into the imaginary figure of Mrs. Blackburn. "It may be that I can help her. If I can only help her a little, it will all be worth while."

She tried presently to think of other things – of the caps she must finish, of the uniforms she had intended to make during her vacation, of the piece of white lawn she must cut up into kerchiefs, of the mending she would ask the girls to do for her before they went to bed. There was so much to occupy her time and her thoughts in the one evening that was left to her – yet, do what she would – look where she pleased – the sweet veiled image of Mrs. Blackburn floated to her through the twilight, up

the long, dim road and round the bend in the avenue – as if this stranger with the lovely name were the "something different" she had waited for in the past. By a miracle of imagination she had transferred this single character into actual experience. The sense of mystery was still there, but the unreality had vanished. It was incredible the way a woman whose face she had never seen had entered into her life. "Why, she is more real than anything," she thought in surprise. "She is more real even than the war."

For the war had not touched her. She stood secure, enclosed, protected from disaster, in her little green corner of southside Virginia. Her personal life had not been overpowered and submerged in the current of impersonal forces. The age of small things still surrounded her – but the quiver and vibration of great movements, of a world in dissolution, the subdued, insistent undercurrent of new spiritual energies in action – these were reaching her, with the ebb and flow of psychological processes, as they were reaching the Virginia in which she lived.

The world was changing – changing – while she went toward it.

CHAPTER II
The Time

AT midnight, when she was alone in her room, Caroline's mind passed from an intense personal realization of the Blackburns to a broader conception of the time in which she was living – the time which this generation had helped to create, and which, like some monster of the imagination, was now devouring its happiness. She thought of her father – a man of intellectual abilities who had spent his life out of touch with his environment, in an uncongenial employment. Young as she was when he died, she had been for years the solitary confidant of his mind, for he also, like these strangers into whose lives she was about to enter, had been the victim of the illimitable and inscrutable forces which shape the thought of an age. He had been different from his generation, and because he had been different, it had destroyed him. Yet his single idea had outlived the multitudinous actions and reactions that surrounded him. He saw not to-day, but to-morrow; and though he was of another mettle from this Blackburn of whom she had been reading, he appeared now in her fancy to take a place beside him in the vivid life of the age.

The lamp was smoking, and after lowering the wick, she sat gazing into the darkness beyond the loosened shutters, which rattled when the wind shook them.

It was in the early autumn of nineteen hundred and sixteen,

the moment in history when America, hesitating on the verge of war, discovered that it was no longer an Anglo-Saxon nation; that, in spite of its language and literature, its shell of customs and traditions, a new race had been created out of a complicated mass of diverse interacting sympathies, prejudices, attractions, and repulsions. Confronted now with problems demanding a definite expression of the national will, it became evident that the pioneer stock had undergone profound modifications, and that from a mingling of many strains had been born an emphatic American spirit, with aspirations essentially different from those of the races from which its lifeblood was drawn. In the arrogant vigour of youth this spirit resented any disposition on the part of its kindred to dictate or even influence its policy or its purpose.

For two years Europe had been at war. The outbreak of the struggle had come as a distant thunderbolt to a nation unaccustomed to threatening armies, and ignorant of the triumphant menace of military ideals; and stunned by a calamity which it had believed impossible, America had been inclined at first to condemn indiscriminately those who had permitted the disaster for apparently insignificant causes. There was sympathy with Belgium because it had been destroyed; with France because it had been invaded; and with England because it had worked sincerely in the interests of peace; but as early as the autumn of nineteen hundred and sixteen this sympathy was little more than uncrystallized sentiment. To the people the problem was irrelevant and disguised in words. For a century they had

been taught that their geographical isolation was indestructible, and that European history concerned them only after it had been successfully transmuted into literature. The effect of these political illusions had been accentuated by the immediate demands upon the thoughts and energies of the nation, by the adventure of conquering a rich and undeveloped continent, and by the gradual adjustment of complex institutions to a rapidly expanding social and economic life. Secure in its remoteness, the country had grown careless in its diplomacy. Commerce was felt to be vital, but foreign relations were cheerfully left to the President, with the assumption that he was acting under the special guidance of Providence, on those memorable occasions when he acted at all. With the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the spirit of the country had flamed into a passionate demand for redress or war. Then the indignation had been gradually allayed by diplomatic phrases and bewildering technicalities; and the masses of the people, busy with an extravagant war prosperity, resigned international matters into the hands of the Government, while, with an uneasy conscience but genuine American optimism, they continued actively to hope for the best.

To an aërial philosopher the Government of the hour might have appeared a composite image of the time – sentimental, evasive of realities, idealistic in speech, and materialistic in purpose and action. Dominated by a single strong intellect, it was composed mainly of men who were without knowledge of world questions or experience in world affairs. At the moment war was

gathering, yet the demand for preparation was either ignored or ridiculed as hysteria.

As the national elections approached both parties avoided the direct issue, and sought by compromise and concession to secure the support of the non-American groups. While the country waited for leadership, the leaders hesitated in the midst of conflicting currents of public sentiment, and endeavoured to win popularity through an irresolute policy of opportunism. To Virginians, who thought politically in terms of a party, the great question was resolved into a personal problem. Where the President led they would follow.

From the beginning there had been many Americans who looked beneath the shifting surface of events, and beheld in this war a challenge to the principles which are the foundation-stones of Western civilization. They realized that this was a war not of men, not of materials, but of ideals – of ideals which are deeper than nationality since they are the common heritage of the human race. They saw that the ideals assailed were the basis of American institutions, and that if they should be overthrown the American Republic could not endure. As in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the problems of European civilization were fought out in the forests of America, so to-day, they felt, the future of America would be decided on the battlefields of Europe. The cause was the cause of humanity, therefore it was America's war.

And now as the elections drew nearer, these clearer thinkers

stood apart and watched the grotesque political spectacle, with its unctuous promises of "peace and prosperity," in the midst of world tragedy. Though the struggle would be close, it was already evident that the sentiment of the country was drifting, not so much toward the policies of the administration, as away from the invectives of the opposite party. Since neither party stood for principle, nor had the courage to declare fearlessly for the maintenance of American rights, there was a measure of comfort in the reflection that, though the purposes of the Government were not wholly approved, they were at least partly known.

By the early autumn the campaign had passed through a fog of generalization and settled into a sham battle of personal and sectional issues, while in Europe the skies grew darker, and the events of the coming year gathered like vultures before the approaching storm.

And always, while America waited and watched, the forces that mould the destinies of men and of nations, were moving, profound, obscure, and impenetrable, beneath the surface of life.

Caroline's lamp flickered and went out, while her thoughts rushed back to the shelter of the house. The room was in darkness, but beyond the shutters, where the wind swept in gusts, the clouds had scattered, and a few stars were shining.

CHAPTER III
Briarlay

IN the train Caroline sat straight and still, with her eyes on the landscape, which unrolled out of the golden web of the distance. Now and then, when her gaze shifted, she could see the pale oval of her face glimmering unsteadily in the window-pane, like a light that is going out slowly. Even in the glass, where her eyes were mere pools of darkness, her mouth looked sad and stern, as if it had closed over some tragic and for ever unutterable secret. It was only when one saw her eyes – those eyes which under the arch of her brows and hair made one think of bluebirds flying – it was only when their colour and radiance lighted her features, that her face melted to tenderness.

While she sat there she thought of a hundred things, yet never once did she think of herself or her own interests as the centre around which her imagination revolved. If life had repressed and denied her, it had trained her mental processes into lucid and orderly habits. Unlike most women, she had learned to think impersonally, and to think in relations. Her spirit might beat its wings against the bars of the cage, but she knew that it would never again rise, with a dart of ecstasy, to test its freedom and its flight in the sky. She had had her day of joy. It was short, and it had left only sadness, yet because she had once had it, even for so brief a time, she might be disillusioned, but she could

not feel wholly defrauded. Through that dead emotion she had reached, for an instant, the heart of life; she had throbbed with its rapture; she had felt, known, and suffered. And in confronting the illusions of life, she had found the realities. Because she had learned that thought, not emotion, is the only permanent basis of happiness, she had been able to found her house on a rock. It was worth a good deal of pain to discover that neither desire nor disappointment is among the eternal verities of experience.

To-day, as on many other days since she had passed through her training in the hospital, she was leaving home, after a vacation in which she had thought of herself scarcely a minute, for the kind of service in which she would not have time to think of herself at all. Work had been the solution of her problem, the immediate restorative; and she knew that it had helped her through the anguish, and – worse than anguish – through the bleakness of her tragedy, as nothing else could have done. "I will not sit down and think of myself," she had said over and over in those first bitter days, and in the years since then, while she was passionately rebuilding her universe, she had kept true to her resolve. She had been active always; she had never brooded among the romantic ruins of the past. If her inner life had grown indifferent, cold, and a little hard, her external sympathies had remained warm, clear, and glowing. The comfort she had denied herself, she had given abundantly to others; the strength she had not wasted in brooding, she had spent freely in a passion of service and pity. In her face there was the beauty and sweetness

of a fervent, though disciplined, spirit.

"I am so sorry to leave them," she thought, with her eyes on the amber, crimson, and purple of the forest. "Mother is no longer young. She needs all the help I can give her, and the girls have so few pleasures. I wish there was something more I could do for them. I would work my fingers to the bone to give them a little happiness." And there floated before her, against the background of the forest, a still yet swiftly fleeting vision, of the fire-lit room, with the girls gathered, knitting, on the hearthrug, and her mother turning to look at her with the good and gentle expression that shone always in her face. Beyond the window the rain fell; the cedar brushed its boughs against the panes with a sound like that of ghostly fingers; on the roof above she heard the measured dropping of acorns. In the flickering light the old mahogany gleamed with a bronze and gold lustre, and the high white bed, under its fringed Marseilles coverlet, stood, like an embodiment of peace and sleep, in the corner. "It looks so happy, so sheltered," she thought, "and yet – " she was going to add, "and yet unhappiness came up the road, from a great distance, and found me there – " but she shattered the vague idea before it formed in her mind.

At the station Mrs. Colfax was waiting, and though Caroline had seen her only once, ten years ago, she recognized her by a bird-like, pecking manner she had never forgotten. As the ruin of a famous beauty the old lady was not without historic distinction. Though she was now shrunken and withered, and strung with

quaint gold chains, which rattled with echoes of an earlier period, she still retained the gracious social art of the "sixties." Her eyes, hollowed under thin grey eyebrows, were black and piercing, and her small aristocratic features looked mashed, as if life had dealt them too hard a blow.

"My dear child, I should have known you anywhere, so, you see, I haven't yet lost my memory. It was years ago that I met you, wasn't it?"

A man in livery – she discovered afterwards that he was the Blackburn's footman – took her bag, and Caroline helped Mrs. Colfax out of the station and into the big limousine at the door. "It was so good of you to meet me," she said, for it was all she could think of, and to the last she had been haunted by the fear that Mr. Blackburn might decide to come for her.

"Good of me? Why, I wanted to come." As she watched Caroline's face, the old lady was thinking shrewdly, "She isn't so pretty as she used to be. I doubt if many men would think twice about her – but she has a lovely expression. I never saw a more spiritual face."

Once safely started she rambled on while the car shot into Franklin Street, and ran straight ahead in the direction of Monument Avenue.

"I always meant to meet you, and just as soon as your telegram came, I 'phoned Angelica about the car. She wanted to come down herself, but the doctor makes her lie down two hours every afternoon. Do you see that new office building at the corner?

