

Chambers Robert William

Athalie



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**Chambers Robert W.
Athalie**

To

My Friend

MESSMORE KENDALL

CHAPTER I

WHEN Mrs. Greensleeve first laid eyes on her baby she knew it was different from the other children.

"What is the matter with it?" she asked.

The preoccupied physician replied that there was nothing the matter. In point of fact he had been admiring the newly born little girl when her mother asked the question.

"She's about as perfect as they make 'em," he concluded, placing the baby beside her mother.

The mother said nothing. From moment to moment she turned her head on the pillow and gazed down at her new daughter with a curious, questioning expression. She had never gazed at any of her other children so uneasily. Even after she fell asleep the slightly puzzled expression remained as a faint crease between her brows.

Her husband, who had been wandering about from the bar to the office, from the office to the veranda, and occasionally entirely around the exterior of the road-house, came in on tiptoe and looked rather vacantly at them both.

Then he went out again as though he was not sure where he might be going. He was a little man and mild, and he did not look as though he had been created for anything in particular, not even for the purpose of procreation.

It was one of those early April days when birds make a great fuss over their vocal accomplishments, and the brown earth grows green over night – when the hot spring sun draws vapours from the soil, and the characteristic Long Island odour of manure is far too prevalent to please anybody but a native.

Peter Greensleeve, wandering at hazard around the corner of the tavern, came upon his business partner, Archer B. Ledlie leisurely digging for bait in the barn-yard. The latter was in his shirt-sleeves – always a good sign for continued fair weather.

"Boy?" inquired Ledlie, resting one soil-incrusted boot on his spade.

"Another girl," admitted Greensleeve.

"Gawsh!" After a moment's rumination he picked up a squirming angle-worm from the edge of the shallow excavation and dropped it into the empty tomato can.

"Going fishing?" inquired Greensleeve without interest.

"I dunno. Mebbe. Your boy Jack seen a trout into Spring Pond."

Ledlie, who was a large, heavy, red-faced man with a noticeably small mouth, faded blue eyes, and grey chin whiskers, picked a budding sprig from a bush, nibbled it, and gravely seated himself on the edge of the horse-trough. He was wearing a cigar behind his ear which he presently extracted, gazed at, then reconsidering the extravagance, replaced.

"Three gals, Pete – that's your record," he remarked, gazing reproachfully out across the salt meadows beyond the causeway. "They won't bring you in nothin'," he added, shutting his thin lips.

"I kind of like them," said Greensleeve with a sigh.

"They'll eat their heads off," retorted Ledlie; "then they'll git married an' go off some'rs. There ain't nothin' to gals nohow. You oughtn't to have went an' done it."

There seemed to be no further defence for Greensleeve. Ledlie continued to chew a sprig of something green and tender, revolving it and rolling it from one side of his small, thin-lipped mouth to the other. His thin little partner brooded in the sunshine. Once he glanced up at the sign which swung in front of the road-house: "Hotel Greensleeve: Greensleeve and Ledlie, proprietors."

"Needs painting, Archie," he volunteered mildly.

"I dunno," said the other. "Since the gunnin' season closed there ain't been no business except them sports from New York. The bar done good; that's all."

"There were two commercial men Wednesday week."

"Yes, an' they found fault with their vittles. They can go to the other place next time," which was as near as Ledlie ever came to profanity.

After a silence Ledlie said: "Here come your kids, Pete. I guess I'll let 'em dig a little bait for me."

Down the road they came dancing, and across the causeway over Spring Pond – Jack, aged four, Doris, three, and Catharine, two; and they broke into a run when they caught sight of their father, travelling as fast as their fat little legs could carry them.

"Is there a new baby? Is there a new baby?" shouted Jack, while still at a distance.

"Is it a boy? I want another brother! Is it a boy?" shrilled Doris as she and baby Catharine came panting up with flushed and excited faces.

"It's a girl," said Greensleeve mildly. "You'd better go into the kitchen and wash your faces."

"A girl!" cried Jack contemptuously. "What did mamma do that for?"

"Oh, goodness!" pouted Doris, "I didn't want any more girls around. What are you going to name her, papa?"

"Athalie, I believe," he said absently.

"Athalie! What kind of name is that?" demanded Jack.

"I dunno. Your mamma wanted it in case the baby was a girl."

The children, breathing hard and rapidly, stood in a silent cluster looking up at their father. Ledlie yawned frightfully, and they all instantly turned their eyes on him to discover if possible the solitary tooth with which rumour credited him. They always gazed intently into his mouth when he yawned, which irritated him.

"Go on in and wash yourselves!" he said as soon as speech became possible. "Ain't you heard what your papa told you!"

They were not afraid of Mr. Ledlie; they merely found him unsympathetic, and therefore concerned themselves with him not at all.

