

Wells Carolyn

The Mystery of the Sycamore



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Carolyn Wells

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CHAPTER I

THE LETTER THAT SAID COME

As the character of a woman may be accurately deduced from her handkerchief, so a man's mental status is evident from the way he opens his mail.

Curtis Keefe, engaged in this daily performance, slit the envelopes neatly and laid the letters down in three piles. These divisions represented matters known to be of no great interest; matters known to be important; and, third, letters with contents as yet unknown and therefore of problematical value.

The first two piles were, as usual, dispatched quickly, and the real attention of the secretary centred with pleasant anticipation on the third lot.

"Gee whiz, Genevieve!"

As no further pearls of wisdom fell from the lips of the engrossed reader of letters, the stenographer gave him a round-eyed glance and then continued her work.

Curtis Keefe was, of course, called Curt by his intimates, and while it may be the obvious nickname was brought about by his

short and concise manner of speech, it is more probable that the abbreviation was largely responsible for his habit of curtness.

Anyway, Keefe had long cultivated a crisp, abrupt style of conversation. That is, until he fell in with Samuel Appleby. That worthy ex-governor, while in the act of engaging Keefe to be his confidential secretary, observed: "They call you Curt, do they? Well, see to it that it is short for courtesy."

This was only one of several equally sound bits of advice from the same source, and as Keefe had an eye single to the glory of self-advancement, he kept all these things and pondered them in his heart.

The result was that ten years of association with Lawyer Appleby had greatly improved the young man's manner, and though still brief of speech, his curtness had lost its unpleasantly sharp edge and his courtesy had developed into a dignified urbanity, so that though still Curt Keefe, it was in name only.

"What's the pretty letter all about, Curtie?" asked the observant stenographer, who had noticed his third reading of the short missive.

"You'll probably answer it soon, and then you'll know," was the reply, as Keefe restored the sheet to its envelope and took up the next letter.

Genevieve Lane produced her vanity-case, and became absorbed in its possibilities.

"I wish I didn't have to work," she sighed; "I wish I was an opera singer."

“Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition,’ murmured Keefe, his eyes still scanning letters; ‘by that sin fell the angels,’ and it’s true you are angelic, Viva, so down you’ll go, if you fall for ambition.”

“How you talk! Ambition is a good thing.”

“Only when tempered by common sense and perspicacity – neither of which you possess to a marked degree.”

“Pooh! You’re ambitious yourself, Curt.”

“With the before-mentioned qualifications. Look here, Viva, here’s a line for you to remember. I ran across it in a book. ‘If you do only what is absolutely correct and say only what is absolutely correct – you can do anything you like.’ How’s that?”

“I don’t see any sense in it at all.”

“No? I told you you lacked common sense. Most women do.”

“Huh!” and Genevieve tossed her pretty head, patted her curly ear-muffs, and proceeded with her work.

Samuel Appleby’s beautiful home graced the town of Stockfield, in the western end of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Former Governor Appleby was still a political power and a man of unquestioned force and importance.

It was fifteen years or more since he had held office, and now, a great desire possessed him that his son should follow in his ways, and that his beloved state should know another governor of the Appleby name.

And young Sam was worthy of the people’s choice. Himself a man of forty, motherless from childhood, and brought up

sensibly and well by his father, he listened gravely to the paternal plans for the campaign.

But there were other candidates, and not without some strong and definite influences could the end be attained.

Wherefore, Mr. Appleby was quite as much interested as his secretary in the letter which was in the morning's mail.

"Any word from Sycamore Ridge?" he asked, as he came into the big, cheerful office and nodded a kindly good-morning to his two assistants.

"Yes, and a good word," returned Keefe, smiling. "It says: 'Come.'" The secretary's attitude toward his employer, though deferential and respectful, was marked by a touch of good-fellowship – a not unnatural outgrowth of a long term of confidential relations between them. Keefe had made himself invaluable to Samuel Appleby and both men knew it. So, as one had no desire to presume on the fact and the other no wish to ignore it, serenity reigned in the well-ordered and well-appointed offices of the ex-governor.

Even the light-haired, light-hearted and light-headed Genevieve couldn't disturb the even tenor of the routine. If she could have, she would have been fired.

Though not a handsome man, not even to be called distinguished looking, Samuel Appleby gave an impression of power. His strong, lean face betokened obdurate determination and implacable will.

Its deep-graven lines were the result of meeting many

obstacles and surmounting most of them. And at sixty-two, the hale and hearty frame and the alert, efficient manner made the man seem years younger.

“You know the conditions on which Wheeler lives in that house?” Appleby asked, as he looked over the top of the letter at Keefe.

“No, sir.”

“Well, it’s this way. But, no – I’ll not give you the story now. We’re going down there – to-day.”

“The whole tribe?” asked Keefe, briefly.

“Yes; all three of us. Be ready, Miss Lane, please, at three-thirty.”

“Yes, sir,” said Genevieve, reaching for her vanity-box.

“And now, Keefe, as to young Sam,” Appleby went on, running his fingers through his thick, iron-gray mane. “If he can put it over, or if I can put it over for him, it will be only with the help of Dan Wheeler.”

“Is Wheeler willing to help?”

“Probably not. He must be made willing. I can do it – I think – unless he turns stubborn. I know Wheeler – if he turns stubborn – well, Balaam’s historic quadruped had nothing on him!”

“Does Mr. Wheeler know Sam?”

“No; and it wouldn’t matter either way if he did. It’s the platform Wheeler stands on. If I can keep him in ignorance of that one plank – ”

“You can’t.”

“I know it – confound it! He opposed my election on that one point – he’ll oppose Sam’s for the same reason, I know.”

“Where do I come in?”

“In a general way, I want your help. Wheeler’s wife and daughter are attractive, and you might manage to interest them and maybe sway their sympathies toward Sam – ”

“But they’ll stand by Mr. Wheeler?”

“Probably – yes. However, use your head, and do all you can with it.”

“And where do I come in?” asked Genevieve, who had been an interested listener.

“You don’t come in at all, Miss. You mostly stay out. You’re to keep in the background. I have to take you, for we’re only staying one night at Sycamore Ridge, and then going on to Boston, and I’ll need you there.”

“Yes, sir,” and the blue eyes turned from him and looked absorbedly into a tiny mirror, as Genevieve contemplated her pleasant pink-and-whiteness.

Her vanity and its accompanying box were matters of indifference to Mr. Appleby and to Keefe, for the girl’s efficiency and skill outweighed them and her diligence and loyalty scored one hundred per cent.

Appleby’s fetish was efficiency. He had found it and recognized it in his secretary and stenographer and he was willing to recompense it duly, even generously. Wherefore the law business of Samuel Appleby, though carried on for the benefit of

a small number of clients, was of vast importance and productive of lucrative returns.

At present, the importance was overshadowed by the immediate interest of a campaign, which, if successful would land the second Appleby in the gubernatorial chair. This plan, as yet not a boom, was taking shape with the neatness and dispatch that characterized the Appleby work.

Young Sam was content to have the matter principally in his father's hands, and things had reached a pitch where, to the senior mind, the coöperation of Daniel Wheeler was imperatively necessary.

And, therefore, to Wheeler's house they must betake themselves.

"What do you know about the Wheeler business, kid?" Keefe inquired, after Mr. Appleby had left them.

Genevieve leaned back in her chair, her dimpled chin moving up and down with a pretty rhythm as she enjoyed her chewing-gum, and gazed at the ceiling beams.

Appleby's offices were in his own house, and the one given over to these two was an attractive room, fine with mahogany and plate glass, but also provided with all the paraphernalia of the most up-to-date of office furniture. There were good pictures and draperies, and a wood fire added to the cheer and mitigated the chill of the early fall weather.

Sidling from her seat, Miss Lane moved over to a chair near the fire.

"I'll take those letters when you're ready," she said. "Why, I don't know a single thing about any Wheeler. Do you?"

"Not definitely. He's a man who had an awful fight with Mr. Appleby, long ago. I've heard allusions to him now and then, but I know no details."

"I, either. But, it seems we're to go there. Only for a night, and then, on to Boston! Won't I be glad to go!"

"We'll only be there a few days. I'm more interested in this Wheeler performance. I don't understand it. Who's Wheeler, anyhow?"

"Dunno. If Sammy turns up this morning, he may enlighten us."

Sammy did turn up, and not long after the conversation young Appleby strolled into the office.

Though still looked upon as a boy by his father, the man was of huge proportions and of an important, slightly overbearing attitude.

Somewhat like his parent in appearance, young Sam, as he was always called, had more grace and ease, if less effect of power. He smiled genially and impartially; he seemed cordial and friendly to all the world, and he was a general favorite. Yet so far he had achieved no great thing, had no claim to any especial record in public or private life.

At forty, unmarried and unattached, his was a case of an able mentality and a firm, reliable character, with no opportunity offered to prove its worth. A little more initiative and he would

have made opportunities for himself; but a nature that took the line of least resistance, a philosophy that believed in a calm acceptance of things as they came, left Samuel Appleby, junior, pretty much where he was when he began. If no man could say aught against him, equally surely no man could say anything very definite for him. Yet many agreed that he was a man whose powers would develop with acquired responsibilities, and already he had a following.