Your mother and I went to school on that spot before we boarded at Miss Braxton's in Petersburg. At that time this part of Franklin Street was very fashionable, but everything has moved west, and everybody who can afford it is building in the country. It isn't like your mother's day at all. New people have taken possession of the town, and anybody who has money can get into society now. We are coming to Monument Avenue. All the houses are brand new, but it is nothing to the country outside. The Blackburns' place just off the River Road is the finest house anywhere about Richmond, they tell me. He built it the year before his marriage, and I remember an artist, who came down to lecture before the Woman's Club, saying to me that Briarlay was like its owner – everything big in it was good and everything little in it was bad. I don't know much about such things, but he poked fun at the fireplaces – said they were Gothic or Italian – I can't remember which – and that the house, of course, is Colonial."

A fit of coughing stopped her, and while she dived into her black silk bag for a handkerchief, Caroline asked curiously, "Has Mr. Blackburn so much money?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose he is the richest man we have here. He owns the large steel works down by the river, and he discovered some new cheap process, they say, which brought him a fortune. I remember hearing this, but I haven't much of a head for such matters. Just now he is having a good deal of trouble with his men, and I'm sure it serves him right for deserting the ways of his father, and going over to the Republicans. Charles takes up

for him because David has always stood by him in business, but of course out of respect for father's memory he couldn't openly sympathize with his disloyalty."

"Does anybody follow him, or is he all alone?" inquired Caroline, less from active interest in the question than from the desire to keep the old lady animated.

"You'll have to ask Charles, and he will be delighted to answer. In this new-fangled idea about breaking the solid South – did you ever hear such stuff and nonsense? – I believe he has had a very bad influence over a number of young men. Then, of late, he has been talking extravagantly about its being our duty to go into this war – as if we had any business mixing ourselves up in other people's quarrels – and that appeals to a lot of fire-eaters and fight-lovers. Of course, a man as rich as David Blackburn will always have a trail of sycophants and addlepates at his heels. What I say is that if Providence had intended us to be in this war, we shouldn't have been given a President wise and strong enough to keep us out of it. If Mr. Wilson is elected for a second term – and my brother Charles says there isn't a doubt of it – it will be because the country feels that he has kept us out of war. There was a long editorial in the paper this morning warning us that, if Mr. Hughes is elected, we shall be fighting Germany within two months. Then think of all the destruction and the dreadful high taxes that would follow – "

"But I thought there was a great deal of war spirit here? At home we work all the time for the Allies."

"Oh, there is, there is. Angelica is president or chairman of two or three societies for helping the wounded, and they even made me head of something – I never can remember the name of it – but it has to do with Belgian orphans. Everybody wants to help, but that is different from going into the actual fighting, you know, and people are very much divided. A few, like David Blackburn, wanted us to declare war the day after the Lusitania was destroyed, but most of us feel – especially the wiser heads – that the President knows more about it than any one else – "

"I suppose he does," admitted Caroline, and she added while she looked at the appointments of the car, "What a beautiful car!"

She sighed gently, for she was thinking of the rotting fence rails and the leaking roof at The Cedars. How far she could make a few thousand dollars go in repairing the house and the out-buildings! If only the leaks could be mended, and the roof reshingled over the wings! If only they could hire a younger man to help poor old Jones, who was growing decrepit!

"This car is Angelica's," said the old lady, "and everything she has is wonderful. As soon as she was married she began to re-decorate Briarlay from garret to cellar. When David first made his money, he went about buying everything he laid eyes on, and she gave whole wagon-loads of furniture to her relatives. There are people who insist that Angelica overdoes things in her way as much as her husband does in his – both were poor when they grew up – but I maintain that her taste is perfect – simply perfect. It is all very well for my daughter Lucy, who has studied

interior decoration in New York, to turn up her nose at walls hung with silk in a country house, but to my mind that pink silk in Angelica's parlours is the most beautiful thing she could have, and I reckon I've as good a right to my ideas as Lucy has to hers. After all, as I tell her, it is only a question of taste."

It was a mild, bright afternoon in October, and as the car turned into the River Road, the country spread softly, in undulations of green, gold, and bronze, to the deep blue edge of the horizon. The valley lay in shadow, while above it shreds of violet mist drifted slowly against the golden ball of the sun. Near at hand the trees were touched with flame, but, as they went on, the brilliant leaves melted gradually into the multi-coloured blend of the distance.

"Mrs. Blackburn must be so beautiful," said Caroline presently. As she approached Briarlay – the house of darkness and mystery that she had seen in her imagination – she felt that the appeal of this unknown woman deepened in vividness and pathos, that it rushed to meet her and enveloped her with the intensity and sweetness of a perfume. It was as if the name Angelica were not a sound, but a thing composed of colour and fragrance – sky-blue like a cloud and as sweet-scented as lilies.

"She was the most beautiful girl who ever came out in Richmond," replied Mrs. Colfax. "The family was so poor that her mother couldn't do anything for her – she didn't even have a coming-out party – but with a girl like that nothing matters. David Blackburn saw her at some reception, and lost his head

completely. I won't say his heart because I've never believed that he had one. Of course he was far and away the best chance she was ever likely to have down here, for it wasn't as if they could have sent her to the White Sulphur. They couldn't afford anything, and they were even educating Angelica to be a teacher. What she would have done if David Blackburn hadn't come along when he did, I cannot imagine – though, as I wrote you, I'd have taught school to my dying day before I'd have married him."

"But didn't she care anything for him?" asked Caroline, for it was incredible to her that such a woman should have sold herself.

Mrs. Colfax sniffed at her smelling-salts. "Of course I haven't the right to an opinion," she rejoined, after a pause, "but as I always reply to Charles when he tells me I am talking too much, 'Well, I can't help having eyes.' I remember as well as if it were yesterday the way Angelica looked when she told me of her engagement. 'I have decided to marry David Blackburn, Cousin Lucy,' she said, and then she added, just as if the words were wrung out of her, 'I loathe the thought of teaching!' It doesn't sound a bit like Angelica, but those were her very words. And now, my dear, tell me something about your mother. Does she still keep up her wonderful spirits?"

After this she asked so many questions that Caroline was still answering them when the car turned out of the road and sped up a long, narrow lane, which was thickly carpeted with amber leaves. At the end of the lane, the vista broadened into an ample sweep of lawn surrounding a red brick house with white columns

and low wings half hidden in Virginia creeper. It was a beautiful house – so beautiful that Caroline held her breath in surprise. Under the October sky, in the midst of clustering elms, which shed a rain of small bronze leaves down on the bright grass and the dark evergreens, the house appeared to capture and imprison the mellow light of the sunset. It was so still, except for a curving flight of swallows over the roof, and the elm leaves, which fell slowly and steadily in the soft air, that the gleaming windows, the red walls, and the white columns, borrowed, for a moment, the visionary aspect of a place seen in a dream.

"There is a formal garden at the back, full of box-borders and cypresses – only they are really red cedars," said Mrs. Colfax. "From the terrace there is a good view of the river, and lower down Angelica has made an old-fashioned garden, with grass walks and rose arbours and mixed flower beds. I never saw such Canterbury bells as she had last summer."

As they entered the circular drive, a touring car passed them slowly on the way out, and a man leaned forward and bowed to Mrs. Colfax. From her casual glance Caroline received an impression of a strong, sunburned face, with heavy brows and dark hair going a little grey on the temples.

"What searching eyes that man has," she observed carelessly, and added immediately, "You know him?"

"Why, that was David Blackburn. I forgot you had never seen him."

"He isn't at all what I expected him to be." While Caroline

spoke she felt an inexplicable sense of disappointment. She scarcely knew what she had expected; yet she realized that he was different from some vague image she had had in her mind.

"His face looked so set I'm afraid he has been quarrelling with Angelica," said the old lady. "Poor child, I feel so distressed."

They had reached the house, and as they were about to alight, the door opened, and a girl in a riding habit, with two Airedale terriers at her heels, strolled out on the porch. At sight of Mrs. Colfax, she came quickly forward, and held out her hand. She had a splendid figure, which the riding habit showed to advantage, and though her face was plain, her expression was pleasant and attractive. Without the harsh collar and the severe arrangement of her hair, which was braided and tied up with a black ribbon, Caroline imagined that she might be handsome.

Mrs. Colfax greeted her as "Miss Blackburn" and explained immediately that she lived at Briarlay with her brother. "She is a great lover of dogs," added the old lady, "and it is a pity that Angelica doesn't like to have them about."

"Oh, they don't mind, they're such jolly beggars," replied the girl in a cheerful, slangy manner, "and besides they get all they want of me. I'm so sorry you didn't come in time for tea. Now I'm just starting for a ride with Alan."

While she was speaking a man on horseback turned from the lane into the drive, and Caroline saw her face change and brighten until it became almost pretty. "There he is now!" she exclaimed, and then she called out impulsively, "Oh, Alan, I've

waited for ever!"

He shouted back some words in a gay voice, but Caroline did not catch them, and before he dismounted, Mrs. Colfax led her through the open door into the hall.

"That's Alan Wythe," said the old lady in a whisper, and she resumed a moment later when they stood within the pink silk walls of Angelica's drawing-room, "Mary has been engaged to him for a year, and I never in my life saw a girl so much in love. I suppose it's natural enough – he's charming – but in my day young ladies were more reserved. And now we'll go straight upstairs to Angelica. She is sure to be lying down at this hour."

As they passed through the wide hall, and up the beautiful Colonial staircase, Caroline felt that the luxury of the place bewildered her. Though the house, except in size, was not unlike country homes she had seen in southside Virginia, there was nothing in her memory, unless she summoned back stray recollections of photographs in Sunday newspapers, that could compare with the decoration of the drawing-room. "It is beautiful, but there is too much of it," she thought, for her eyes, accustomed to bare surfaces and the formal purity of Sheraton and Chippendale, were beginning to discriminate.

"I want you to notice everything when you have time," said Mrs. Colfax. "I tell Angelica that it is a liberal education just to come inside of this house."

"It would take weeks to see it," responded Caroline; and then, as she moved toward a long mirror in the hall upstairs, it seemed

to her that her reflection, in her severe blue serge suit, with the little round blue hat Diana had trimmed, looked as grotesquely out of place as if she had been one of the slender Sheraton chairs at The Cedars. "If I appear a lady I suppose it is as much as I can hope for," she thought, "and besides nobody will notice me."

The humour leaped to her eyes, while Mrs. Colfax, watching her with a side-long glance, reflected that Carrie Warwick's daughter had distinction. Her grace was not merely the grace of a slender body with flowing lines; it was the grace of word, of glance, of smile, of gesture, that indefinable and intangible quality which is shed by a lovely soul as fragrance is shed by a flower. "Even if she lives to be as old as I am, she will still keep her poise and her charm of appearance," thought the old lady, "she will never lose it because it isn't a matter of feature – it isn't dependent on outward beauty. Years ago she was prettier than she is to-day, but she wasn't nearly so distinguished." Aloud she said presently, "Your hair grows in such a nice line on your forehead, my dear, just like your mother's. I remember we always made her brush hers straight back as you do, so she could show her 'widow's peak' in the centre. But yours is much darker, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is almost black. Mother's was the loveliest shade of chestnut. I have a lock of it in an old breast-pin."

A door at the end of the hall opened, and a thin woman, in rusty black alpaca, came to meet them.

"That's the housekeeper – Matty Timberlake, the very salt of the earth," whispered Mrs. Colfax. "She is Angelica's cousin."

When the housekeeper reached them, she stooped and kissed Mrs. Colfax before she spoke to Caroline. She was a long, narrow, neuralgic woman, with near-sighted eyes, thin grey hair which hung in wisps on her forehead, and a look which seemed to complain always that she was poor and dependent and nobody noticed her.

"Angelica is lying down," she said, "but she would like to speak to Miss Meade before I take her to her room."

Caroline's heart gave a bound. "At last I shall see her," she thought, while she followed Mrs. Timberlake down the hall and across the threshold of Angelica's room. The influence that she had felt first in the twilight at The Cedars and again in the drive out from Richmond, welcomed her like a caress.