Ignoring him, Jack said, addressing his father: "I nearly caught a snake up the road. Gee! But he was a dandy."

"He had stripes," said Doris solemnly.

"He wiggled," asserted little Catharine, and her eyes became very round.

"What kind was he, papa?" inquired Jack.

"Oh, just a snake," replied Greensleeve vaguely.

The eager faces of the children clouded with disappointment; dawning expectancy faded; it was the old, old tragedy of bread desired, of the stone offered.

"I liked that snake," muttered Jack. "I wanted to keep him for a pet. I wanted to know what kind he was. He seemed very friendly."

"Next time," suggested Ledlie, "you pet him on the head with a rock."

"What?"

"Snakes is no good. There's pizen into 'em. You kill every one you see an' don't ask questions."

In the boy's face intelligence faded. Impulse lay stunned after its headlong collision with apathy, and died out in the clutch of ignorance.

"Is that so, papa?" he asked, dully.

"Yes, I guess so," nodded Greensleeve. "Mr. Ledlie knows all about snakes and things."

"Go on in an' wash!" repeated Ledlie. "You don't git no supper if you ain't cleaned up for table. Your papa says so, don't you, Pete?"

Greensleeve usually said what anybody told him to say.

"Walk quietly," he added; "your poor mamma's asleep."

Reluctantly the children turned toward the house, gazing inquiringly up at the curtained window of their mother's room as they trooped toward the veranda.

Jack swung around on the lower step:

"Papa!" he shouted.

"Well?"

"I forget what her name is!"

"Athalie."

CHAPTER II

HER first memories were of blue skies, green trees, sunshine, and the odour of warm moist earth.

Always through life she retained this memory of her early consciousness – a tree in pink bloom; morning-glories covering a rotting board fence; deep, rich, sun-warmed soil into which her baby fingers burrowed.

A little later commenced her memory of her mother – a still, white-shawled figure sewing under a peach tree in pink bloom.

Vast were her mother's skirts, as Athalie remembered them – a wide white tent under which she could creep out of the sunlight and hide.

Always, too, her earliest memories were crowded with children, hosts of them in a kaleidoscopic whirl around her, and their voices seemed ever in her ears.

By the age of four she had gradually understood that this vaguely pictured host of children numbered only three, and that they were her brother and two sisters – very much grown up and desirable to play with. But at seven she began to be surprised that Doris and Catharine were no older and no bigger than they were, although Jack's twelve years still awed her.

It was about this time that the child began to be aware of a difference between herself and the other children. For a year or two it did not trouble her, nor even confuse her. She seemed to be aware of it, that was all.

When it first dawned on her that her mother was aware of it too, she could never quite remember. Once, very early in her career, her mother who had been sewing under the peach tree, dropped her work and looked down at her very steadily where she sat digging holes in the dirt.

And Athalie had a vague idea in after life that this was the beginning; because there had been a little boy sitting beside her all the while she was digging; and, somehow, she was aware that her mother could not see him.

She was not able to recollect whether her mother had spoken to her, or even whether she herself had conversed with the little boy. He never came again; of that she was positive.

When it was that her brother and sisters began to suspect her of being different she could not remember.

In the beginning she had not understood their half-incredulous curiosity concerning her; and, ardently communicative by nature, she was frank with them, confident and undisturbed, until their child-like and importunate aggressiveness, and the brutal multiplicity of their questions drove her to reticence and shyness.

For what seemed to amaze them or excite them to unbelief or to jeers seemed to her ordinary, unremarkable, and not worthy of any particular notice – not even of her own.

That she sometimes saw things "around corners," as Jack put it, had seemed natural enough to her. That, now and then, she seemed to perceive things which nobody else noticed never disturbed her even when she became aware that other people were unable to see them. To her it was as though her own eyesight were normal, and astigmatism the rule among other people.

But the blunt, merciless curiosity of other children soon taught Athalie to be on her guard. She learned that embarrassed reserve which tended toward secretiveness and untruth before she was eleven.

And in school she learned to lie, learned to deny accusations of being different, pretended that what her sisters accused her of had been merely "stories" made up to amuse them.

So, in school, she made school-life endurable for herself. Yet, always, there seemed to be *something* between her and other children that made intimacies impossible.

At the same time she was conscious of the admiration of the boys, of something about herself that they liked outside of her athletic abilities.

She had a great many friends among the boys; she could out-run, out-jump, out-swim any of them in the big country school. She was supple and trim, golden-haired and dark-eyed, and ready for anything that required enterprise and activity of mind or body. Her ragged skirts were still short at eleven – short enough not to impede her. And she led the chase for pleasure all over that part of Long Island, running wild with the pack from hill to tide-water until every farmer in the district knew "the Greensleeve girl."