“Hello, little one,” he greeted Genevieve, carelessly, as he sat down near Keefe. “I say, old chap, you’re going down to the Wheelers’ to-day, I hear.”

“Yes; this afternoon,” and the secretary looked up inquiringly.

“Well, I’ll tell you what. You know the governor’s going there to get Wheeler’s aid in my election boom, and I can tell you a way to help things along, if you agree. See?”

“Not yet, but go ahead.”

“Well, it’s this way. Dan Wheeler’s daughter is devoted to her father. Not only filial respect and all that, but she just fairly idolizes the old man. Now, he recipes, of course, and what she says goes. So – I’m asking you squarely – won’t you put in a good word to Maida, that’s the girl – and if you do it with your inimitable dexterity and grace, she’ll fall for it.”

“You mean for me to praise you up to Miss Wheeler and ask her father to give you the benefit of his influence?”

“How clearly you do put things! That’s exactly what I mean. It’s no harm, you know – merely the most innocent sort of

electioneering – ”

“Rather!” laughed Keefe. “If all electioneering were as innocent as that, the word would carry no unpleasant meaning.”

“Then you’ll do it?”

“Of course I will – if I get opportunity.”

“Oh, you’ll have that. It’s a big, rambling country house – a delightful one, too – and there’s tea in the hall, and tennis on the lawn, and moonlight on the verandas – ”

“Hold up, Sam,” Keefe warned him, “is the girl pretty?”

“Haven’t seen her for years, but probably, yes. But that’s nothing to you. You’re working for me, you see.” Appleby’s glance was direct, and Keefe understood.

“Of course; I was only joking. I’ll carry out your commission, if, as I said, I get the chance. Tell me something of Mr. Wheeler.”

“Oh, he’s a good old chap. Pathetic, rather. You see, he bumped up against dad once, and got the worst of it.”

“How?”

Sam Appleby hesitated a moment and then said: “I see you don’t know the story. But it’s no secret, and you may as well be told. You listen, too, Miss Lane, but there’s no call to tattle.”

“I’ll go home if you say so,” Genevieve piped up, a little crisply.

“No, sit still. Why, it was while dad was governor – about fifteen years ago, I suppose. And Daniel Wheeler forged a paper – that is, he said he didn’t, but twelve other good and true peers of his said he did. Anyway, he was convicted and sentenced, but

father was a good friend of his, and being governor, he pardoned Wheeler. But the pardon was on condition – oh, I say – hasn't dad ever told you, Keefe?"

"Never."

"Then, maybe I'd better leave it for him to tell. If he wants you to know he'll tell you, and if not, I mustn't."

"Oh, goodness!" cried Genevieve. "What a way to do! Get us all excited over a thrilling tale, and then chop it off short!"

"Go on with it," said Keefe; but Appleby said, "No; I won't tell you the condition of the pardon. But the two men haven't been friends since, and won't be, unless the condition is removed. Of course, dad can't do it, but the present governor can make the pardon complete, and would do so in a minute, if dad asked him to. So, though he hasn't said so, the assumption is, that father expects to trade a full pardon of Friend Wheeler for his help in my campaign."

"And a good plan," Keefe nodded his satisfaction.

"But," Sam went on, "the trouble is that the very same points and principles that made Wheeler oppose my father's election will make him oppose mine. The party is the same, the platform is the same, and I can't hope that the man Wheeler is not the same stubborn, adamant, unbreakable old hickory knot he was the other time."

"And so, you want me to soften him by persuading his daughter to line up on our side?"

"Just that, Keefe. And you can do it, I am sure."

"I'll try, of course; but I doubt if even a favorite daughter could influence the man you describe."

"Let me help," broke in the irrepressible Genevieve. "I can do lots with a girl. I can do more than Curt could. I'll chum up with her and –"

"Now, Miss Lane, you keep out of this. I don't believe in mixing women and politics."

"But Miss Wheeler's a woman."

"And I don't want her troubled with politics. Keefe here can persuade her to coax her father just through her affections – I don't want her enlightened as to any of the political details. And I can't think your influence would work half as well as that of a man. Moreover, Keefe has discernment, and if it isn't a good plan, after all, he'll know enough to discard it – while you'd blunder ahead blindly, and queer the whole game!"

"Oh, well," and bridling with offended pride, Genevieve sought refuge in her little mirror.

"Now, don't get huffy," and Sam smiled at her; "you'll probably find that Miss Wheeler's complexion is finer than yours, anyway, and then you'll hate her and won't want to speak to her at all."

Miss Lane flashed an indignant glance and then proceeded to go on with her work.

"Hasn't Wheeler tried for a pardon all this time?" Keefe asked.

"Indeed he has," Sam returned, "many times. But you see, though successive governors were willing to grant it, father

always managed to prevent it. Dad can pull lots of wires, as you know, and since he doesn't want Wheeler fully pardoned, why, he doesn't get fully pardoned."

"And he lives under the stigma."

"Lots of people don't know about the thing at all. He lives – well – he lives in Connecticut – and – oh, of course, there is a certain stigma."

"And your father will bring about his full pardon if he promises – "

"Let up, Keefe; I've said I can't tell you that part – you'll get your instructions in good time. And, look here, I don't mean for you to make love to the girl. In fact, I'm told she has a suitor. But you're just to give her a little song and dance about my suitability for the election, and then adroitly persuade her to use her powers of persuasion with her stubborn father. For he will be stubborn – I know it! And there's the mother of the girl.. tackle Mrs. Wheeler. Make her see that my father was justified in the course he took – and besides, he was more or less accountable to others – and use as an argument that years have dulled the old feud and that bygones ought to be bygones and all that.

"Try to make her see that a full pardon now will be as much, and in a way more, to Wheeler's credit, than if it had been given him at first – "

"I can't see that," and Keefe looked quizzical

"Neither can I," Sam confessed, frankly, "but you can make a woman swallow anything."

“Depends on what sort of woman Mrs. Wheeler is,” Keefe mused.

“I know it. I haven’t seen her for years, and as I remember, she’s pretty keen, but I’m banking on you to put over some of your clever work. Not three men in Boston have your ingenuity, Keefe, when it comes to sizing up a situation and knowing just how to handle it. Now, don’t tell father all I’ve said, for he doesn’t especially hold with such small measures. He’s all for the one big slam game, and he may be right. But I’m right, too, and you just go ahead.”

“All right,” Keefe agreed. “I see what you mean, and I’ll do all I can that doesn’t in any way interfere with your father’s directions to me. There’s a possibility of turning the trick through the women folks, and if I can do it, you may count on me.”

“Good! And as for you, Miss Lane, you keep in the background, and make as little mischief as you can.”

“I’m not a mischief-maker,” said the girl, pouting playfully, for she was not at all afraid of Sam Appleby.

“Your blue eyes and pink cheeks make mischief wherever you go,” he returned; “but don’t try them on old Dan Wheeler. He’s a morose old chap – ”

“I should think he would be!” defended Genevieve; “living all these years under a ban which may, after all, be undeserved! I’ve heard that he was entirely innocent of the forgery!”

“Have you, indeed?” Appleby’s tone was unpleasantly sarcastic. “Other people have also heard that – from the Wheeler

family! Those better informed believe the man guilty, and believe, too, that my father was too lenient when he granted even a conditional pardon.”

“But just think – if he was innocent – how awful his life has been all these years! You bet he’ll accept the full pardon and give all his effort and influence and any possible help in return.”

“Hear the child orate!” exclaimed Sam, gazing at the enthusiastic little face, as Genevieve voiced her views.

“I think he’ll be ready to make the bargain, too,” declared Keefe. “Your father has a strong argument. I fancy Wheeler’s jump at the chance.”

“Maybe – maybe so. But you don’t know how opposed he is to our principles. And he’s a man of immovable convictions. In fact, he and dad are two mighty strong forces. One or the other must win out – but I’ve no idea which it will be.”

“How exciting!” Genevieve’s eyes danced. “I’m so glad I’m to go. It’s a pretty place, you say?”

“Wonderful. A great sweep of rolling country, a big, long, rambling sort of house, and a splendid hospitality. You’ll enjoy the experience, but remember, I told you to be good.”

“I will remember,” and Genevieve pretended to took cherubic.

CHAPTER II

NORTH DOOR AND SOUTH DOOR

For Samuel Appleby to pay a visit to Daniel Wheeler was of itself an astounding occurrence. The two men had not seen each other since the day, fifteen years ago, when Governor Appleby had pardoned the convicted Wheeler, with a condition, which, though harsh, had been strictly adhered to.

They had never been friends at heart, for they were diametrically opposed in their political views, and were not of similar tastes or pursuits. But they had been thrown much together, and when the time came for Wheeler to be tried for forgery, Appleby lent no assistance to the case. However, through certain influences brought to bear, in connection with the fact that Mrs. Wheeler was related to the Applebys, the governor pardoned the condemned man, with a conditional pardon.