Her first impression was one of blue and ivory and gold. There was a bed, painted in garlands, with a scalloped canopy of blue silk; and Caroline, who was accustomed to mahogany testers or the little iron beds in the hospital, was conscious of a thrill of delight as she looked at it. Then her eyes fell on the white bear-skin rug before the fire, and from the rug they passed to the couch on which Mrs. Blackburn was lying. The woman and the room harmonized so perfectly that one might almost have mistaken Angelica for a piece of hand-painted furniture. At first she appeared all blue silk and pale gold hair and small delicate features. Then she sat up and held out her hand, and Caroline saw that she looked not only human, but really tired and frail. There were faint shadows under her eyes, which were like grey velvet,

and her hair, parted softly in golden wings over her forehead, showed several barely perceptible creases between her eyebrows. She was so thin that the bones of her face and neck were visible beneath the exquisite texture of her flesh, yet the modelling was as perfect as if her head and shoulders had been chiselled in marble.

"You are Caroline Meade," she said sweetly. "I am so glad you have come."

"I am glad, too. I wanted to come." The vibrant voice, full of warmth and sympathy, trembled with pleasure. For once the reality was fairer than the dream; the woman before her was lovelier than the veiled figure of Caroline's imagination. It was one of those unforgettable moments when the mind pauses, with a sensation of delight and expectancy, on the edge of a new emotion, of an undiscovered country. This was not only something beautiful and rare; it was different from anything that had ever happened to her before; it was a part of the romantic mystery that surrounded the unknown. And it wasn't only that Mrs. Blackburn was so lovely! More than her beauty, the sweetness of her look, the appeal of her delicacy, of her feminine weakness, went straight to the heart. It was as if her nature reached out, with clinging tendrils, seeking support. She was like a fragile white flower that could not live without warmth and sunshine.

"The other nurse leaves in the morning," Mrs. Blackburn was saying in her gentle voice, which carried the merest note

of complaint, as if she cherished at heart some secret yet ineradicable grievance against destiny, "So you have come at the right moment to save me from anxiety. I am worried about Letty. You can understand that she is never out of my thoughts."

"Yes, I can understand, and I hope she will like me."

"She will love you from the first minute, for she is really an affectionate child, if one knows how to take her. Oh, Miss Meade, you have taken a load off my shoulders! You look so kind and so competent, and I feel that I can rely on you. I am not strong, you know, and the doctor won't let me be much with Letty. He says the anxiety is too wearing, though, if I had my way, I should never think of myself."

"But you must," said Caroline quietly. She felt that the child's illness and the terrible cause of it were wrecking Mrs. Blackburn's health as well as her happiness.

"Of course, I must try to take care of myself because in the end it will be so much better for Letty." As she answered, Angelica slipped her feet into a pair of embroidered blue silk *mules*, and rising slowly from her lace pillows, stood up on the white rug in front of the fire. Though she was not tall, her extraordinary slenderness gave her the effect of height and the enchanting lines of one of Botticelli's Graces. "With you in the house I feel that everything will be easier," she added, after a minute in which she gazed down at the new nurse with a thoughtful, appraising look.

"It will be as easy as I can make it. I will do everything that

I can." The words were not spoken lightly, for the opportunity of service had brought a glow to Caroline's heart, and she felt that her reply was more than a promise to do her best – that it was a vow of dedication from which only the future could release her. She had given her pledge of loyalty, and Mrs. Blackburn had accepted it. From this instant the bond between them assumed the nature and the obligation of a covenant.

A smile quivered and died on Angelica's lips, while the pathos in her expression drew the other to her as if there were a visible wound to be healed. "You will be a blessing. I can tell that when I look at you," she murmured; and her speech sounded almost empty after the overflowing sympathy of the silence. To Caroline it was a relief when the housekeeper called to her from the doorway, and then led her upstairs to a bedroom in the third storey.

It was a delightful room overlooking the circular drive, and for a minute they stood gazing down on the lawn and the evergreens.

"Everything is so lovely!" exclaimed Caroline presently. One could rest here, she thought, even with hard work and the constant strain, which she foresaw, on her sympathies.

"Yes, it is pretty," answered the housekeeper. Already Mrs. Timberlake had proved that, though she might be the salt of the earth, she was a taciturn and depressing companion – a stranded wreck left over from too voluble a generation of women.

"And I never saw any one lovelier than Mrs. Blackburn," said Caroline, "she looks like an angel."

"Well, I reckon there is mighty little you can say against Angelica's looks unless your taste runs to a trifle more flesh," responded Mrs. Timberlake drily.

"She ought to be happy," pursued Caroline, with a feeling that was almost one of resentment. "Anyone as beautiful as that ought to be happy."

Mrs. Timberlake turned slowly toward her, and Caroline was aware of a spasmodic stiffening of her figure, as if she were nerving herself for an outburst. When the explosion came, however, it was in the nature of an anti-climax.

"I expect you are going to be very useful to her," she said; and in answer to a hurried summons at the door, she made one of her nervous gestures, and went out into the hall.

"It would be perfect," thought Caroline, "if I didn't have to meet Mr. Blackburn"; and she concluded, with a flash of her mother's unquenchable optimism, "Well, perhaps I shan't see him to-night!"

The sun had set, and almost imperceptibly the afterglow had dissolved into the twilight. Outside, the lawn and the evergreens were in shadow; but from the house a misty circle of light fell on the drive, and on a narrow strip of turf, from which each separate blade of grass emerged with exaggerated distinctness as if it were illuminated. Within this circle, with its mysterious penumbra, human life also seemed exaggerated by the luminous haze which divided it from the partial shadow of the evening. The house stood enclosed in light as in a garden; and beyond it,

where the obscurity began, there was the space and silence of the universe. While she stood there, she felt, with a certainty more profound than a mere mental conviction, that this lighted house contained, for her, all the joy and tragedy of human experience; that her life would be interwoven with these other lives as closely as branches of trees in a forest. The appeal of Mrs. Blackburn had stirred her heart and intensified her perceptions. From the bleakness of the last seven years, she had awakened with revived emotions.

"It is just my fancy," she thought, "but I feel as if something wonderful had really happened – as if life were beginning all over again to-night."

The words were still in her mind, when a child's laugh rang out from a window below, and the figure of a man passed from the outlying obscurity across the illuminated grass. Though he moved so hurriedly out of the light, she caught the suggestion of a smile; and she had a singular feeling that he was the same man, and yet not the same man, that she had seen in the motor.

"I do hope I shan't have to meet him to-night," she repeated at the very instant that a knock fell on her door, and an old coloured woman came in to bring a message from Mrs. Blackburn.

She was a benevolent looking, aristocratic negress, with a fine, glossy skin as brown as a chestnut, and traces of Indian blood in her high cheekbones. A white handkerchief was bound over her head like a turban, and her black bombazine dress hung in full, stately folds from her narrow waist line. For a minute, before

delivering her message, she peered gravely at Caroline by the dim light of the window.

"Ain't you Miss Carrie Warwick's chile, honey? You ax 'er ef'n she's done forgot de Fitzhugh chillun's mammy? I riz all er de Fitzhugh chillun."

"Then you must be Mammy Riah? Mother used to tell me about you when I was a little girl. You told stories just like Bible ones."

"Dat's me, honey, en I sutney is glad ter see you. De chillun dey wuz al'ays pesterin' me 'bout dose Bible stories jes' exactly de way Letty wuz doin' dis ve'y mawnin'."

"Tell me something about the little girl. Is she really ill?" asked Caroline; and it occurred to her, as she put the question, that it was strange nobody had mentioned the child's malady. Here again the darkness and mystery of the house she had imagined – that house which was so unlike Briarlay – reacted on her mind.

The old negress chuckled softly. "Naw'm, she ain' sick, dat's jes' some er Miss Angy's foolishness. Dar ain' nuttin' in de worl' de matter wid Letty 'cep'n de way dey's brung 'er up. You cyarn' raise a colt ez ef'n hit wuz a rabbit, en dar ain' no use'n tryin'." Then she remembered her message. "Miss Angy sez she sutney would be erbleeged ter you ef'n you 'ould come erlong down ter dinner wid de res' un um. Miss Molly Waver's done 'phone she cyarn' come, en dar ain' nobody else in de house ez kin set in her place."

For an instant Caroline hesitated. "If I go down, I'll have to

meet Mr. Blackburn," she said under her breath.

A gleam of humour shot into the old woman's eyes.

"Marse David! Go 'way f'om yer, chile, whut you skeered er Marse David fur?" she rejoined. "He ain' gwine ter hu't you."

CHAPTER IV
Angelica

AT a quarter of eight o'clock, when Caroline was waiting to be called, Mrs. Timberlake came in to ask if she might fasten her dress.

"Oh, you're all hooked and ready," she remarked. "I suppose nurses learn to be punctual."

"They have to be, so much depends on it."

"Well, you look sweet. I've brought you a red rose from the table. It will lighten up that black dress a little."

"I don't often go to dinner parties," said Caroline while she pinned on the rose. "Will there be many people?" There was no shyness in her voice or manner; and it seemed to Mrs. Timberlake that the black gown, with its straight, slim skirt, which had not quite gone out of fashion, made her appear taller and more dignified. Her hair, brushed smoothly back from her forehead, gave to her clear profile the look of some delicate etching. There was a faint flush in her cheeks, and her eyes were richer and bluer than they had looked in the afternoon. She was a woman, not a girl, and her charm was the charm not of ignorance, but of intelligence, wisdom, and energy.

"Only twelve," answered the housekeeper, "sometimes we have as many as twenty." There was an expression of pain in her eyes, due to chronic neuralgia, and while she spoke she pressed

her fingers to her temples.

"Is Mr. Wythe coming?" asked Caroline.

"He always comes. It is so hard to find unattached men that the same ones get invited over and over. Then there are Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers. They are from New York and the dinner is given to them – and the Ashburtons and Robert Colfax and his wife – who was Daisy Carter – she is very good looking but a little flighty – and Mr. Peyton, old Mrs. Colfax's brother."

"I know – 'Brother Charles' – but who are the Ashburtons?"

"Colonel Ashburton is very amusing. He is on Mr. Blackburn's side in politics, and they are great friends. His wife is dull, but she means well, and she is useful on committees because she is a good worker and never knows when she is put upon. Well, it's time for you to go down, I reckon. I just ran up from the pantry to see if I could help you."

A minute later, when Caroline left her room, Mary Blackburn joined her, and the two went downstairs together. Mary was wearing a lovely gown of amber silk, and she looked so handsome that Caroline scarcely recognized her. Her black hair, piled on the crown of her head, gave her, in spite of her modern dash and frankness, a striking resemblance to one of the old portraits at The Cedars. She was in high spirits, for the ride with Alan had left her glowing with happiness.

"We'd better hustle. They are waiting for us," she said. "I was late getting in, so I tossed on the first dress I could find."

Then she ran downstairs, and Caroline, following her more

slowly, found herself presently shaking hands with the dreaded David Blackburn. He was so quiet and unassuming that only when he had taken her hand and had asked her a few conventional questions about her trip, did she realize that she was actually speaking to him. In evening clothes, surrounded by the pink silk walls of Angelica's drawing-room, his face looked firmer and harder than it had appeared in the motor; but even in this extravagant setting, he impressed her as more carefully dressed and groomed than the average Virginian of her acquaintance. She saw now that he was younger than she had at first thought; he couldn't, she surmised, be much over forty. There were deep lines in his forehead; his features had settled into the granite-like immobility that is acquired only through grim and resolute struggle; and his dark, carefully brushed hair showed a silvery gloss on the temples – yet these things, she realized, were the marks of battles, not of years. What struck her most was the quickness with which the touch of arrogance in his expression melted before the engaging frankness of his smile.

"I'm glad you've come. I hope you will get on with Letty," he said; and then, as he turned away, the vision of Angelica, in white chiffon and pearls, floated toward her from a group by the fireplace.