There was, of course, some devilry among cherry trees and apple orchards – some lawlessness born of sheer exuberance and superb health – some malicious trespassing, some harrying of unpopular neighbours. But not very much, considering.

Her home life was colourless, calm, comfortable, and uneventful as she regarded it. Business at the Hotel Greensleeve had fallen off and in reality the children had very little. But children at that age who live all day in the open, require little except sympathetic intelligence for their million daily questions.

This the Greensleeve children found wanting except when their mother did her best to stimulate her own latent intelligence for their sakes.

But it rested on the foundation of an old-fashioned and limited education. Only the polite, simpler, and more maidenly arts had been taught her in the little New Jersey school her father had kept. And her education ceased when she married Greensleeve, the ex-"professor" of penmanship, a kind, gentle, unimaginative man, unusually dull even for a teacher. And he was a failure even at that.

They began married life by buying the house they were now living in; and when Greensleeve also failed as a farmer, they opened the place as a public tavern, and took in Ledlie to finance it.

So it was to her mother that Athalie went for any information that her ardent and growing intellect required. And her mother, intuitively surmising the mind-hunger of youth, and its vigorous needs, did her limited best to satisfy it in her children. And that is really all the education they had; for what they got in the country school amounted to – well it amounted to what anybody ever gets in school.

Her most enduring, most vivid memories of her mother clustered around those summer days of her twelfth year, brief lamp-lit scenes between long, sunlit hours of healthy, youthful madness – quiet moments when she came in flushed and panting from the headlong chase after pleasure, tired, physically satisfied, to sit on the faded carpet at her mother's feet and clasp her hands over her mother's knees.

Then "what?" and "why?" and "when?" and "how?" were the burden of the child's eager speech. Nothing seemed to have escaped her quick ears or eyes, no natural phenomena of the open; life, birth, movement, growth, the flow, and ebb of tides, thunder pealing from high-piled clouds, the sun shining through fragrant falling rain, mists that grew over swamp and meadow.

And, "Why?" she always asked.

Nothing escaped her; – swallows skimming and sheering Spring Pond, trout that jumped at sunset, the quick furry shapes of mink and muskrat, the rattling flash of a blue-winged kingfisher, a tall heron wading, a gull mewing.

Nothing escaped her; the casual caress of mating birds, procreation in farm-yard and barn-yard, fledgelings crying from a robin's nest of mud and messy refuse, blind kittens tugging at their blinking mother.

Death, too, she saw, – a dusty heap of feathers here, a little mound of fur, there, which the idle breezes stirred under the high sky, – and once a dead dog, battered, filthy and bloody, shot by the roadside; and once some pigs being killed on a farm, all screaming.

Then, in that school as in every school, there was the sinister minority, always huddling in corners, full of mean silences and furtive leering. And their half-heard words, half-understood

phrases, – a gesture, a look that silenced and perplexed her – these the child brought also to her mother, sitting at her feet, face against her knees.

For a month or two her mother had not been very well, and the doctor who had brought Athalie into the world stopped in once or twice a week. When he was with her mother the children were forbidden the room.

One evening in particular Athalie remembered. She had been running her legs off playing hounds-and-hares across country from the salt-hay stacks to the chestnut ridge, and she had come in after sunset to find her mother sewing in her own bedroom, her brother and sisters studying their lessons in the sitting-room where her father also sat reading the local evening paper.

Supper was over, but Athalie went to the kitchen and presently returned to her mother's room carrying a bowl of bread and milk and half a pie.

Here on the faded carpet at her mother's feet, full in the lamplight she sat her down and ate in hungry silence while her mother sewed.

Athalie seldom studied. A glance at her books seemed to be enough for her. And she passed examinations without effort under circumstances where plodders would have courted disaster.

Rare questions from her mother, brief replies marked the meal. When she had satisfied her hunger she jumped up, ran downstairs with the empty dishes, and came slowly back again, – a slender, supple figure with tangled hair curling below her shoulders, dirty shirt-waist, soiled features and hands, and the ragged blue skirt of a sailor suit hanging to her knees.

"Your other sailor suit is washed and mended," said her mother, smiling at her child in tatters.

Athalie, her gaze remote, nodded absently. After a moment she lifted her steady dark blue eyes:

"A boy kissed me, mamma," she remarked, dropping cross-legged at her mother's feet.

"Don't kiss strange boys," said her mother quietly.

"I didn't. But why not?"

"It is not considered proper."

"Why?"

Her mother said: "Kissing is a common and vulgar practice except in the intimacy of one's own family."

"I thought so," nodded Athalie; "I soaked him for doing it."

"Who was he?"