Separated ever since, a few letters had passed between the two men, but they resulted in no change of conditions.

As the big car ran southward through the Berkshire Hills, Appleby's thoughts were all on the coming meeting, and the scenery of autumn foliage that provoked wild exclamations of delight from Genevieve and assenting enthusiasm from Keefe left the other unmoved.

An appreciative nod and grunt were all he vouchsafed to

the girl's gushing praises, and when at last they neared their destination he called her attention to a tall old sycamore tree standing alone on a ridge not far away.

"That's the tree that gives the Wheeler place its name," he informed. "Sycamore Ridge is one of the most beautiful places in Connecticut."

"Oh, are we in Connecticut?" asked Miss Lane. "I didn't know we had crossed the border. What a great old tree! Surely one of the historic trees of New England, isn't it?"

"Historic to the Wheelers," was the grim reply, and then Mr. Appleby again relapsed into silence and spoke no further word until they reached the Wheeler home.

A finely curved sweep of driveway brought them to the house, and the car stopped at the south entrance.

The door did not swing open in welcome, and Mr. Appleby ordered his chauffeur to ring the bell.

This brought a servant in response, and the visiting trio entered the house.

It was long and low, with many rooms on either side of the wide hall that went straight through from south to north. The first room to the right was a large living-room, and into this the guests were shown and were met by a grave-looking man, who neither smiled nor offered a hand as his calm gaze rested on Samuel Appleby.

Indeed, the two men stared at one another, in undisguised curiosity. Each seemed to search the other's face for information

as to his attitude and intent.

“Well, Dan,” Appleby said, after the silent scrutiny, “you’ve changed some, but you’re the same good-looking chap you always were.”

Wheeler gave a start and pulled himself together.

“Thank you. I suppose I should return the compliment.”

“But you can’t conscientiously do it, eh?” Appleby laughed. “Never mind. Personal vanity is not my besetting sin. This is my secretary, Mr. Keefe, and my assistant, Miss Lane.”

“Ah, yes, yes. How are you? How do you do? My wife and daughter will look after the young lady. Maida!”

As if awaiting the call, a girl came quickly in from the hall followed by an older woman. Introductions followed, and if there was an air of constraint on the part of the host the ladies of the family showed none. Sunny-faced Maida Wheeler, with her laughing brown eyes and gold brown hair, greeted the visitors with charming cordiality, and her mother was equally kind and courteous.

Genevieve Lane’s wise and appraising eyes missed no point of appearance or behavior.

“Perfect darlings, both of them!” she commented to herself. “Whatever ails the old guy, it hasn’t bitten them. Or else – wait a minute – ” Genevieve was very observant – “perhaps they’re putting on a little. Is their welcome a bit extra, to help things along?”

Yet only a most meticulous critic could discern anything more

than true hospitality in the attitude of Mrs. Wheeler or Maida. The latter took Genevieve to the room prepared for her and chatted away in girlish fashion.

“The place is so wonderful!” Genevieve exclaimed, carefully avoiding personal talk. “Don’t you just adore it?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve loved Sycamore Ridge for nearly fifteen years.”

“Have you lived here so long?” Genevieve was alert for information. It was fifteen years ago that the pardon had been granted.

But as Maida merely assented and then changed the subject, Miss Lane was far too canny to ask further questions.

With a promptness not entirely due to chance, the stenographer came downstairs dressed for dinner some several minutes before the appointed hour. Assuming her right as a guest, she wandered about the rooms.

The south door, by which they had entered, was evidently the main entrance, but the opposite, or north door, gave on to an even more beautiful view, and she stepped out on the wide veranda and gazed admiringly about. The low ridge nearby formed the western horizon, and the giant sycamore, its straight branches outlined against the fading sunset, was impressive and a little weird. She strolled on, and turned the corner the better to see the ridge. The veranda ran all round the house, and as she went on along the western side, she suddenly became aware of a silent figure leaning against a pillar at the southwest corner.

“It is so quiet it frightens me,” she said to Daniel Wheeler, as

she neared him.

“Do you feel that way, too?” he asked, looking at her a little absently. “It is the lull before the storm.”

“Oh, that sunset doesn’t mean rain,” Genevieve exclaimed, smiling, “unless your Connecticut blue laws interpret weather signs differently from our Massachusetts prophets. We *are* in Connecticut, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” and Wheeler sighed unaccountably. “Yes, Miss Lane, we are. That sycamore is the finest tree in the state.”

“I can well believe it. I never saw such a grandfather of a tree! It’s all full of little balls.”

“Yes, buttonballs, they are called. But note its wonderful symmetry, its majestic appearance – ”

“And strength! It looks as if it would stand, there forever!”

“Do you think so?” and the unmistakable note of disappointment in the man’s tone caused Genevieve to look up in astonishment. “Well, perhaps it will,” he added quickly.

“Oh, no, of course it won’t really! No tree stands forever. But it will be here long after you and I are gone.”

“Are you an authority on trees?” Wheeler spoke without a smile.

“Hardly that; but I was brought up in the country, and I know something of them. Your daughter loves the country, too.”

“Oh, yes – we all do.”

The tone was courteous, but the whole air of the man was so melancholy, his cheerfulness so palpably assumed, that

Genevieve felt sorry for him, as well as inordinately curious to know what was the matter.

But her sympathy was the stronger impulse, and with a desire to entertain him, she said, "Come for a few steps in the garden, Mr. Wheeler, won't you? Come and show me that quaint little summer-house near the front door. It is the front door, isn't it? It's hard to tell."

"Yes, the north door *is* the front door," Wheeler said slowly, as if repeating a lesson. "The summer-house you mention is near the front door. But we won't visit that now. Come this other way, and I'll show you a Japanese tea-house, much more attractive."

But Genevieve Lane was sometimes under the spell of the Imp of the Perverse.

"No, no," she begged, smilingly, "let the Japanese contraption wait; please go to the little summer-house now. See, how it fairly twinkles in the last gleams of the setting sun! What is the flower that rambles all over it? Oh, do let's go there now! Come, please!"

With no reason for her foolish insistence save a whim, Genevieve was amazed to see the look of fury that came over her host's face.

"Appleby put you up to that!" he cried, in a voice of intense anger. "He told you to ask me to go to that place!"

"Why, Mr. Wheeler," cried the girl, almost frightened, "Mr. Appleby did nothing of the sort! Why should he! I'm not asking anything wrong, am I? Why is it so dreadful to want to see an arbor instead of a tea-house? You must be crazy!"

When Miss Lane was excited, she was quite apt to lose her head, and speak in thoughtless fashion.

But Mr. Wheeler didn't seem to notice her informality of speech. He only stared at her as if he couldn't quite make her out, and then he suddenly seemed to lose interest in her or her wishes, and with a deep sigh, he turned away, and fell into the same brooding posture as when she had first approached him.

"Come to dinner, people," called Maida's pretty voice, as, with outstretched hands she came toward them. "Why, dads, what are you looking miserable about? What have you done to him, Miss Lane?"

"Maida, child, don't speak like that! Miss Lane has been most kindly talking to me, of – of the beauties of Sycamore Ridge."

"All right, then, and forgive me, Miss Lane. But you see, the sun rises and sets for me in one Daniel Wheeler, Esquire, and any shadow on his face makes me apprehensive of its cause."

Only for an instant did Genevieve Lane's sense of justice rise in revolt, then her common sense showed her the better way, and she smiled pleasantly and returned:

"I don't blame you, Miss Wheeler. If I had a father, I should feel just the same way, I know. But don't do any gory-lock-shaking my way. I assure you I didn't really scold him. I only kicked because he wouldn't humor my whim for visiting the summer-house with the blossoms trailing over it! Was that naughty of me?"

But though Genevieve listened for the answer, none came.

“Come on in to dinner, daddy, dear,” Maida repeated. “Come, Miss Lane, they’re waiting for us.”

Dinner was a delightful occasion.

Daniel Wheeler, at the head of his own table, was a charming host, and his melancholy entirely disappeared as the talk ran along on subjects grave or gay, but of no personal import.

Appleby, too, was entertaining, and the two men, with Mrs. Wheeler, carried on most of the conversation, the younger members of the party being by what seemed common consent left out of it.

Genevieve looked about the dining-room, with a pleased interest. She dearly loved beautiful appointments and was really imagining herself mistress of just such a house, and visioning herself at the head of such a table. The long room stretched from north to south, parallel with the hall, though not adjoining. The table was not in the centre, but toward the southern end, and Mr. Wheeler, at the end near the windows, had Keefe and Miss Lane on either side of him.

Appleby, as guest of honor, sat at Mrs. Wheeler’s right, and the whole effect was that of a formal dinner party, rather than a group of which two were merely office employés.

“It is one of the few remaining warm evenings,” said Mrs. Wheeler, as she rose from the table, “we will have our coffee on the veranda. Soon it will be too cool for that.”

“Which veranda?” asked Genevieve of Maida, as they went through the hall. “The north one, I hope.”

“Your hopes must be dashed,” laughed the other, “for it will be the south one. Come along.”