"Colonel Ashburton is an old friend of your mother's, Miss Meade. He took her to her first cotillion, and he is eager to meet her daughter." There followed swift introductions to the Ashburtons, the Chalmers, and the Colfaxes; and not until

Caroline was going into the dining-room on the arm of Mrs. Colfax's "Brother Charles," was she able to distinguish between the stranger from New York, who looked lean and wiry and strenuous, and the white-haired old gentleman who had taken her mother to the cotillion. She was not confused; and yet her one vivid impression was of Angelica, with her pale Madonna head, her soft grey eyes under thick lashes, and her lovely figure in draperies of chiffon that flowed and rippled about her.

Though the house was an inappropriate setting for David Blackburn, it was, for all its newness and ornate accessories, the perfect frame for his wife's beauty. She reminded Caroline of the allegorical figure of Spring in one of the tapestries on the dining-room walls – only she was so much softer, so much more ethereal, as if the floral image had come to life and been endowed with a soul. It was the rare quality of Mrs. Blackburn's beauty that in looking at her one thought first of her spirit – of the sweetness and goodness which informed and animated her features. The appeal she made was the appeal of an innocent and beautiful creature who is unhappy. Against the background of an unfortunate marriage, she moved with the resigned and exalted step of a Christian martyr.

Sitting silently between the flippant "Brother Charles" and the imposing Colonel Ashburton, who was still talking of her mother, Caroline tried to follow the conversation while she studied the faces and the dresses of the women. Mrs. Chalmers, who was large and handsome in a superb gown of green velvet,

appeared heavy and indifferent, and Mrs. Ashburton, an over-earnest middle-aged woman, with a classic profile and a look of impersonal yet hungry philanthropy, was so detached that she seemed, when she spoke, to be addressing an invisible audience. In spite of her regular features and her flawless complexion, she was as devoid of charm as an organized charity. On her right sat Allan Wythe, a clean-cut, good-looking chap, with romantic eyes and the air of a sportsman. Though Caroline had heard that he wrote plays, she thought that he needed only a gun and a dog to complete his appearance. "He is the only good-looking man here," she concluded. "Some people might think Mr. Blackburn good-looking, but I suppose I know too much about him." And she remembered that her father had said a man's character always showed in his mouth.

Next to Alan there was Mrs. Robert Colfax – a beautiful Spanish-looking creature, straight as a young poplar, and as full of silvery lights and shadows. She had no sooner sat down than she began to ask Angelica, with an agreeable though flighty animation, if she had seen somebody since he had come back from his wedding trip? For the next quarter of an hour they kept up an excited interchange of gossip, while Mr. Chalmers listened with polite attention, and Caroline tried in vain to discover who the unknown person was, and why his wedding trip should interest anybody so profoundly.

"Well, I never thought he'd get another wife after his last misadventure," rippled Mrs. Colfax, "but they tell me he had only

to wink an eyelash. I declare I don't know a more discouraging spectacle than the men that some women will marry."

At the other end of the table, Mrs. Blackburn was talking in a low voice to Mr. Chalmers, and the broken clauses of her conversation were punctuated by the laughter of the irrepressible Daisy, who was never silent. Though Angelica was not brilliant, though she never said anything clever enough for one to remember, she had what her friends called "a sweet way of talking," and a flattering habit, when she was with a man, of ending every sentence with a question. "I'm sure I don't see how we are to keep out of this war, do you, Mr. Chalmers?" or "I think the simplest way to raise money would be by some tableaux, don't you, Colonel Ashburton?"; and still a little later there floated to Caroline, "I tell Mary she rides too much. Don't you think it is a pity for a woman to spend half her life in the saddle? Of course if she hasn't anything else to do – but in this age, don't you feel, there are so many opportunities of service?"

"Oh, when it comes to that," protested Mrs. Colfax, in the tone of airy banter she affected, "There are many more of us trying to serve than there are opportunities of service. I was telling mother only the other day that I couldn't see a single war charity because the vice-presidents are so thick."

A lull fell on the table, and for the first time Caroline heard Blackburn's voice. Mrs. Chalmers was asking him about the house, and he was responding with a smile that made his face almost young and sanguine. His mouth, when he was not on

guard, was sensitive and even emotional, and his eyes lost the sharpness that cut through whatever they looked at.

"Why, yes, I built it before my marriage," he was saying. "Dodson drew the plans. You know Dodson?"

Mrs. Chalmers nodded. "He has done some good things in New York. And this lovely furniture," she was plainly working hard to draw him out. "Where did you find it?"

He met the question lightly. "Oh, I had a lot of stuff here that Angelica got rid of."

From the other end of the table Mrs. Blackburn's voice floated plaintively, "There isn't a piece of it left," she said. "It made the house look exactly like an Italian hotel."

The remark struck Caroline as so unfortunate that she turned, with a start of surprise, to glance at her hostess. Could it be that Mrs. Blackburn was without tact? Could it be that she did not realize the awkwardness of her interruption? Yet a single glance at Angelica was sufficient to answer these questions. A woman who looked like that couldn't be lacking in social instinct. It must have been a casual slip, nothing more. She was probably tired – hadn't old Mrs. Colfax said that she was delicate? – and she did not perceive the effect of her words. Glancing again in Blackburn's direction, Caroline saw that his features had hardened, and that the hand on the tablecloth was breaking a piece of bread into crumbs.

The change in his manner was so sudden that Caroline understood, even before she saw the twitching of his eyebrows,

and the gesture of irritation with which he pushed the bread crumbs away, that, in spite of his reserve and his coldness, he was a bundle of over-sensitive nerves. "He was behaving really well," she thought. "It is a pity that she irritated him." Though she disliked Blackburn, she was just enough to admit that he had started well with Mrs. Chalmers. Of course, no one expected him to appear brilliant in society. A man who had had no education except the little his mother had taught him, and who had devoted his life to making a fortune, was almost as much debarred from social success as a woman who knew only trained nursing. Yet, in spite of these defects, she realized that he appeared to advantage at his own table. There was something about him – some latent suggestion of force – which distinguished him from every other man in the room. He looked – she couldn't quite define the difference – as if he could do things. The recollection of his stand in politics came to her while she watched him, and turning to Mr. Peyton, who was a trifle more human than Colonel Ashburton, she asked:

"What is this new movement Mr. Blackburn is so much interested in? I've seen a great deal about it in the papers."

There was a bluff, kind way about Charles Peyton, and she liked the natural heartiness of the laugh with which he answered. "You've seen a great deal more than you've read, young lady, I'll warrant. No, it isn't exactly a new movement, because somebody in the North got ahead of him – you may always count on a Yankee butting in just before you – but he is organizing the

independent voters in Virginia, if that's what you mean. At least he thinks he is, though even way down here I've a suspicion that those Yankees have been meddling. Between you and me, Miss Meade, it is all humbug – pure humbug. Haven't we got one party already, and doesn't that one have a hard enough time looking after the negroes? Why do we want to go and start up trouble just after we've got things all nicely settled? Why does David want to stir up a hornet's nest among the negroes, I'd like to know?"

On the other side of Caroline, Colonel Ashburton became suddenly audible. "Ask that Rip Van Winkle, Miss Meade, if he was asleep while we made a new constitution and eliminated the vote of the negroes? You can't argue with these stand-patters, you know, because they never read the signs of the times."

"Well, there isn't a better way of proving it's all humbug than by asking two questions," declared the jovial Charles – a plethoric, unwieldy old man, with a bald head, and a figure that was continually brimming over his waistcoat. "What I want to know, Billy Ashburton, is just this – wasn't your father as good a man as you are, and wasn't the Democratic Party good enough for your father? I put the same to you, Miss Meade, wasn't the Democratic Party good enough for your father?"

"Ah, you're driven to your last trench," observed the Colonel, with genial irony, while Caroline replied slowly: "Yes, it was good enough for father, but I remember he used to be very fond of quoting some lines from Pope about 'principles changing with the times.' I suppose the questions are different from what they

were in his day."

"I'd like to see any questions the Democrats aren't able to handle," persisted Charles. "They always have handled them to my satisfaction, and I reckon they always will, in spite of Blackburn and Ashburton."

"I wish Blackburn could talk to you, Miss Meade," said Colonel Ashburton. "He doesn't care much for personalities. He has less small talk than any man I know, but he speaks well if you get him started on ideas. By-the-way, he is the man who won me over. I used to be as strongly prejudiced against any fresh departure in Virginia politics as our friend Charles there, but Blackburn got hold of me, and convinced me, as he has convinced a great many others, against my will. He proved to me that the old forms are worn out – that they can't do the work any longer. You see, Blackburn is an idealist. He sees straight through the sham to the truth quicker than any man I've ever known – "

"An idealist!" exclaimed Caroline, and mentally she added, "Is it possible for a man to have two characters? To have a public character that gives the lie to his private one?"

"Yes, I think you might call him that, though, like you, I rather shy at the word. But it fits Blackburn, somehow, for he is literally on fire with ideas. I always say that he ought to have lived in the glorious days when the Republic was founded. He belongs to the pure breed of American."

"But I understood from the papers that it was just the other way – that he was – that he was – "

"I know, my child, I know." He smiled indulgently, for she looked very charming with the flush in her cheeks, and after thirty years of happy companionship with an impeccable character, he preferred at dinner a little amiable weakness in a woman. "You have seen in the papers that he is a traitor to the faith of his fathers. You have even heard this asserted by the logical Charles on your right."

She lifted her eyes, and to his disappointment he discovered that earnestness, not embarrassment, had brought the colour to her cheeks. "But I thought that this new movement was directed at the Democratic Party – that it was attempting to undo all that had been accomplished in the last fifty years. It seems the wrong way, but of course there must be a right way toward better things."

For a minute he looked at her in silence; then he said again gently, "I wish Blackburn could talk to you." Since she had come by her ideas honestly, not merely borrowed them from Charles Colfax, it seemed only chivalrous to treat them with the consideration he accorded always to the fair and the frail.

She shook her head. The last thing she wanted was to have Mr. Blackburn talk to her. "I thought all old-fashioned Virginians opposed this movement," she added after a pause. "Not that I am very old-fashioned. You remember my father, and so you will know that his daughter is not afraid of opinions."

"Yes, I remember him, and I understand that his child could not be afraid either of opinions or armies."

She smiled up at him, and he saw that her eyes, which had been a little sad, were charged with light. While he watched her he wondered if her quietness were merely a professional habit of reserve which she wore like a uniform. Was the warmth and fervour which he read now in her face a glimpse of the soul which life had hidden beneath the dignity of her manner?

"But Blackburn isn't an agitator," he resumed after a moment. "He has got hold of the right idea – the new application of eternal principles. If we could send him to Washington he would do good work."

"To Washington?" She looked at him inquiringly. "You mean to the Senate? Not in the place of Colonel Acton?"

"Ah, that touches you! You wouldn't like to see the 'Odysseus of Democracy' dispossessed?"

Laughter sparkled in her eyes, and he realized that she was more girlish than he had thought her a minute ago. After all, she had humour, and it was a favourite saying of his that ideas without humour were as bad as bread without yeast.

"Only for another Ajax," she retorted merrily. "I prefer the strong to the wise. But does Mr. Blackburn want the senatorship?"

"Perhaps not, but he might be made to take it. There is a rising tide in Virginia."

"Is it strong enough to overturn the old prejudices?"

"Not yet – not yet, but it is strengthening every hour." His tone had lost its gallantry and grown serious. "The war in Europe

has taught us a lesson. We aren't satisfied any longer, the best thought isn't satisfied, with the old clutter and muddle of ideas and sentiments. We begin to see that what we need in politics is not commemorative gestures, but constructive patriotism."

As he finished, Caroline became aware again that Blackburn was speaking, and that for the first time Mrs. Chalmers looked animated and interested.

"Why, that has occurred to me," he was saying with an earnestness that swept away his reserve. "But, you see, it is impossible to do anything in the South with the Republican Party. The memories are too black. We must think in new terms."

"And you believe that the South is ready for another party? Has the hour struck?"

"Can't you hear it?" He looked up as he spoke. "The war abroad has liberated us from the old sectional bondage. It has brought the world nearer, and the time is ripe for the national spirit. The demand now is for men. We need men who will construct ideas, not copy them. We need men strong enough to break up the solid South and the solid North, and pour them together into the common life of the nation. We want a patriotism that will overflow party lines, and put the good of the country before the good of a section. The old phrases, the old gestures, are childish to-day because we have outgrown them – " He stopped abruptly, his face so enkindled that Caroline would not have known it, and an instant later the voice of Mrs. Blackburn was heard saying sweetly but firmly, "David, I am afraid that

Mrs. Chalmers is not used to your melodramatic way of talking."

In the hush that followed it seemed as if a harsh light had fallen over Blackburn's features. A moment before Caroline had seen him inspired and exalted by feeling – the vehicle of the ideas that possessed him – and now, in the sharp flash of Angelica's irony, he appeared insincere and theatrical – the claptrap politician in motley.

"It is a pity she spoke just when she did," thought Caroline, "but I suppose she sees through him so clearly that she can't help herself. She doesn't want him to mislead the rest of us."

Blackburn's guard was up again, and though he made no reply, his brow paled slowly and his hand – the nervous, restless hand of the emotional type – played with the bread crumbs.

"Yes, it is a pity," repeated Caroline to herself. "It makes things very uncomfortable." It was evident to her that Mrs. Blackburn watched her husband every instant – that she was waiting all the time to rectify his mistakes, to put him in the right again. Then, swiftly as an arrow, there flashed through Caroline's mind, "Only poor, lovely creature, she achieves exactly the opposite result. She is so nervous she can't see that she puts him always in the wrong. She makes matters worse instead of better every time."

From this moment the dinner dragged on heavily to its awkward end. Blackburn had withdrawn into his shell; Mrs. Chalmers looked depressed and bored; while the giddy voice of Mrs. Colfax sounded as empty as the twitter of a sparrow. It was

as if a blight had fallen over them, and in this blight Angelica made charming, futile attempts to keep up the conversation. She had tried so hard, her eyes, very gentle and pensive, seemed to say, and all her efforts were wasted.

Suddenly, in the dull silence, Mrs. Colfax began asking, in her flightiest manner, about Angelica's family. For at least five minutes she had vacillated in her own mind between the weather and Roane Fitzhugh, who, for obvious reasons, was not a promising topic; and now at last, since the weather was too perfect for comment, she recklessly decided to introduce the unsavoury Roane.

"We haven't seen your brother recently, Angelica. What do you hear from him?"

For an instant Mrs. Blackburn's eyes rested with mute reproach on her husband. Then she said clearly and slowly, "He has been away all summer, but we hope he is coming next week. David," she added suddenly in a louder tone, "I was just telling Daisy how glad we are that Roane is going to spend the autumn at Briarlay."

It was at that instant, just as Mrs. Blackburn, smiling amiably on her husband, was about to rise from the table, that the astounding, the incredible thing happened, for Blackburn looked up quickly, and replied in a harsh, emphatic manner, "He is not coming to Briarlay. You know that we cannot have him here."

Then before a word was uttered, before Mrs. Colfax had time to twitter cheerfully above the awkwardness, Mrs. Blackburn

rose from her chair, and the women trailed slowly after her out of the dining-room. As Caroline went, she felt that her heart was bursting with sympathy for Angelica and indignation against her husband. "How in the world shall I ever speak to him after this?" she thought. "How shall I ever stay under the same roof with him?" And glancing pityingly to where Mrs. Blackburn's flower-like head drooped against the rosy shade of a lamp, she realized that Angelica never looked so lovely as she did when she was hurt.

CHAPTER V
The First Night

WHEN the last guest had gone, Caroline went upstairs to her room, and sitting down before the little ivory and gold desk, began a letter to her mother. For years, ever since her first night in the hospital, she had poured out her heart after the day's work and the day's self-control and restraint were over. It was a relief to be free sometimes, to break through the discipline of her profession, to live and love for oneself, not for others.

The house was very still – only from the darkness outside, where the wind had risen, a few yellow leaves fluttered in through the window.

I am here, at last, dearest mother, and I have been longing to tell you about it. First of all, I had a good trip, my train was exactly on time, and Mrs. Colfax met me in the most beautiful car I ever saw, and brought me out to Briarlay. She was very nice and kind, but she looks ever so much older than you do, and I cannot help feeling that, in spite of the loss of so many children and father's dreadful disappointments, your life has been happier than hers. As I get older, and see more of the world – and heaven knows I have seen anything but the best of it these last seven or eight years – I understand better and better that happiness is something you have to find deep down in yourself, not in other people or outside things. It shines through sometimes

just as yours does and lights up the world around and the dark places, but it never, *never* comes from them – of this I am very sure.

I wish I could describe this house to you, but I cannot – I simply cannot, the words will not come to me. It is big and beautiful, but I think it is too full of wonderful things – there are rooms that make me feel as if I were in a museum because of the tapestries and crowded rugs and French furniture. I like English mahogany so much better, but that may be just because I am used to it. I suppose it is natural that Mrs. Blackburn should prefer surroundings that are opulent and florid, since they make her look like a lovely flower in a greenhouse. She is even more beautiful than I thought she would be, and she does not seem the least bit snobbish or spoiled or arrogant. I have always said, you remember, that nursing has taught me not to rely on mere impressions whether they are first or last ones – but I have never in my life met any one who attracted me so strongly in the beginning. It is years since I have felt my sympathy so completely drawn out by a stranger. I feel that I would do anything in the world that I could for her; and though I cannot write frankly about what I have observed here, I believe that she needs help and understanding as much as any one I ever saw. The situation seems worse even than we were led to expect. Of course I have seen only the surface so far, but my heart has been wrung for her ever since I have been in the house, and this evening there was a very painful scene at the dinner table. I shall not write any more

about it, though I imagine it will be spread all over Richmond by young Mrs. Colfax.

About Mr. Blackburn I have not quite made up my mind. I do not doubt that everything Mrs. Colfax wrote us is true, and I know if I stay on here that I shall make no attempt to conceal from him how much I dislike him. That will be no secret. I simply could not pretend even to him that I was not heart and soul on the side of his wife. It is so perfectly dreadful when one has to take sides with a husband or wife, isn't it? When I think how wonderful a marriage like yours and father's can be, it makes me feel sorry and ashamed for human nature as I see it here. But you cannot become a nurse and keep many illusions about love. The thing that remains after years of such work is no illusion at all – but the clear knowledge of the reality. A nurse sees the best and the worst of humanity – and the very best of it is the love that some people keep to the end.

As for this marriage, there is not a person in Richmond, nor a servant in the house, who does not know that it is an unhappy one. Mrs. Blackburn cannot be at fault – one has only to look at her to realize that she is too gentle and sweet to hurt any one – and yet I discovered to-night that she does not know how to treat him, that she says the wrong thing so often without meaning to, and that unconsciously she irritates him whenever she speaks. It is impossible to blame her, for she must have suffered a great many things that no one knows of, and I suppose her nerves are not always under control. But nothing could be more unfortunate

than her manner to him at times.

Strange to say (I do not understand why) some people appear to admire him tremendously. I went down to dinner to-night because one of the guests did not come, and Colonel Ashburton – he said he used to know you – talked in the most extravagant fashion about Mr. Blackburn's abilities. The air here is heavy with politics because of the elections, and I tried to listen as closely as I could. I thought how intensely interested father would have been in the discussion. As far as I can understand Mr. Blackburn's way of thinking is not unlike father's, and but for his behaviour to his wife, this would give me a sympathetic feeling for him. I forgot to tell you that he looked very well to-night – not in the least rough or common. His face is not ugly, only he wears his hair brushed straight back, and this makes his features look sterner than they really are. His eyes are the keenest I ever saw – grey, I think, and yet, funny as it sounds, there are times when they are almost pathetic – and his smile is very nice and reminds me in a way of father's. This may have been why I thought of father all the time I was at dinner – this and the political talk which went on as long as we were at the table.

Well, I started to tell you about the elections, and I know you are thinking I shall never go on. It seems that Mr. Blackburn intends to vote for Hughes – though I heard him tell Mr. Chalmers that if he lived in the North he should probably vote with the Democrats. Voting for a man, he feels, is not nearly so important as voting against a section – at least this is what

I gathered. There was a great deal said about the war, but nobody, except Mrs. Colfax's brother Charles, who does not count, seemed to think there was the faintest chance of our being in it. Mr. Chalmers told me afterwards that if Wilson should be re-elected, it would be mainly because of the slogan "he kept us out of war." As far as I could discover Mr. Chalmers stands firmly by the President, but I heard Mr. Blackburn tell Colonel Ashburton that what he hoped for now was conduct so flagrant, on Germany's part, that the public conscience would demand a more vigorous policy. By the way, Mr. Chalmers said that the feeling was so strong in New York that he expected the State to go to the Republicans because there was a general impression that to vote with them meant to vote for war. Of course, he added, this was mere German propaganda – but that was only another way of saying he did not agree with it. Opinions change every hour, and just as soon as a new one begins to be popular, people forget all that they believed just as ardently a few weeks before. Don't you remember how complacent we were about our splendid isolation and our pluperfect pacifism and our being "too proud to fight" such a very short while ago? Well, nobody remembers now the way we crowed over Europe and patted one another on the back, and congratulated ourselves because we could stand aside and wait until history showed who was right. That is over and gone now, and "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier" has joined the dust of all the other rag-time. If the slow coach of history ever does come up with us, it may find us in the thick of the fight

after all, and not waiting by the roadside. Mr. Chalmers believes that if the President is re-elected, and can get the country behind him, the Government will declare that a state of war exists – but Mr. Blackburn, on the other hand, is convinced that both Wilson and Hughes are pledged to fulfil their promises of "peace and prosperity." He insists that there was more war spirit over the whole country the week after the *Lusitania* was sunk, than there has ever been since, and that we were as ready to fight then as we shall be after the elections. It is like being in the midst of electric currents to sit still and listen to these men argue. Can you imagine anything more unlike father's day when all Virginians, except those whom nobody knew, thought exactly alike? Now, though the vote is solid still, and the great majority accepts the policies of the Democrats as uncritically as it accepts Scripture, opinions about secondary issues vary as much as they do anywhere else. There are some who regard the President as greater than George Washington – and others who say that the moment is great, not the man. Mr. Colfax believes that he is a generation ahead of his country, and Colonel Ashburton believes just as strongly that he is a generation behind it – that it is a case where a wave of destiny is sweeping a man on to greatness. I suppose here again we shall have to wait until history shows who is right.

I have not seen the little girl yet – her name is Letty. They have to be careful not to excite her in the evening, and the other nurse is still with her.

Now I must go to bed.

Your devoted child,
CAROLINE.

She had finished her letter and glanced at her watch on the bureau – it was one o'clock – when a cry or moan reached her from the darkness and silence of the house, and a few minutes afterwards there came the sound of running footsteps on the stairs, and a hasty knock fell on her door.

"Miss Meade, will you please come as quickly as you can?"

Opening the door, she met the frightened face of a maid.

"What has happened? Is Mrs. Blackburn ill?"

"I don't know. She hasn't undressed and she is too ill to speak. I left her on the couch, and ran upstairs to call you."

They were already in the hall, and while they hurried to the staircase, Caroline asked a few questions in a whisper.

"Is there any medicine that she is accustomed to take?"

"I give her ammonia sometimes, but to-night it didn't do any good."

"Does she faint often?"