The two girls, followed by Keefe, took possession of a group of chairs near Mrs. Wheeler, while the two older men sat apart, and soon became engrossed in their own discussions.

Nor was it long before Samuel Appleby and his host withdrew to a room which opened on to that same south veranda, and which was, in fact, Mr. Wheeler’s den.

“Well, Sam,” Keefe heard the other say, as he drew down the blind, “we may as well have it out now. What are you here for?”

Outwardly placid, but almost consumed with curiosity, Curt Keefe changed his seat for one nearer the window of the den. He hoped to hear the discussion going on inside, but was doomed to disappointment, for though the murmuring of the voices was audible, the words were not distinct, and Keefe gathered only enough information to be sure that there was a heated argument in progress and that neither party to it was inclined to give in a single point.

Of course, he decided, the subject was the coming election campaign, but the details of desired bargaining he could not gather.

Moreover, often, just as he almost heard sentences of interest, the chatter of the girls or some remark of Mrs. Wheeler’s would drown the voices of the men in the room.

One time, indeed, he heard clearly: “When the Sycamore on the ridge goes into Massachusetts – ” but this was sheer nonsense,

and he concluded he must have misunderstood.

Later, they all forgathered in the living-room and there was music and general conversation.

Genevieve Lane proved herself decidedly entertaining, and though Samuel Appleby looked a little amusedly at his stenographer, he smiled kindly at her as he noticed that she in no way overstepped the bounds of correct demeanor.

Genevieve was thinking of what Keefe had said to her: "If you do only what is absolutely correct and say what is only absolutely correct, you can do whatever you like."

She had called it nonsense at the time, but she was beginning to see the truth of it. She was careful that her every word and act should be correct, and she was most decidedly doing as she liked. She made good with Mrs. Wheeler and Maida with no trouble at all; but she felt, vaguely, that Mr. Wheeler didn't like her. This she set about to remedy.

Going to his side, as he chanced to sit for a moment alone, she smiled ingratiatingly and said:

"I wonder if you can imagine, sir, what it means to me to see the inside of a house like this?"

"Bless my soul, what do you mean?" asked Wheeler, puzzled at the girl's manner.

"It's like a glimpse of Fairyland," she went on. "You see, I'm terribly ambitious – oh, fearfully so! And all my ambitions lead to just this sort of a home. Do you suppose I'll ever achieve it, Mr. Wheeler?"

Now the girl had truly wonderful magnetic charm, and even staid old Dan Wheeler was not insensible to the note of longing in her voice, the simple, honest admission of her hopes.

“Of course you will, little one,” he returned, kindly. “I’ve heard that whatever one wants, one gets, provided the wish is strong enough.” He spoke directly to her, but his gaze wandered as if his thoughts were far away.

“Do you really believe that?” Genevieve’s big blue eyes begged an affirmation.

“I didn’t say I believed it – I said I have heard it.” He smiled sadly. “Not quite the same – so far as I’m concerned; but quite as assuring to you. Of course, my belief wouldn’t endorse the possibility.”

“It would for me,” declared Genevieve. “I’ve lots of confidence in other people’s opinions – ”

“Anybody’s?”

“Anybody whom I respect and believe in.”

“Appleby, for instance?”

“Oh, yes, indeed! I’d trust Mr. Appleby’s opinions on any subject. Let’s go over there and tell him so.”

Samuel Appleby was sitting at the other end, the north end of the long room. “No,” said Wheeler, “I’m too comfortable here to move – ask him to come here.”

Genevieve looked at him a little astonished. It was out of order, she thought, for a host to speak thus. She pressed the point, saying there was a picture at the other end of the room she wished

to examine.

“Run along, then,” said Wheeler, coolly. “Here, Maida, show Miss Lane that etching and tell her the interesting details about it.”

The girls went away, and soon after Keefe drifted round to Wheeler’s side.

“You know young Sam Appleby?” he asked, casually.

“No,” Wheeler said, shortly but not sharply. “I daresay he’s a most estimable chap.”

“He’s all of that. He’s a true chip of the old block. Both good gubernatorial timber, as I’m sure you agree.”

“What makes you so sure, Mr. Keefe?”

Curt Keefe looked straight at him. “Well,” he laughed, “I’m quite ready to admit that the wish was father to the thought.”

“Why do you call that an admission?”

“Oh,” Keefe readily returned, “it is usually looked upon as a confession that one has no reason for a thought other than a wish.”

“And why is it your wish?”

“Because it is the wish of my employer,” said Keefe, seriously. “I know of no reason, Mr. Wheeler, why I shouldn’t say that I hope and trust you will use your influence to further the cause of young Appleby.”

“What makes you think I can do so?”

“While I am not entirely in Mr. Appleby’s confidence, he has told me that the campaign would be greatly aided by your

willingness to help, and so I can't help hoping you will exercise it."

"Appleby has told you so much, has he? No more?"

"No more, I think, regarding yourself, sir. I know, naturally, the details of the campaign so far as it is yet mapped out."

"And you know why I do not want to lend my aid?"

"I know you are not in accordance with the principles of the Appleby politics – "

"That I am not! Nor shall I ever be. Nor shall I ever pretend to be – "

"Pretend? Of course not. But could you not be persuaded?"

"By what means?"

"I don't know, Mr. Wheeler," and Keefe looked at him frankly. "I truly don't know by what means. But I do know that Mr. Appleby is here to present to you an argument by which he hopes to persuade you to help young Sam along – and I earnestly desire to add any word of mine that may help influence your decision. That is why I want to tell you of the good traits of Sam Appleby, junior. It may be I can give you a clearer light on his character than his father could do – that is, I might present it as the opinion of a friend – "

"And not exaggerate his virtues as a father might do? I see. Well, Mr. Keefe, I appreciate your attitude, but let me tell you this: whatever I do or don't do regarding this coming campaign of young Appleby will be entirely irrespective of the character or personality of that young man. It will all depend on the senior

Appleby's arrangements with me, and my ability to change his views on some of the more important planks in his platform. If he directed you to speak to me as you have done, you may return that to him as my answer."

"You, doubtless, said the same to him, sir?"

"Of course I did. I make no secret of my position in this matter. Samuel Appleby has a hold over me – I admit that – but it is not strong enough to make me forget my ideas of right and wrong to the public. No influence of a personal nature should weigh against any man's duty to the state, and I will never agree to pretend to any dissimulation in order to bring about a happier life for myself."

"But need you subscribe to the objectionable points to use your influence for young Sam?"

"Tacitly, of course. And I do not choose even to appear to agree to principles abhorrent to my sense of justice and honesty, thereby secretly gaining something for myself."

"Meaning your full pardon?"

Wheeler turned a look of surprise on the speaker.

"I thought you said you hadn't Appleby's full confidence," he said.

"Nor have I. I do know – as do many men – that you were pardoned with a condition, but the condition I do not know. It can't be very galling." And Keefe looked about on the pleasant surroundings.

"You think not? That's because you don't know the terms. And

yet, galling though they are, hateful though it makes my life, and the lives of my wife and daughter, we would all rather bear it than to deviate one iota from the path of strict right.”

“I must admire you for that, as must any honorable man. But are there not degrees or shadings of right and wrong – ”

“Mr. Keefe, as an old man, I take the privilege of advising you for your own good. All through your life I beg you remember this: Anyone who admits degrees or shadings of right or wrong – is already wrong. Don’t be offended; you didn’t claim those things, you merely asked the question. But, remember what I said about it.”

CHAPTER III

ONE LAST ARGUMENT

Adjoining the bedroom of Samuel Appleby at Sycamore Ridge was a small sitting-room, also at his disposal. Here, later that same evening he sat in confab with his two assistants.

“We leave to-morrow afternoon,” he said to Keefe and Miss Lane. “But before that, we’ve much to do. So far, we’ve accomplished nothing. I am a little discouraged but not disheartened. I still have a trump card to play, but I don’t want to use it unless absolutely necessary.”

“If you were inclined to take us further into your confidence, Mr. Appleby,” Keefe began, and the older man interrupted:

“That’s just what I propose to do. The time has come for it. Perhaps if you both know the situation you may work more intelligently.”

“Sure we could!” exclaimed Genevieve. She was leaning forward in her chair, clasping her knees, her pretty evening frock disclosing her babyishly soft neck and arms; but without a trace of self-consciousness, she thought only of the subject they were discussing.

“There’s something queer,” she went on. “I can’t see through it. Why does Mr. Wheeler act so polite most of the time, and then do some outrageous thing, like – ”

“Like what?”

“Like refusing to cross the room – or – why, he declined point-blank to go with me to the north arbor, yet was perfectly willing to take me to the Japanese tea-house!”

“That’s just the point of the whole thing,” said Appleby, seriously; “here’s the explanation in a nutshell. Years ago, Daniel Wheeler was pardoned for a crime he had committed – ”

“He did commit it, then?” interrupted Keefe.

“He was tried and convicted. He was sentenced. And I, being governor at the time, pardoned him on the one condition, that he never again set foot inside the boundaries of the State of Massachusetts.”