"I'm not sure. She has these attacks, but only after – after – "

The woman paused in confusion, and before she could recover herself, Caroline had opened the door and walked swiftly to the prostrate figure, in white chiffon, on the couch in front of the fire. Bending over she felt Angelica's pulse and lowered her head, with its loosened amber hair, on the pillows.

"Your pulse is good. Do you feel better now?" she asked tenderly, for, in spite of the quiet competence of her professional

attitude, her heart was aching with pity.

"I was sure I could count on your sympathy." As she answered, Mrs. Blackburn stretched out her hands until they rested on Caroline's arm. "Has Mary gone out of the room?"

"Your maid? Yes, she has just gone. What can I do for you?"

Even in the midst of the emotional crisis, Angelica's manner had not lost a trace of its charming self-possession, its rather colourless sweetness. Her grey eyes, drenched in tears which left no redness on the firm white lids, were as devoid of passion as the eyes of a child.

"I cannot tell you – I cannot tell any one," she said after a moment, not in answer to the other's question, but with a plaintive murmur. Then she began to cry very gently, while she clung to Caroline with her lovely hands which were as soft and fragrant as flowers.

"I think I know without your telling me," responded Caroline soothingly. "Let me help you." All her years of nursing had not enabled her to watch suffering, especially the suffering of helpless things, without a pang of longing to comfort. She was on her knees now by the couch, her smooth dark head bending over Angelica's disarranged fair one, her grave, compassionate face gazing down on the other's delicate features, which were softened, not disfigured, by tears.

"The worst is about Roane – my brother," began Angelica slowly. "He came here to-night, but they – " she lingered over the word, "sent him away before I could talk to him. He is downstairs

now on the terrace because he is not allowed to come into the house – my brother. I must get this cheque to him, but I do not like to ask one of the servants – "

"You wish me to take it to him?" Caroline released herself from the clinging hands, and rose quickly to her feet. Here at last was a definite call to action.

"Oh, Miss Meade, if you would!" Already Angelica's eyes were dry.

"I will go at once. Is the cheque written?"

"I carried it down with me, but I could not get a chance to give it to Roane. Poor boy," she added in a low rather than a soft tone, "Poor boy, after all, he is more sinned against than sinning!"

Drawing the cheque from under the lace pillows, she gave it into Caroline's hand with a gesture of relief. "Go through the dining-room to the terrace, and you will find him outside by the windows. Tell him that I will see him as soon as I can, and ask him please not to trouble me again."

She had rung for her maid while she was speaking, and when the woman appeared, she rose and waited, with a yawn, for her dress to be unfastened. Then suddenly, as if she had forgotten something, she gave Caroline a smile full of beauty and pathos. "Thank you a thousand tunes, dear Miss Meade," she exclaimed gratefully.

It was dark downstairs, except for a nebulous glow from the hall above and a thin reddish line that ran beneath the closed door of the library. Not until she reached the dining-room did

Caroline dare turn on the electric light, and as soon as she did so, the terrace and the garden appeared by contrast to be plunged in blackness. When she opened one of the long French windows, and stepped out on the brick terrace, her eyes became gradually accustomed to the starlight, and she discerned presently the shrouded outlines of the juniper trees and a marble fountain which emerged like a ghost from the quivering spray of water. As she went quickly down the steps to the lower terrace, she felt as much alone in her surroundings as if the house and Mrs. Blackburn had receded into a dream. Overhead there was the silvery glitter of stars, and before her she divined the simplicity and peace of an autumn garden, where the wind scattered the faint scent of flowers that were already beginning to drop and decay.

When she approached the fountain, the figure of a man detached itself from the vague shape of an evergreen, and came toward her.

"Well, I've waited awhile, haven't I?" he began airily, and the next instant exclaimed with scarcely a change of tone, "Who are you? Did Anna Jeannette send you?"

"I am Letty's new nurse – Miss Meade."

"What! A spirit yet a woman too!" His voice was full of charm.

"Mrs. Blackburn sent me with this." As she held out the cheque, he took it with a gesture that was almost hungry. "She asked me to say that she would see you very soon, and to beg you not to trouble her again."

"Does she imagine that I do it for pleasure!" He placed the cheque in his pocket book. "She cannot suppose that I came here to-night for the sake of a row."

Though he was unusually tall, he carried his height with the ease of an invincible dignity and self-possession; and she had already discerned that his sister's pathos had no part in the tempestuous ardour and gaiety of his nature.

"She didn't tell me," answered Caroline coldly. "There is nothing else, is there?" Her features were like marble beneath the silken dusk of her hair which was faintly outlined against the cloudier darkness.

"There is a great deal – since you ask me."

"Nothing, I mean, that I may say to your sister?"

"You may say to her that I thank her for her message – and her messenger."

He was about to add something more, when Caroline turned away from him and moved, without haste, as if she were unaware that he followed her, up the shallow steps of the terrace. When she reached the window, she passed swiftly, like a dissolving shadow, from the darkness into the light of the room. Nothing had been said that she found herself able to resent, and yet, in some indefinable way, Roane's manner had offended her. "For a trained nurse you are entirely too particular," she said to herself, smiling, as she put out the light and went through the wide doorway into the hall. "You have still a good deal of haughtiness to overcome, Miss Meade, if you expect every man to treat you

as if you wore side curls and a crinoline."

The hall, when she entered it, was very dim, but as she approached the door of the library, it opened, and Blackburn stood waiting for her on the threshold. Behind him the room was illuminated, and she saw the rich sheen of leather bindings and the glow of firelight on the old Persian rug by the hearth.

"You have been out, Miss Meade?"

"Yes, I have been out." As she threw back her head, the light was full on her face while his was in shadow.

"Do you need anything?"

"Nothing, thank you."

For an instant their eyes met, and in that single glance, charged with an implacable accusation, she made Angelica's cause her own. Grave, remote, dispassionate, her condemnation was as impersonal as a judgment of the invisible Powers.

"That is all, then, good-night," he said.

"Good-night."

While he watched her, she turned as disdainfully as she had turned from Roane, and ascended the stairs.

CHAPTER VI
Letty

IN the breakfast room next morning, Caroline found the little girl in charge of Miss Miller, the nurse who was leaving that day. Letty was a fragile, undeveloped child of seven years, with the dark hair and eyes of her father, and the old, rather elfish look of children who have been ill from the cradle. Her soft, fine hair hung straight to her shoulders, and framed her serious little face, which was charming in spite of its unhealthy pallor. Caroline had questioned Miss Miller about the child's malady, and she had been reassured by the other nurse's optimistic view of the case.

"We think she may outgrow the trouble, that's why we are so careful about all the rules she lives by. The doctor watches her closely, and she isn't a difficult child to manage. If you once gain her confidence you can do anything with her, but first of all you must make her believe in you."

"Was she always so delicate?"

"I believe she was born this way. She is stunted physically, though she is so precocious mentally. She talks exactly like an old person sometimes. The things she says would make you laugh if it wasn't so pathetic to know that a child thinks them."

Yes, it was pathetic, Caroline felt, while she watched Letty cross the room to her father, who was standing before one of the French windows. As she lifted her face gravely, Blackburn bent

over and kissed her.

"I'm taking a new kind of medicine, father."

He smiled down on her. "Then perhaps you will eat a new kind of breakfast."

"And I've got a new nurse," added Letty before she turned away and came over to Caroline. "I'm so glad you wear a uniform," she said in her composed manner. "I think uniforms are much nicer than dresses like Aunt Matty's."

Mrs. Timberlake looked up from the coffee urn with a smile that was like a facial contortion. "Anything might be better than my dresses, Letty."

"But you ought to get something pretty," said the child quickly, for her thoughts came in flashes. "If you wore a uniform you might look happy, too. Are all nurses happy, Miss Miller?"

"We try to be, dear," answered Miss Miller, a stout, placid person, while she settled the little girl in her chair. "It makes things so much easier."

Blackburn, who had been looking out on the terrace and the formal garden, turned and bowed stiffly as he came to the table. It was evident that he was not in a talkative mood, and as Caroline returned his greeting with the briefest acknowledgment, she congratulated herself that she did not have to make conversation for him. Mary had not come in from her ride, and since Mrs. Timberlake used language only under the direct pressure of necessity, the sound of Letty's unembarrassed childish treble rippled placidly over the constrained silence of her elders.

"Can you see the garden?" asked the child presently. "I don't mean the box garden, I mean the real garden where the flowers are?"

Caroline was helping herself to oatmeal, and raising her eyes from the dish, she glanced through the window which gave on the brick terrace. Beyond the marble fountain and a dark cluster of junipers there was an arch of box, which framed the lower garden and a narrow view of the river.

"That's where my garden is, down there," Letty was saying. "I made it all by myself – didn't I, Miss Miller? – and my verbenas did better than mother's last summer. Would you like to have a garden, father?" she inquired suddenly, turning to Blackburn, who was looking over the morning paper while he waited for his coffee. "It wouldn't be a bit more trouble for me to take care of two than one. I'll make yours just like mine if you want me to."

Blackburn put down his paper. "Well, I believe I should like one," he replied gravely, "if you are sure you have time for it. But aren't there a great many more important things you ought to do?"

"Oh, it doesn't take so much time," returned the child eagerly, "I work all I can, but the doctor won't let me do much. I'll make yours close to mine, so there won't be far to go with the water. I have to carry it in a very little watering-pot because they won't let me lift a big one."

A smile quivered for an instant on her father's lips, and Caroline saw his face change and soften as it had done the

evening before. It was queer, she thought, that he should have such a sensitive mouth. She had imagined that a man of that character would have coarse lips and a brutal expression.

"Now, it's odd, but I've always had a fancy for a garden of that sort," he responded, "if you think you can manage two of them without over-taxing yourself. I don't want to put you to additional trouble, you know. After all, that's just what I hire Peter for, isn't it?"

While the child was assuring him that Peter had neither the time nor the talent for miniature gardening, Miss Miller remarked pleasantly, as if she were visited by a brilliant idea, "You ought to make one for your mother also, Letty."

"Oh, mother doesn't want one," returned the child: "The big ones are hers, aren't they, father?" Then, as Blackburn had unfolded his paper again, she added to Caroline, with one of the mature utterances Miss Miller had called pathetic, "When you have big things you don't care for little things, do you?"

As they were finishing breakfast, Mary Blackburn dashed in from the terrace, with the Airedale terriers at her heels.

"I was afraid you'd have gone before I got back, David," she said, tossing her riding-crop and gloves on a chair, and coming over to the table. "Patrick, put the dogs out, and tell Peter to give them their breakfast." Then turning back to her brother, she resumed carelessly, "That man stopped me again – that foreman you discharged from the works."

Blackburn's brow darkened. "Ridley? I told him not to come

on the place. Is he hanging about?"

"I met him in the lane. He asked me to bring a message to you. It seems he wants awfully to be reinstated. He is out of work; and he doesn't want to go North for a job."

"It's a pity he didn't think of that sooner. He has made more trouble in the plant than any ten men I've ever had. It isn't his fault that there's not a strike on now."

"I know," said Mary, "but I couldn't refuse to hear him. There's Alan now," she added. "Ask him about it."

She looked up, her face flushing with pride and happiness, as Alan Wythe opened the window. There was something free and noble in her candour. All the little coquetries and vanities of women appeared to shrivel in the white blaze of her sincerity.

"So you've been held up by Ridley," remarked Blackburn, as the young man seated himself between Mary and Mrs. Timberlake. "Did he tell you just what political capital he expects to make out of my discharging him? It isn't the first time he has tried blackmail."