“Whee!” exclaimed Genevieve; “never go to Boston!”

“Nor anywhere else in the state. But this is the complication: Mrs. Wheeler, who is, by the way, a distant connection of my own family, inherited a large fortune on condition that she live in Massachusetts. So you see, the situation was peculiar. To keep her inheritance, Mrs. Wheeler must live in Massachusetts. Yet Mr. Wheeler could not enter the state without forfeiting his pardon.”

“What a mess!” cried Genevieve, but Keefe said: “You planned that purposely, Mr. Appleby?”

“Of course,” was the straightforward reply.

“Then I don’t see how you can expect Mr. Wheeler’s help in the campaign.”

“By offering him a complete pardon, of course.”

“But go on with the story,” demanded Genevieve. “What did they do about the Massachusetts business?”

“As you see,” returned Appleby, “this house is built on the state line between Massachusetts and Connecticut. It is carefully planned and built, and all the rooms or parts of rooms that Mr. Wheeler uses or enters are on the Connecticut side, yet the house is more than half in Massachusetts, which secures the estate to Mrs. Wheeler.”

“Well, I never!” Genevieve exclaimed. “So that’s why he can’t go to the north arbor – it’s in Massachusetts!”

“Of course it is. Also, he never goes into the northern end of the dining-room or the living-room.”

“Or hall.”

“Or hall. In fact, he merely is careful to keep on his own side of a definitely drawn line, and therefore complies with the restrictions. His den and his own bedroom and bath are all on the south side, while Mrs. Wheeler has a sitting-room, boudoir, and so forth, on the north side. She and Maida can go all over the house, but Mr. Wheeler is restricted. However, they’ve lived that way so long, it has become second nature to them, and nobody bothers much about it.”

“Do people know?” asked Keefe. “The neighbors, I mean.”

“Oh, yes; but, as I say, it makes little confusion. The trouble comes, as Miss Lane suggested, when Wheeler wants to go to Boston or anywhere in Massachusetts.”

“Yet that is a small thing, compared with his freedom,”

observed Keefe; “I think he got off easy.”

“But with Wheeler it isn’t so much the deprivation as the stigma. He longs for a full pardon, and would do most anything to have it, but he refuses to stand for Sam’s election, even with that for a bribe.”

“You can’t pardon him now that you aren’t governor, can you, Mr. Appleby?” asked Genevieve.

“I can arrange to have it done. In fact, the present governor is ready and even anxious to pardon him, but I hold the key to that situation, myself. You two needn’t know all the details, but now you know the principal points, and I expect you to utilize them.”

“I’m willing enough,” and Genevieve rocked back and forth thoughtfully, “and I may think of a way – but, for the moment, I don’t.”

“Get chummy with Maida,” suggested Appleby.

“Let me do that,” Keefe interrupted. “Without undue conceit, I believe I can influence the young lady, and I think Miss Lane, now that she knows the truth, can jolly up Mr. Wheeler to good effect.”

“But, good gracious! What do you want to do?” and Genevieve giggled. “Say I entice the old gentleman over the line – then his pardon is canceled and he’s a criminal – then you agree to ignore the lapse if he meets your wishes – is that the idea?”

Appleby smiled. “A little crude, Miss Lane. And beside, you couldn’t get him over the line. He’s too accustomed to his limitations to be caught napping, and not even your charms could

decoy him over intentionally.”

“Think so? Probably you’re right. Well, suppose I try to work through Maida. If I could persuade Mr. Wheeler that she suffers from the stigma of her father’s incomplete pardon – ”

“Yes, that’s it. This thing can’t be accomplished by brutal threats, it must be done by subtle suggestion and convincing hints.”

“That’s my idea,” agreed Keefe. “If I can talk straight goods to Miss Wheeler and make her see how much better it would be for her father in his latter years to be freed from all touch of the past disgrace, she might coax him to listen to you.”

“That’s right. Now, you know what you’re here for; just do what you can – but don’t make a mess of things. I’d rather you did nothing than to do some fool thing!”

“Trust us!” Genevieve encouraged him, as she rose. “Me and Curt may not put over a big deal, but we won’t do anything silly.”

The two men smiled as the girl, with a pleasant good-night, went away to her own room.

“She’s true blue,” said Keefe.

“Yes, she is,” Appleby nodded. “All her frivolity is on the surface, like her powder and paint. At heart, that child has only my interests. I quite appreciate it.”

“I hope you think the same of me, Mr. Appleby.”

“I do, Keefe. More, I trust you with my most confidential matters. I’ll own I want this business here to come out in my favor. I can’t push Wheeler too hard – so I ask your help. But,

as I hinted, I've one rod yet in pickle. If necessary, I'll use it, but I'd rather not."

"Of course I hope you won't have to, but, I'll admit I don't see much chance of succeeding with the present outlook."

"To-morrow morning will tell. If we can't work the thing through by noon, say – I'll spring my last trap. Good-night, Keefe."

"Good-night, Mr. Appleby."

Without apparent coercion the morning hours brought about a cozy session on the south veranda with Miss Lane and Daniel Wheeler in attendance, while at the same time, Keefe and Maida wandered over the beautiful park of the estate.

Keefe had gently guided the conversation into confidential channels, and when he ventured to sympathize with the girl in regard to her father's deprivation he was surprised at her ready acceptance of it.

"Oh, you know, don't you, Mr. Keefe!" she exclaimed. "But you don't know all it means to me. You see" – she blushed but went steadily on – "you see, I'm engaged to – to a man I adore. And –"

"Don't tell me if you'd rather not," he murmured.

"No, it's a relief to tell – and, somehow – you seem so wise and strong –"

"Go on then – please."

The kind voice helped her and Maida resumed: "Well, Jeff – Mr. Allen, lives in Boston, and so –"

“So it would be very awkward if your father couldn’t go there.”

“Not only that – but I’ve made a vow never to step foot into Massachusetts until my father can do so, too. Nothing would induce me to break that vow!”

“Not even your lover?” said Keefe, astonished.

“No; my father is more to me than any lover.”

“Then you don’t truly love Mr. Allen.”

“Oh, yes, I do – I do! But father is my idol. I don’t believe any girl ever adored her father as I do. All my life I’ve had only the one object – to make him forget – as far as possible, his trouble. Now, if I were to marry and leave him – why, I simply couldn’t do it!”

“Can’t Mr. Allen live in Connecticut?”

“No; his business interests are all in Boston, and he can’t be transplanted. Oh, if father could only do what Mr. Appleby wants him to, then we could all be happy.”

“Can’t you persuade him?”

“I’ve tried my best. Mother has tried, too. But, you see, it’s a matter of principle, and when principle is involved, we are all in the same boat. Mother and I would scorn any wrongdoing quite as much as father does.”

“And you’ll give up your life happiness for a principle?”

“Of course. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t every decent person? I couldn’t live at all, if I were knowingly doing wrong.”

“But your – ” Keefe stopped abruptly.

“I know what you were going to say,” Maida spoke sadly; “you

were going to say my father did wrong. *I don't believe he did.*"

"Don't you know?"

"I know in my own heart. I know he is incapable of the crime he was charged with. I'm sure he is shielding some one else, or else some one did it of whom he has no knowledge. But my father commit a crime? Never!"

"Do you care to tell me the details?"

"I don't know why I shouldn't. It was long ago, you know, and dad was accused of forgery. It was proved on him – or the jury thought it was – and he was convicted – "

"And sentenced?"

"Yes; to a long prison term. But Governor Appleby pardoned him with that mean old proviso, that he never should step into Massachusetts!"

"Was your mother then the heir to the Massachusetts property?"

"No; but Mr. Appleby knew she would be. So, when she did inherit, and had to live in Massachusetts to hold the estate, Mr. Appleby thought he had dad where he wanted him."

"Were they foes?"

"Politically, yes. Because dad did all he could to keep Mr. Appleby from being governor."

"But didn't succeed?"

"No; but almost. So, then, Mr. Appleby did this pardon trick to get even with father, and I think it turned out more serious than he anticipated. For mother took up the feud, and she got

lawyers and all that and arranged to have the house built on the line between the states!”

“Was the estate she inherited on both sides of the line?”

“Oh, no; but it was near the southern border of Massachusetts, and she bought enough adjoining land to make the arrangement possible.”

“Then the house isn’t on the ground she inherited?”

“Not quite, but the lawyers decided it so that she really complies with the terms of the will, so it’s all right.”

“Was your mother the only heir?”

“So far as we can find out. I believe there was another branch of the family, but we haven’t been able to trace it, so as the years go by, we feel more and more confident there’s no other heir. Of course, should one turn up, his claim would be recognized.”

Further talk quickly convinced Keefe that there was no hope of persuading Maida Wheeler to influence or advise her father in any direction other than his idea of right. No amount of urging or arguing would make Wheeler see his duty other than he now saw it, or make Maida endeavor to change his views. With a sigh over his failure, Keefe deftly turned the talk in other channels, and then they strolled back to the house.

As was to be expected, Genevieve had made no progress with her part of the plan. Her talk with Mr. Wheeler had availed nothing. He was courteous and kind; he was amused at her gay, merry little ways; he politely answered her questions, both serious and flippant, but absolutely nothing came of it all.

Samuel Appleby had a short but straightforward conversation with Mrs. Wheeler.

“Now, Sara,” he said, “remember I’m your old friend as well as your relative.”

“I don’t call you a relative,” she returned, calmly.

“A family connection, then; I don’t care what you call it. And I’m going to speak right out, for I know better than to try sophistries. If you can get Dan to play my game regarding my son’s campaign, I’ll see that Dan gets full pardon, and at once. Then Maida can marry young Allen and you can all go to Boston to live.”

“Sam Appleby, I’d rather never see Boston again, never have Dan see it, than to have him agree to endorse principles that he does not believe! And Dan feels the same way about it.”

“But don’t you consider your daughter? Will you condemn Maida to a broken-hearted life – ?”

“Maida must decide for herself. I think Jeffrey Allen will yet persuade her to leave her father. She is devoted to Dan, but she is deeply in love with Jeff and it’s only natural she should go with him. Any other girl would do so without a second thought. Maida is unusual, but I doubt if she can hold out much longer against her lover’s pleading.”

“I think she will. Maida has your own unbreakable will.”

“So be it, then. The child must choose for herself. But it doesn’t alter the stand Dan and I have taken.”

“Nothing can alter that?”

“Nothing, Samuel Appleby.”

“That remains to be seen. Have I your permission to talk to Maida, alone?”

“Certainly. Why not? If you can persuade her to marry Jeff, I’ll be only too glad. If you find her determined to stand by her father, then the case remains as it is at present.”

And so, as Maida returned from her walk with Keefe, she was asked to go for another stroll with Samuel Appleby.

She assented, though with no show of pleasure at the prospect.

But as they started off, she said: “I’m glad to have a talk with you, Mr. Appleby. I want to appeal to your better nature.”

“Good! That’s just what I want – to appeal to yours. Suppose you word your appeal first.”

“Mine is simple to understand. It is only that having had your way and having spoiled my father’s life for fifteen years, I ask you, in the name of humanity and justice, to arrange matters so that his latter years of life shall be free from the curse you put upon him.”

“I didn’t put it upon him – he brought it on himself.”

“He never committed that crime – and you know it!”

“What do you mean by that?” Appleby gave her a startled glance.

Had Maida seen this glance, she might have been enlightened. But her eyes were cast down, and she went on: “I don’t know it surely, but I am positive in my own heart father never did it. However, that’s past history. All I ask now is his full pardon –

which, I know, you can bring about if you want to.”

“And I will, willingly and gladly, if your father will grant my request.”

“To put your son in as governor with the same political views that prevented my father from voting for you! You know he can’t do that!”

“And yet you expect me to favor him!”

“But don’t you see the difference? Your pardon will mean everything to father – ”

“And to you!”

“Yes, but that’s a secondary consideration. I’d ask this for father just the same, if it meant disaster for me!”

“I believe you would!” and Appleby gazed admiringly at the sweet, forceful face, and the earnest eyes.

“Of course I should! As I say, it means life’s happiness to him.”

“And his consent means just as much to me.”

“No, it doesn’t. That’s just it. Even though father doesn’t definitely help you in your son’s election, he will do nothing to hinder. And that’s much the same.”

“It’s far from being the same. His positive and definite help is a very different matter from his negative lack of interference. It’s the help I want. And I do want it! Do you suppose I’d come here and urge it – beg for it – if I didn’t think it absolutely necessary?”

“No; I suppose not. But I know he never will grant it, so you may as well give up hope.”

“You know that, do you, Maida?” Appleby’s voice was almost wistful.

“I most certainly do,” and the girl nodded her head positively.

“Then listen to me. I have one argument yet unused. I’m going to use it now. And with you.”

Maida looked up in alarm. Appleby’s face was stern, his tone betokened a final, even desperate decision.

“Oh, not with me,” she cried; “I – I’m only a girl – I don’t know about these things – let’s go where father is.”

“No; you are the one. In your hands must rest your father’s fate – your father’s future. Sit here, beneath the old sycamore – you know about the tree?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Never mind that now; I’ve only a few moments, but that’s time enough. You know, Maida, how your mother holds this estate?”

“Yes – she must live in Massachusetts. Well, we do. The lawyers said – ”

“That isn’t the point; this is it. There is another heir.”

“We’ve always thought it possible.” Maida spoke coolly, though a dull fear clutched her heart.

“It’s more than a possibility, it’s a fact. I know it – and I know the heir.”

“Who is it?”

“Never mind for the moment. Suffice it to say that he doesn’t know it himself – that no one knows it but me. Now, you and I

know. No one else does. Do you understand?”

His keen gaze at her made her understand.

“I – ” she faltered.

“You do understand,” he asserted. “You sense my proposition before I make it. And you have it right – you’re a smart girl, Maida. Yes, I suggest that you and I keep our secret, and that in return for my silence you persuade your father to meet my wishes. Then, he shall be fully pardoned, and all will be well.”

“You criminal! You dishonest and dishonorable man!” she cried, her eyes blazing, her cheeks reddening with her righteous indignation.

“There, there, my girl, have a care. You haven’t thought it all out yet. Doubtless you’re going to say that neither your father nor mother want to remain here, if my statement is true.”

“Of course I say that! They won’t want to stay a minute! Who is the heir? Tell me!”

“And have you thought what it will mean to them to leave this place? Have you realized that your father has no business interests nor can he find any at his age? Do you remember that your mother has no funds outside the estate she inherited? Do you want to plunge them into penury, into pauperism, in their declining years?”

“Yes – if honesty requires it – ” but the sweet voice trembled at the thought.

“Honesty is a good thing – a fine policy – but you are a devoted daughter, and I remind you that to tell this thing I have told you,

means disaster – ruin for you and your parents. Young Allen can't support them – they are unaccustomed to deprivation – and," he lowered his voice, "this heir I speak of has no knowledge of the truth. He misses nothing, since he hopes for nothing."

Maida looked at him helplessly.

"I must think," she said, brokenly. "Oh, you are cruel, to put this responsibility on me."

"You know why I do it. I am not disinterested."

CHAPTER IV

THE BIG SYCAMORE TREE

At the south door the Appleby car stood waiting.

Genevieve was saying good-bye to Maida, with the affection of an old friend.

“We’re coming back, you know,” she reminded, “in two or three days, and please say you’ll be glad to see me!”

“Of course,” Maida assented, but her lip trembled and her eyes showed signs of ready tears.

“Cheer up,” Genevieve babbled on. “I’m your friend – whatever comes with time!”

“So am I,” put in Curtis Keefe. “Good-bye for a few days, Miss Wheeler.”

How Maida did it, she scarcely knew herself, but she forced a smile, and even when Samuel Appleby gave her a warning glance at parting she bravely responded to his farewell words, and even gaily waved her hand as the car rolled down the drive.

Once out of earshot, Appleby broke out:

“I played my trump card! No, you needn’t ask me what I was, for I don’t propose to tell you. But it will take the trick, I’m sure. Why, it’s got to!”

“It must be something pretty forcible, then,” said Keefe, “for it looked to me about as likely as snow in summertime, that

any of those rigid Puritans would ever give in an inch to your persuasions.”

“Or mine,” added Genevieve. “Never before have I failed so utterly to make any headway when I set out to be really persuasive.”

“You did your best, Miss Lane,” and Appleby looked at her with the air of one appraising the efficiency of a salesman. “I confess I didn’t think Wheeler would be quite such a hardshell – after all these years.”

“He’s just like concrete,” Keefe observed. “They all are. I didn’t know there were such conscientious people left in this wicked old world!”

“They’re not really in the world,” Appleby declared. “They’ve merely vegetated in that house of theirs, never going anywhere –”

“Oh, come now, Mr. Appleby,” and Genevieve shook her head, “Boston isn’t the only burg on the planet! They often go to New York, and that’s going some!”

“Not really often – I asked Wheeler. He hasn’t been for five or six years, and though Maida goes occasionally, to visit friends, she soon runs back home to her father.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Keefe said, “they’re by no means mossbacks or hayseeds. They’re right there with the goods, when it comes to modern literature or up-to-date news –”

“Oh, yes, they’re a highbrow bunch,” Appleby spoke impatiently; “but a recluse like that is no sort of a man! The truth

is, I'm at the end of my patience! I've got to put this thing over with less palaver and circumlocution. I thought I'd give him a chance – just put the thing up to him squarely once – and, as he doesn't see fit to meet me half-way, he's got to be the loser, that's all.”

“He seems to be the loser, as it is.” This from Keefe.

“But nothing to what's coming to him! Why, the idea of my sparing him at all is ridiculous! If he doesn't come down, he's got to be wiped out! That's what it amounts to!”

“Wiped out – how?”