Alan was replying to Mrs. Timberlake's question about his coffee – she never remembered, Caroline discovered later, just how much sugar one liked – and there was a pause before he turned to Blackburn and answered: "I haven't a doubt that he means to make trouble sooner or later – he has some pull, hasn't he? – but at the moment he is more interested in getting his job back. He talked a lot about his family – tried to make Mary ask you to take him on again – "

Blackburn laughed, not unpleasantly, but with a curious bluntness and finality, as if he were closing a door on some mental passage. "Well, you may tell him," he rejoined, "that I wouldn't take him back if all the women in creation asked me."

Alan received this with his usual ease and flippancy. "The fellow appears to have got the wrong impression. He told me that Mrs. Blackburn was taking an interest in his case, and had promised to speak to you."

"He told you that?" said Blackburn, and stopped abruptly.

For a minute Alan looked almost disconcerted. In his riding clothes he was handsomer and more sportsmanlike than he had been the evening before, and Caroline told herself that she could understand why Mary Blackburn had fallen so deeply in love with him. What she couldn't understand – what puzzled her every instant – was the obvious fact that Alan had fallen quite as deeply in love with Mary. Of course the girl was fine and sensible and high-spirited – any one could see that – but she appeared just the opposite of everything that Alan would have sought in a woman. She was neither pretty nor feminine; and Alan's type was the one of all others to which the pretty and feminine would make its appeal. "He must love her for her soul," thought Caroline. "He must see how splendid she is at heart, and this has won him."

In a few minutes Blackburn left the table, while Letty caught Caroline's hand and drew her through the window out on the terrace. The landscape, beyond the three gardens, was golden with October sunlight, and over the box maze and the variegated

mist of late blooming flowers, they could see the river and the wooded slopes that folded softly into the sparkling edge of the horizon. It was one of those autumn days when the only movement of the world seems to be the slow fall of the leaves, and the quivering of gauzy-winged insects above the flower-beds. Perfect as the weather was, there was a touch of melancholy in its brightness that made Caroline homesick for The Cedars. "It is hard to be where nobody cares for you," she thought. "Where nothing you feel or think matters to anybody." Then her stronger nature reasserted itself, and she brushed the light cloud away. "After all, life is mine as much as theirs. The battle is mine, and I will fight it. It is just as important that I should be a good nurse as it is that Mrs. Blackburn should be beautiful and charming and live in a house that is like fairyland."

Letty called to her, and running down the brick steps from the terrace, the two began a gentle game of hide-and-seek in the garden. The delighted laughter of the child rang out presently from the rose-arbours and the winding paths; and while Caroline passed in and out of the junipers and the young yew-trees, she forgot the loneliness she had felt on the terrace. "I'll not worry about it any more," she thought, pursuing Letty beyond the marble fountain, where a laughing Cupid shot a broken arrow toward the sun. "Mother used to say that all the worry in the world would never keep a weasel out of the hen-house." Then, as she twisted and doubled about a tall cluster of junipers, she ran directly across the shadow of Blackburn.

As her feet came to a halt the smile died on her lips, and the reserve she had worn since she reached Briarlay fell like a veil over her gaiety. While she put up her hand to straighten her cap, all the dislike she felt for him showed in her look. Only the light in her eyes, and the blown strands of hair under her cap, belied her dignity and her silence.

"Miss Meade, I wanted to tell you that the doctor will come about noon. I have asked him to give you directions."

"Very well." Against the dark junipers, in her white uniform, she looked like a statue except for her parted lips and accusing eyes.

"Letty seems bright to-day, but you must not let her tire herself."

"I am very careful. We play as gently as possible."

"Will you take her to town? I'll send the car back for you."

For an instant she hesitated. "Mrs. Blackburn has not told me what she wishes."

He nodded. "Letty uses my car in the afternoon. It will be here at three o'clock."

In the sunlight, with his hat off, he looked tanned and ruddy, and she saw that there was the power in his face which belongs to expression – to thought and purpose – rather than to feature. His dark hair, combed straight back from his forehead, made his head appear distinctive and massive, like the relief of a warrior on some ancient coin, and his eyes, beneath slightly beetling brows, were the colour of the sea in a storm. Though his height was

not over six feet, he seemed to her, while he stood there beside the marble fountain, the largest and strongest man she had ever seen. "I know he isn't big, and yet he appears so," she thought: "I suppose it is because he is so muscular." And immediately she added to herself, "I can understand everything about him except his mouth – but his mouth doesn't belong in his face. It is the mouth of a poet. I wonder he doesn't wear a moustache just to hide the way it changes."

"I shall be ready at three o'clock," she said. "Mrs. Colfax asked me to bring Letty to play with her children."

"She will enjoy that," he answered, "if they are not rough." Then, as he moved away, he observed indifferently, "It is wonderful weather."

As he went back to the house Letty clung to him, and lifting her in his arms, he carried her to the terrace and round the corner where the car waited. For the time at least the play was spoiled, and Caroline, still wearing her professional manner, stood watching for Letty to come back to her. "I could never like him if I saw him every day for years," she was thinking, when one of the French windows of the dining-room opened, and Mary Blackburn came down the steps into the garden.

"I am so glad to find you alone," she said frankly, "I want to speak to you – and your white dress looks so nice against those evergreens."

"It's a pity I have to change it then, but I am going to take Letty to town after luncheon. The doctor wants her to be with

other children."

"I know. She is an odd little thing, isn't she? I sometimes think that she is older and wiser than any one in the house." Her tone changed abruptly. "I want to explain to you about last night, Miss Meade. David seemed so dreadfully rude, didn't he?"

Caroline gazed back at her in silence while a flush stained her cheeks. After all, what could she answer? She couldn't and wouldn't deny that Mr. Blackburn had been inexcusably rude to his wife at his own table.

"It is so hard to explain when one doesn't know everything," pursued Mary, with her unfaltering candour. "If you had ever seen Roane Fitzhugh, you would understand better than I can make you that David is right. It is quite impossible to have Roane in the house. He drinks, and when he was here last summer, he was hardly ever sober. He was rude to everyone. He insulted me."

"So that was why – " began Caroline impulsively, and checked herself.

"Yes, that was why. David told him that he must never come back again."

"And Mrs. Blackburn did not understand."

Mary did not reply, and glancing at her after a moment, Caroline saw that she was gazing thoughtfully at a red and gold leaf, which turned slowly in the air as it detached itself from the stem of a maple.

"If you want to get the best view of the river you ought to go down to the end of the lower garden," she said carelessly before

she went back into the house.

In the afternoon, when Caroline took Letty to Mrs. Colfax's, a flickering light was shed on the cause of Mary's reticence.

"Oh, Miss Meade, wasn't it perfectly awful last evening?" began the young woman as soon as the children were safely out of hearing in the yard. "I feel so sorry for Angelica!"

Even in a Southern woman her impulsiveness appeared excessive, and when Caroline came to know her better, she discovered that Daisy Colfax was usually described by her friends as "kind-hearted, but painfully indiscreet."

"It was my first dinner party at Briarlay. As far as I know they may all end that way," responded Caroline lightly.

"Of course I know that you feel you oughtn't to talk," replied Mrs. Colfax persuasively, "but you needn't be afraid of saying just what you think to me. I know that I have the reputation of letting out everything that comes into my mind – and I do love to gossip – but I shouldn't dream of repeating anything that is told me in confidence." Her wonderful dusky eyes, as vague and innocent as a child's, swept Caroline's face before they wandered, with their look of indirection and uncertainty, to her mother-in-law, who was knitting by the window. Before her marriage Daisy had been the acknowledged beauty of three seasons, and now, the mother of two children and as lovely as ever, she managed to reconcile successfully a talent for housekeeping with a taste for diversion. She was never still except when she listened to gossip, and before Caroline had been six weeks in Richmond, she had

learned that the name of Mrs. Robert Colfax would head the list of every dance, ball, and charity of the winter.

"If you ask me what I think," observed the old lady tartly, with a watchful eye on the children, who were playing ring-around-the-rosy in the yard. "It is that David Blackburn ought to have been spanked and put to bed."

"Well, of course, Angelica had been teasing him about his political views," returned her daughter-in-law. "You know how she hates it all, but she didn't mean actually to irritate him – merely to keep him from appearing so badly. It is as plain as the nose on your face that she doesn't know how to manage him."

They were sitting in the library, and every now and then the younger woman would take up the receiver of the telephone, and have a giddy little chat about the marketing or a motor trip she was planning. "But all I've got to say," she added, turning from one of these breathless colloquies, "is that if you have to manage a man, you'd better try to get rid of him."

"Well, I'd like to see anybody but a bear-tamer manage David Blackburn," retorted the old lady. "With Angelica's sensitive nature she ought never to have married a man who has to be tamed. She never dares take her eyes off him, poor thing, for fear he'll make some sort of break."

"I wonder," began Caroline, and hesitated an instant. "I wonder if it wouldn't be better just to let him make his breaks and not notice them? Of course, I know how trying it must be for her – she is so lovely and gentle that it wrings your heart to see

him rude to her – but it makes every little thing appear big when you call everybody's attention to it. I don't know much about dinner parties," she concluded with a desire to be perfectly fair even to a man she despised, "but I couldn't see that he was doing anything wrong last night. He was getting on very well with Mrs. Chalmers, who was interested in politics – " She broke off and asked abruptly, "Is Mrs. Blackburn's brother really so dreadful?"

"I've often wondered," said the younger Mrs. Colfax, "if Roane Fitzhugh is as bad as people say he is?"

"Well, he has always been very polite to me," commented the old lady. "Though Brother Charles says that you cannot judge a man's morals by his manners. Was Alan Wythe there last night?"

"Yes, I sat by him," answered Daisy. "I wish that old uncle of his in Chicago would let him marry Mary."

This innocent remark aroused Caroline's scorn. "To think of a man's having to ask his uncle whom he shall marry!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"You wouldn't say that, my dear," replied old Mrs. Colfax, "if you knew Alan. He is a charming fellow, but the sort of talented ne'er-do-well who can do anything but make a living. He has an uncle in Chicago who is said to be worth millions – one of the richest men, I've heard, in the West – but he will probably leave his fortune to charity. As it is he doles out a pittance to Alan – not nearly enough for him to marry on."

"Isn't it strange," said Caroline, "that the nice people never seem to have enough money and the disagreeable ones seem to

have a great deal too much? But I despise a man," she added sweepingly, "who hasn't enough spirit to go out into the world and fight."

The old lady's needles clicked sharply as she returned to her work. "I've always said that if the good Lord would look after my money troubles, I could take care of the others. Now, if Angelica's people had not been so poor she would have been spared this dreadful marriage. As it is, I am sure, the poor thing makes the best of it – I don't want you to think that I am saying a word against Angelica – but when a woman runs about after so many outside interests, it is pretty sure to mean that she is unhappy at home."

"It's a pity," said the younger woman musingly, "that so many of her interests seem to cross David's business. Look at this Ridley matter, for instance – of course everyone says that Angelica is trying to make up for her husband's injustice by supporting the family until the man gets back to work. It's perfectly splendid of her, I know. There isn't a living soul who admires Angelica more than I do, but with all the needy families in town, it does seem that she might just as well have selected some other to look after."

The old lady, having dropped some stitches, went industriously to work to pick them up. "For all we know," she observed piously, "it may be God's way of punishing David."

CHAPTER VII
Caroline Makes Discoveries

AT four o'clock Daisy Colfax rushed off to a committee meeting at Briarlay ("something very important, though I can't remember just which one it is"), and an hour later Caroline followed her in Blackburn's car, with Letty lying fast asleep in her arms.

"I am going to do all I can to make it easier for Mrs. Blackburn," she thought. "I don't care how rude he is to me if he will only spare her. I am stronger than she is, and I can bear it better." Already it seemed to her that this beautiful unhappy woman filled a place in her life, that she would be willing to make any sacrifice, to suffer any humiliation, if she could only help her.

Suddenly Letty stirred and put up a thin little hand. "I like you, Miss Meade," she said drowsily. "I like you because you are pretty and you laugh. Mammy says mother never laughs, that she only smiles. Why is that?"

"I suppose she doesn't think things funny, darling."

"When father laughs out loud she tells him to stop. She says it hurts her."

"Well, she isn't strong, you know. She is easily hurt."

"I am not strong either, but I like to laugh," said the child in her quaint manner. "Mammy says there isn't anybody's laugh so pretty as yours. It sounds like music."

"Then I must laugh a great deal for you, Letty, and the more we laugh together the happier we'll be, shan't we?"

As the car turned into the lane, where the sunlight fell in splinters over the yellow leaves, a man in working clothes appeared suddenly from under the trees. For an instant he seemed on the point of stopping them; then lowering the hand he had raised, he bowed hurriedly, and passed on at a brisk walk toward the road.

"His name is Ridley, I know him," said Letty. "Mother took me with her one day when she went to see his children. He has six children, and one is a baby. They let me hold it, but I like a doll better because dolls don't wriggle." Then, as the motor raced up the drive and stopped in front of the porch, she sat up and threw off the fur robe. "There are going to be cream puffs for tea, and mammy said I might have one. Do you think mother will mind if I go into the drawing-room? She is having a meeting."

"I don't know, dear. Is it a very important meeting?"

"It must be," replied Letty, "or mother wouldn't have it. Everything she has is important." As the door opened, she inquired of the servant, "Moses, do you think this is a very important meeting?"

Moses, a young light-coloured negro, answered solemnly, "Hit looks dat ar way ter me, Miss Letty, caze Patrick's jes' done fotched up de las' plate uv puffs. Dose puffs wuz gwine jes' as fast ez you kin count de las' time I tuck a look at um, en de ladies dey wuz all a-settin' roun' in va' yous attitudes en eatin' um up

like dey tasted moughty good."

"Then I'm going in," said the child promptly. "You come with me, Miss Meade. Mother won't mind half so much if you are with me." And grasping Caroline's hand she led the way to the drawing-room. "I hope they have left one," she whispered anxiously, "but meetings always seem to make people so hungry."

In the back drawing-room, where empty cups and plates were scattered about on little tables, Angelica was sitting in a pink and gold chair that vaguely resembled a throne. She wore a street gown of blue velvet, and beneath a little hat of dark fur, her hair folded softly on her temples. At the first glance Caroline could see that she was tired and nervous, and her pensive eyes seemed to plead with the gaily chattering women about her. "Of course, if you really think it will help the cause," she was saying deprecatingly; then as Letty entered, she broke off and held out her arms. "Did you have a good time, darling?"

The child went slowly forward, shaking hands politely with the guests while her steady gaze, so like her father's, sought the tea table. "May I have a puff and a tart too, mother?" she asked as she curtseyed to Mrs. Ashburton.

"No, only one, dear, but you may choose."

"Then I'll choose a puff because it is bigger." She was a good child, and when the tart was forbidden her, she turned her back on the plate with a determined gesture. "I saw the man, mother – the one with the baby. He was in the lane."

"I know, dear. He came to ask your father to take him back in the works. Perhaps if you were to go into the library and ask him very gently, he would do it. It is the case I was telling you about, a most distressing one," explained Angelica to Mrs. Ashburton. "Of course David must have reason on his side or he wouldn't take the stand that he does. I suppose the man does drink and stir up trouble, but we women have to think of so much besides mere justice. We have to keep close to the human part that men are so apt to overlook." There was a writing tablet on her knee, and while she spoke, she leaned earnestly forward, and made a few straggling notes with a yellow pencil which was blunt at the point. Even her efficiency – and as a chairman she was almost as efficient as Mrs. Ashburton – was clothed in sweetness. As she sat there, holding the blunt pencil in her delicate, blue-veined hand, she appeared to be bracing herself, with a tremendous effort of will, for some inexorable demand of duty. The tired droop of her figure, the shadow under her eyes, the pathetic little lines that quivered about her mouth – these things, as well as the story of her loveless marriage, awakened Caroline's pity. "She bears it so beautifully," she thought, with a rush of generous emotion. "I have never seen any one so brave and noble. I believe she never thinks of herself for a minute."

"I always feel," observed Mrs. Ashburton, in her logical way which was trying at times, "that a man ought to be allowed to attend to his own business."

A pretty woman, with a sandwich in her hand, turned from

the tea table and remarked lightly, "Heaven knows it is the last privilege of which I wish to deprive him!" Her name was Mallow, and she was a new-comer of uncertain origin, who had recently built a huge house, after the Italian style, on the Three Chopt Road. She was very rich, very smart, very dashing, and though her ancestry was dubious, both her house and her hospitality were authentic. Alan had once said of her that she kept her figure by climbing over every charity in town; but Alan's wit was notoriously malicious.

"In a case like this, don't you think, dear Mrs. Ashburton, that a woman owes a duty to humanity?" asked Angelica, who liked to talk in general terms of the particular instance. "Miss Meade, I am sure, will agree with me. It is so important to look after the children."

"But there are so many children one might look after," replied Caroline gravely; then feeling that she had not responded generously to Angelica's appeal, she added, "I think it is splendid of you, perfectly splendid to feel the way that you do."

"That is so sweet of you," murmured Angelica gratefully, while Mrs. Aylett, a lovely woman, with a face like a magnolia flower and a typically Southern voice, said gently, "I, for one, have always found Angelica's unselfishness an inspiration. With her delicate health, it is simply marvellous the amount of good she is able to do. I can never understand how she manages to think of so many things at the same moment." She also held a pencil in her gloved hand, and wrote earnestly, in illegible figures, on

the back of a torn envelope.

"Of course, we feel that!" exclaimed the other six or eight women in an admiring chorus. "That is why we are begging her to be in these tableaux."

It was a high-minded, unselfish group, except for Mrs. Mallow, who was hungry, and Daisy Colfax, who displayed now and then an inclination to giddiness. Not until Caroline had been a few minutes in the room did she discover that the committee had assembled to arrange an entertainment for the benefit of the Red Cross. Though Mrs. Blackburn was zealous as an organizer, she confined her activities entirely to charitable associations and disapproved passionately of women who "interfered" as she expressed it "with public matters." She was disposed by nature to vague views and long perspectives, and instinctively preferred, except when she was correcting an injustice of her husband's, to right the wrongs in foreign countries.

"Don't you think she would make an adorable Peace?" asked Mrs. Aylett of Caroline.

"I really haven't time for it," said Angelica gravely, "but as you say, Milly dear, the cause is everything, and then David always likes me to take part in public affairs."

A look of understanding rippled like a beam of light over the faces of the women, and Caroline realized without being told that Mrs. Blackburn was overtaxing her strength in deference to her husband's wishes. "I suppose like most persons who haven't always had things he is mad about society."

"I've eaten it all up, mother," said Letty in a wistful voice. "It tasted very good."

"Did it, darling? Well, now I want you to go and ask your father about poor Ridley and his little children. You must ask him very sweetly, and perhaps he won't refuse. You would like to do that, wouldn't you?"

"May I take Miss Meade with me?"

"Yes, she may go with you. There, now, run away, dear. Mother is so busy helping the soldiers she hasn't time to talk to you."

"Why are you always so busy, mother?"

"She is so busy because she is doing good every minute of her life," said Mrs. Aylett. "You have an angel for a mother, Letty."

The child turned to her with sudden interest. "Is father an angel too?" she inquired.

A little laugh, strangled abruptly in a cough, broke from Daisy Colfax, while Mrs. Mallow hastily swallowed a cake before she buried her flushed face in her handkerchief. Only Mrs. Aylett, without losing her composure, remarked admiringly, "That's a pretty dress you have on, Letty."

"Now run away, dear," urged Angelica in a pleading tone, and the child, who had been stroking her mother's velvet sleeve, moved obediently to the door before she looked back and asked, "Aren't you coming too, Miss Meade?"

"Yes, I'm coming too," answered Caroline, and while she spoke she felt that she had never before needed so thoroughly

the discipline of the hospital. As she put her arm about Letty's shoulders, and crossed the hall to Blackburn's library, she hoped passionately that he would not be in the room. Then Letty called out "father!" in a clear treble, and almost immediately the door opened, and Blackburn stood on the threshold.

"Do you want to come in?" he asked. "I've got a stack of work ahead, but there is always time for a talk with you."

He turned back into the room, holding Letty by the hand, and as Caroline followed silently, she noticed that he seemed abstracted and worried, and that his face, when he glanced round at her, looked white and tired. The red-brown flush of the morning had faded, and he appeared much older.

"Won't you sit down," he asked, and then he threw himself into a chair, and added cheerfully, "What is it, daughter? Have you a secret to tell me?"

Against the rich brown of the walls his head stood out, clear and fine, and something in its poise, and in the backward sweep of his hair, gave Caroline an impression of strength and swiftness as of a runner who is straining toward an inaccessible goal. For the first time since she had come to Briarlay he seemed natural and at ease in his surroundings – in the midst of the old books, the old furniture, the old speckled engravings – and she understood suddenly why Colonel Ashburton had called him an idealist. With the hardness gone from his eyes and the restraint from his thin-lipped, nervous mouth, he looked, as the Colonel had said of him, "on fire with ideas." He had evidently been at work, and

the fervour of his mood was still visible in his face.

"Father, won't you please give Ridley his work again?" said the child. "I don't want his little children to be hungry." As she stood there at his knee, with her hands on his sleeve and her eyes lifted to his, she was so much like him in every feature that Caroline found herself vaguely wondering where the mother's part in her began. There was nothing of Angelica's softness in that intense little face, with its look of premature knowledge.

Bending over he lifted her to his knee, and asked patiently, "If I tell you why I can't take him back, Letty, will you try to understand?"

She nodded gravely. "I don't want the baby to be hungry."

For a moment he gazed over her head through the long windows that opened on the terrace. The sun was just going down, and beyond the cluster of junipers the sky was turning slowly to orange.

"Miss Meade," he said abruptly, looking for the first time in Caroline's face, "would you respect a man who did a thing he believed to be unjust because someone he loved had asked him to?"

For an instant the swiftness of the question – the very frankness and simplicity of it – took Caroline's breath away. She was sitting straight and still in a big leather chair, and she seemed to his eyes a different creature from the woman he had watched in the garden that morning. Her hair was smooth now under her severe little hat, her face was composed and stern, and for

the moment her look of radiant energy was veiled by the quiet capability of her professional manner.

"I suppose not," she answered fearlessly, "if one is quite sure that the thing is unjust."

"In this case I haven't a doubt. The man is a firebrand in the works. He drinks, and breeds lawlessness. There are men in jail now who would be at work but for him, and they also have families. If I take him back there are people who would say I do it for a political reason."

"Does that matter? It seems to me nothing matters except to be right."

He smiled, and she wondered how she could have thought that he looked older. "Yes, if I am right, nothing else matters, and I know that I am right." Then looking down at Letty, he said more slowly, "My child, I know another family of little children without a father. Wouldn't you just as soon go to see these children?"

"Is there a baby? A very small baby?"

"Yes, there is a baby. I am sending the elder children to school, and one of the girls is old enough to learn stenography. The father was a good man and a faithful worker. When he died he asked me to look after his family."

"Then why doesn't Mrs. Blackburn know about them?" slipped from Caroline's lips. "Why hasn't any one told her?"

The next instant she regretted the question, but before she could speak again Blackburn answered quietly, "She is not

strong, and already she has more on her than she should have undertaken."

"Her sympathy is so wonderful!" Almost in spite of her will, against her instinct for reticence where she distrusted, against the severe code of her professional training, she began by taking Mrs. Blackburn's side in the household.

"Yes, she is wonderful." His tone was conventional, yet if he had adored his wife he could scarcely have said more to a stranger.

There was a knock at the door, and Mammy Riah inquired querulously through the crack, "Whar you, Letty? Ain't you comin' ter git yo' supper?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.