“Figuratively and literally! Mentally, morally and physically! That's how! I've stood all I can – I've waited long enough – too long – and now I'm going to play the game my own way! As I said, I played a trump card – I raised one pretty definite ruction just before we left. Now, that may do the business – and, it may not! If not, then desperate measures are necessary – and will be used!”

“Good gracious, Mr. Appleby!” Genevieve piped up from her fur collar which nearly muffled her little face. “You sound positively murderous!”

“Murder! Pooh, I'd kill Dan Wheeler in a minute, if that would help Sam! But I don't want Wheeler dead – I want him alive – I want his help – his influence – yet, when he sits there looking like a stone wall, and about as easy to overthrow, I declare I *could* kill him! But I don't intend to. It's far more likely he'd kill me!”

“Why?” exclaimed Keefe. “Why should he? And – but you're

joking.”

“Not at all. Wheeler isn’t of the murderer type, or I’d be taking my life in my hands to go into his house! He hates me with all the strength of a hard, bigoted, but strictly just nature. He thinks I was unjust in the matter of his pardon, he thinks I was contemptible, and false to our old-time friendship; and he would be honestly and truly glad if I were dead. But – thank heaven – he’s no murderer!”

“Of course not!” cried Genevieve. “How you do talk! As if murder were an everyday performance! Why, people in our class don’t kill each other!”

The placid assumption of equality of class with her employer was so consistently Miss Lane’s usual attitude, that it caused no mental comment from either of her hearers. Her services were so valuable that any such little idiosyncrasy was tolerated.

“Of course we don’t – often,” agreed Appleby, “but I’d wager a good bit that if Dan Wheeler could bump me off without his conscience knowing it – off I’d go!”

“I don’t know about that,” said Genevieve, musingly – “but I do believe that girl would do it!”

“What?” cried Keefe. “Maida!”

“Yes; she’s a lamb for looks, but she’s got a lion’s heart – if anybody ever had one! Talk about a tigress protecting her cubs; it would be a milk-and-water performance beside Maida Wheeler shielding her father – or fighting for him – yes, or killing somebody for him!”

“Rubbish!” laughed Appleby. “Maida might be willing enough, in that lion heart of hers – but little girls don’t go around killing people.”

“I know it, and I don’t expect her to. But I only say she’s capable of it.”

“Goethe says – (Keefe spoke in his superior way) – ‘We are all capable of crime, even the best of us.’”

“I remember that phrase,” mused Appleby. “Is it Goethe’s? Well, I don’t say it’s literally true, for lots of people are too much of a jellyfish makeup to have such a capability. But I do believe there are lots of strong, forcible people, who are absolutely capable of crime – if the opportunity offers.”

“That’s it,” and Genevieve nodded her head wisely. “Opportunity is what counts. I’ve read detective stories, and they prove it. Be careful, Mr. Appleby, how you trust yourself alone with Mr. Wheeler.”

“That will do,” he reprimanded. “I can take care of myself, Miss Lane.”

Genevieve always knew when she had gone too far, and, instead of sulking, she tactfully changed the subject and entertained the others with her amusing chatter, at which she was a success.

At that very moment, Maida Wheeler, alone in her room, was sobbing wildly, yet using every precaution that she shouldn’t be heard.

Thrown across her bed, her face buried in the pillows, she

fairly shook with the intensity of her grief.

But, as often happens, after she had brought her crying spell to a finish – and exhausted Nature insists on a finish – she rose and bathed her flushed face and sat down to think it out calmly.

Yet the more she thought the less calm she grew.

For the first time in her life she was face to face with a great question which she could not refer to her parents. Always she had confided in them, and matters that seemed great to her, even though trifling in themselves, were invariably settled and straightened out by her wise and loving father or mother.

But now, Samuel Appleby had told her a secret – a dreadful secret – that she must not only weigh and decide about, but must – at least, until she decided – keep from her parents.

“For,” Maida thought, “if I tell them, they’ll at once insist on knowing who the rightful heir is, they’ll give over the place to him – and what will become of us?”

Her conscience was as active as ever it was, her sense of right and wrong was in no way warped or blunted, but instinct told her that she must keep this matter entirely to herself until she had come to her own conclusion. Moreover, she realized, the conclusion must be her own – the decision must be arrived at by herself, and unaided.

Finally, accepting all this, she resolved to put the whole thing out of her mind for the moment. Her parents were so intimately acquainted with her every mood or shade of demeanor, they would see at once that something was troubling her mind, unless

she used the utmost care to prevent it. Care, too, not to overdo her precaution. It would be quite as evident that she was concealing something, if she were unusually gay or carefree of manner.

So the poor child went downstairs, determined to forget utterly the news she had heard, until such time as she could be again by herself.

And she succeeded. Though haunted by a vague sense of being deceitful, she behaved so entirely as usual, that neither of her parents suspected her of pretense.

Moreover, the subject of Samuel Appleby's visit was such a fruitful source of conversation that there was less chance of minor considerations.

"Never will I consent," her father was reiterating, as Maida entered the room. "Why, Sara, I'd rather have the conditional pardon rescinded, rather pay full penalty of my conviction, than stand for the things young Sam's campaign must stand for!"

A clenched fist came down on the table by way of emphasis.

"Now, dad," said Maida, gaily, "don't thump around like that! You look as if you'd like to thump Mr. Appleby!"

"And I should! I wish I could bang into his head just how I feel about it –"

"Oh, he knows!" and Mrs. Wheeler smiled. "He knows perfectly how you feel."

"But, truly, mother, don't you think dad could – well, not do anything wrong – but just give in to Mr. Appleby – for – for my sake?"

“Maida – dear – that is our only stumbling-block. Your father and I would not budge one step, for ourselves – but for you, and for Jeffrey – oh, my dear little girl, that’s what makes it so hard.”

“For us, then – father, can’t you – for our sake – ”

Maida broke down. It wasn’t for her sake she was pleading – nor for the sake of her lover. It was for the sake of her parents – that they might remain in comfort – and yet, comfort at the expense of honesty? Oh, the problem was too great – she hadn’t worked it out yet.

“I can’t think,” her father’s grave voice broke in on her tumultuous thoughts. “I can’t believe, Maida, that you would want my freedom at the cost of my seared conscience.”

“No, oh, no, father, I don’t – you know I don’t. But what is this dreadful thing you’d have to countenance if you linked up on the Appleby side? Are they pirates – or rascals?”

“Not from their own point of view,” and Dan Wheeler smiled. “They think we are! You can’t understand politics, child, but you must know that a man who is heart and soul in sympathy with the principles of his party can’t conscientiously cross over and work for the other side.”

“Yes, I know that, and I know that tells the whole story. But, father, think what there is at stake. Your freedom – and – ours!”

“I know that, Maida dear, and you can never know how my very soul is torn as I try to persuade myself that for those reasons it would be right for me to consent. Yet – ”

He passed his hand wearily across his brow, and then folding

his arms on the table he let his head sink down upon them.

Maida flew to his side. "Father, dearest," she crooned over him, as she caressed his bowed head, "don't think of it for a minute! You know I'd give up anything – I'd give up Jeff – if it means one speck of good for you."

"I know it, dear child, but – run away, now, Maida, leave me to myself."

Understanding, both Maida and her mother quietly left the room.

"I'm sorry, girlie dear, that you have to be involved in these scenes," Mrs. Wheeler said fondly, as the two went to the sitting-room.

"Don't talk that way, mother. I'm part of the family, and I'm old enough to have a share and a voice in all these matters. But just think what it would mean, if father had his pardon! Look at this room, and think, he has never been in it! Never has seen the pictures – the view from the window, the general coziness of it all."

"I know, dear, but that's an old story. Your father is accustomed to living only in his own rooms –"

"And not to be able to go to the other end of the dining-room or living-room, if he chooses! It's outrageous!"

"Yes, Maida, I quite agree – but no more outrageous than it was last week – or last year."

"Yes, it is! It grows more outrageous every minute! Mother, what did that old will say? That you must live in Massachusetts?"

“Yes – you know that, dear.”

“Of course I do. And if you lived elsewhere, what then?”

“I forfeit the inheritance.”

“And what would become of it?”

“In default of any other heirs, it would go to the State of Massachusetts.”

“And there are no other heirs?”

“What ails you, Maida? You know all this. No, there are no other heirs.”

“You’re sure?”

“As sure as we can be. Your father had every possible search made. There were advertisements kept in the papers for years, and able lawyers did all they could to find heirs if there were any. And, finding none, we were advised that there were none, and we could rest in undisturbed possession.”

“Suppose one should appear, what then?”

“Then, little girl, we’d give him the keys of the house, and walk out.”

“Where would we walk to?”

“I’ve no idea. In fact, I can’t imagine where we could walk to. But that, thank heaven, is not one of our troubles. Your father would indeed be desperately fixed if it were! You know, Maida, from a fine capable business man, he became a wreck, because of that unjust trial.”

“Father *never* committed the forgery?”

“Of course not, dear.”

“Who did?”

“We don’t know. It was cleverly done, and the crime was purposely fastened on your father, because he was about to be made the rival candidate of Mr. Appleby, for governor.”

“I know. And Mr. Appleby was at the bottom of it!”

“Your father doesn’t admit that – ”

“He must have been.”

“Hush, Maida. These matters are not for you to judge. You know your father has done all he honestly could to be fully pardoned, or to discover the real criminal, and as he hasn’t succeeded, you must rest content with the knowledge that there was no stone left unturned.”

“But, mother, suppose Mr. Appleby has something more up his sleeve. Suppose he comes down on dad with some unexpected, some unforeseen blow that – ”

“Maida, be quiet. Don’t make me sorry that we have let you into our confidence as far as we have. These are matters above your head. Should such a thing as you hint occur, your father can deal with it.”

“But I want to help – ”

“And you can best do that by not trying to help! Your part is to divert your father, to love him and cheer him and entertain him. You know this, and you know for you to undertake to advise or suggest is not only ridiculous but disastrous.”

“All right, mother, I’ll be good. I don’t mean to be silly.”

“You are, when you assume ability you don’t possess.” Mrs.

Wheeler's loving smile robbed the words of any harsh effect. "Run along now, and see if dad won't go for a walk with you; and don't refer to anything unpleasant."

Maida went, and found Wheeler quite ready for a stroll "Which way?" he asked as they crossed the south veranda.

"Round the park, and bring up under the tree, and have tea there," dictated Maida, her heart already lighter as she obeyed her mother's dictum to avoid unpleasant subjects.

But as they walked on, and trivial talk seemed to pall, they naturally reverted to the discussion of their recent guests.

"Mr. Appleby is an old curmudgeon," Maida declared; "Mr. Keefe is nice and well-behaved; but the little Lane girl is a scream! I never saw any one so funny. Now she was quite a grand lady, and then she was a common little piece! But underneath it all she showed a lot of good sense and I'm sure in her work she has real ability."

"Appleby wouldn't keep her if she didn't have," her father rejoined; "but why do you call him a curmudgeon? He's very well-mannered."

"Oh, yes, he is. And to tell the truth, I'm not sure just what a curmudgeon is. But – he's it, anyway."

"I gather you don't especially admire my old friend."

"Friend! If he's a friend – give me enemies!"

"Fie, fie, Maida, what do you mean? Remember, he gave me my pardon."

"Yes, a high old pardon! Say, dad, tell me again exactly how

he worded that letter about the tree.”

“I’ve told you a dozen times! He didn’t mean anything anyhow. He only said, that when the big sycamore tree went into Massachusetts I could go.”

“What a crazy thing to say, wasn’t it?”

“It was because we had been talking about the play of *Macbeth*. You remember, “Till Birnam Wood shall come to Dunsinane.”

“Oh, yes, and then it did come – by a trick.”

“Yes, the men came, carrying branches. We’d been talking about it, discussing some point, and then – it seemed clever, I suppose – to Appleby, and he wrote that about the sycamore.”

“Meaning – never?”

“Meaning never.”

“But Birnam Wood did go.”

“Only by a trick, and that would not work in this case. Why, are you thinking of carrying a branch of sycamore into Massachusetts?”

Maida returned his smile as she answered: “I’d manage to carry the whole tree in, if it would do any good! But, I s’pose, old Puritan Father, you’re too conscientious to take advantage of a trick?”

“Can’t say, till I know the details of the game. But I doubt Appleby’s being unable to see through your trick, and then – where are you?”

“That wouldn’t matter. Trick or no trick, if the big sycamore

went into Massachusetts, you could go. But I don't see any good plan for getting it in. And, too, Sycamore Ridge wouldn't be Sycamore Ridge without it. Don't you love the old tree, dad?"

"Of course, as I love every stick and stone about the place. It has been a real haven to me in my perturbed life."

"Suppose you had to leave it, daddy?"

"I think I'd die, dear. Unless, that is, we could go back home."

"Isn't this home?"

"It's the dearest spot on earth – outside my native state."

"There, there, dad, don't let's talk about it. We're here for keeps –"

"Heaven send we are, dearest! I couldn't face the loss of this place. What made you think of such a thing?"

"Oh, I'm thinking of all sorts of things to-day. But, father, while we're talking of moving – couldn't you – oh, couldn't you, bring yourself, somehow, to do what Mr. Appleby wants you to do? I don't know much about it – but father, darling, if you *only could!*"

"Maida, my little girl, don't think I haven't tried. Don't think I don't realize what it means to you and Jeff. I know – oh, I *do* know how it would simplify matters if I should go over to the Appleby side – and push Sam's campaign – as I could do it. I know that it would mean my full pardon, my return to my old home, my reunion with old scenes and associations. And more than that, it would mean the happiness of my only child – my daughter – and her chosen husband. And yet, Maida, as God is

my judge, I am honest in my assertion that I *can't* so betray my honor and spend my remaining years a living lie. I can't do it, Maida – I *can't*.”

And the calm, sorrowful countenance he turned to the girl was more positive and final than any further protestation could have been.

CHAPTER V

THE BUGLE SOUNDED TAPS

Although the portions of the house and grounds that were used by Wheeler included the most attractive spots, yet there were many forbidden places that were a real temptation to him.

An especial one was the flower-covered arbor that had so charmed Genevieve and another was the broad and beautiful north veranda. To be sure, the south piazza was equally attractive, but it was galling to be compelled to avoid any part of his own domain. However, the passing years had made the conditions a matter of habit and it was only occasionally that Wheeler's annoyance was poignant.

In fact, he and his wife bore the cross better than did Maida. She had never become reconciled to the unjust and arbitrary dictum of the conditional pardon. She lived in a constant fear lest her father should some day inadvertently and unintentionally step on the forbidden ground, and it should be reported. Indeed, knowing her father's quixotic honesty, she was by no means sure he wouldn't report it himself.

It had never occurred – probably never would occur, and yet, she often imagined some sudden emergency, such as a fire, or burglars, that might cause his impulsive invasion of the other side of the house.

In her anxiety she had spoken of this to Samuel Appleby when he was there. But he gave her no satisfaction. He merely replied: "A condition is a condition."

Curtis Keefe had tried to help her cause, by saying: "Surely a case of danger would prove an exception to the rule," but Appleby had only shaken his head in denial.

Though care had been taken to have the larger part of the house on the Massachusetts side of the line, yet the rooms most used by the family were in Connecticut. Here was Mr. Wheeler's den, and this had come to be the most used room in the whole house. Mrs. Wheeler's sitting-room, which her husband never had entered, was also attractive, but both mother and daughter invaded the den, whenever leisure hours were to be enjoyed.

The den contained a large south bay window, which was Maida's favorite spot. It had a broad, comfortable window-seat, and here she spent much of her time, curled up among the cushions, reading. There were long curtains, which, half-drawn, hid her from view, and often she was there for hours, without her father's knowing it.

His own work was engrossing. Cut off from his established law business in Massachusetts, he had at first felt unable to start it anew in different surroundings. Then, owing to his wife's large fortune, it was decided that he should give up all business for a time. And as the time went on, and there was no real necessity for an added income, Wheeler had indulged in his hobby of book collecting, and had amassed a library of unique charm as well as

goodly intrinsic value.

Moreover, it kept him interested and occupied, and prevented his becoming morose or melancholy over his restricted life.

So, many long days he worked away at his books, and Maida, hidden in the window-seat, watched him lovingly in the intervals of her reading.

Sitting there, the morning after Samuel Appleby's departure, she read not at all, although a book lay open on her lap. She was trying to decide a big matter, trying to solve a vexed question.

Maida's was a straightforward nature. She never deceived herself. If she did anything against her better judgment, even against her conscience, it was with open eyes and understanding mind. She used no sophistry, no pretence, and if she acted mistakenly she was always satisfied to abide by the consequences.

And now, she set about her problem, systematically and methodically, determined to decide upon her course, and then strictly follow it.

She glanced at her father, absorbed in his book catalogues and indexes, and a great wave of love and devotion filled her heart. Surely no sacrifice was too great that would bring peace or pleasure to that martyred spirit.

That he was a martyr, Maida was as sure as she was that she was alive. She knew him too well to believe for an instant that he had committed a criminal act; it was an impossibility for one of his character. But that she could do nothing about. The question had been raised and settled when she was too young to know

anything about it, and now, her simple duty was to do anything she might to ease his burden and to help him to forget.

“And,” she said to herself, “first of all, he must stay in this home. He positively *must*— and that’s all there is about that. Now, if he knows — if he has the least hint that there is another heir, he’ll get out at once — or at least, he’ll move heaven and earth to find the heir, and then we’ll have to move. And where to? That’s an unanswerable question. Anyway, I’ve only one sure conviction. I’ve got to keep from him all knowledge or suspicion of that other heir!

“Maybe it isn’t true — maybe Mr. Appleby made it up — but I don’t think so. At any rate, I have to proceed as if it were true, and do my best. And, first of all, I’ve got to hush up my own conscience. I’ve too much of my father’s nature to want to live here if it rightfully belongs to somebody else. I feel like a thief already. But I’m going to bear that — I’m going to live under that horrid conviction that I’m living a lie — for father’s sake.”

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