"Oh, it was that fresh Harry Eldon. I told him if he ever tried to get fresh with me again I'd kill him... Mamma?"

"Yes?"

"All that about poor old Mr. Manners isn't true, is it?"

Her mother smiled. The children had been taught to leave a morsel on their plates "for manners"; and to impress it upon them their mother had invented a story about a poor old man named Manners who depended upon what they left, and who crept in to eat it after they had retired from table.

So leaving something "for Manners" had been thoroughly and successfully inculcated, until the habit was formed. And now Athalie was the last of the children to discover the gentle fraud practised upon her.

"I'm glad, anyway," concluded the child. "I never thought we left him enough to eat."

Her mother said: "I shall tell you only truths after this. You are old enough to understand reason, now, and to reason a little yourself."

"I do... But I am not yet perfectly sure where babies come from. You said you would tell me *that* some day. I'd really like to know, mamma."

Her mother continued to sew for a while, then, passing the needle through the hem she looked down at her daughter.

"Have you formed any opinion of your own?"

"Yes," said the child honestly.

"Then I'd better tell you the truth," said her mother tranquilly, "because the truth is very wonderful and beautiful – and interesting."

So she related to the child, very simply and clearly all that need be told concerning the mystery of life in its beginnings; and Athalie listened, enchanted.

And mostly it thrilled the child to realise that in her, too, lay latent a capability for the creation of life.

Another hour with her mother she remembered in after years.

Mrs. Greensleeve had not been as well: the doctor came oftener. Frequently Athalie returning from school discovered her mother lying on the bed. That evening the child was sitting on the floor at her mother's feet as usual, just inside the circle of lamplight, playing solitaire with an ancient pack of cards.

Presently something near the door attracted her attention and she lifted her head and sat looking at it, mildly interested, until, suddenly, she felt her mother's eyes on her, flushed hotly, and turned her head away.

"*What* were you looking at?" asked her mother in a low voice.

"Nothing, mamma."

"Athalie!"

"What, mamma?"

"*What* were you looking at?"

The child hung her head: "Nothing – " she began; but her mother checked her: "Don't lie, Athalie. I'll try to understand you. Now tell me what you were – what you thought you were looking at over there near the door."

The child turned and glanced back at the door over her shoulder.

"There is nothing there – now," she muttered.

"Was there anything?"

Athalie sat silent for a while, then she laid her clasped hands across her mother's knees and rested her cheek on them.

"There was a woman there," she said.

"Where?"

"Over by the door."

"You saw her, Athalie?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Did she open the door and come in and then close it behind her?"

"No."

"How did she come in?"

"I don't know. She – just came in."

"Was she a young woman?"

"No, old."

"Very old?"

"Not very. There was grey in her hair – a little."

"How was she dressed?"

"She wore a night-gown, mamma. There were spots on it – like medicine."

"Had you ever seen her before?"

"I think so."

"Who was she?"

"Mrs. Allen."

Her mother sat very still but her clasped hands tightened and a little of the colour faded from her cheeks. There was a Mrs. Allen who had been suffering from an illness which she herself was afraid she had.

"Do you mean Mrs. James Allen who lives on the old Allen farm?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, mamma."

In the morning they heard of Mrs. Allen's death. And it was several months before Mrs. Greensleeve again spoke to her daughter on the one subject about which Athalie was inclined to be most reticent. But that subject now held a deadly fascination for her mother.

They had been sitting together in Mrs. Greensleeve's bedroom; the mother knitting, in bed propped up upon the pillows. Athalie, cross-legged on a hassock beside her, was doing a little mending on her own account, when her mother said abruptly but very quietly:

"I have always known that you possess a power – which others cannot understand."

The child's face flushed deeply and she bent closer over her mending.

"I knew it when they first brought you to me, a baby just born... I don't know how I knew it, but I did."

Athalie, sewing steadily, said nothing.

"I think," said her mother, "you are, in some degree, what is called clairvoyant."

"What?"

"Clairvoyant," repeated her mother quietly. "It comes from the French, *clair*, clear; the verb *voir*, to see; *clair-voyant*, seeing clearly. That is all, Athalie... Nothing to be ashamed of – if it is true, – " for the child had dropped her work and had hidden her face in her hands.

"Dear, are you afraid to talk about it to your mother?"

"N-no. What is there to say about it?"

"Nothing very much. Perhaps the less said the better... I don't know, little daughter. I don't understand it – comprehend it. If it's so, it's so... I see you sometimes looking at things I cannot see; I know sometimes you hear sounds which I cannot hear... Things happen which perplex the rest of us; and, somehow I seem to know that they do not perplex you. What to us seems unnatural to you is natural, even a commonplace matter of course."

"That's it, mamma. I have never seen anything that did not seem quite natural to me."

"Did you know that Mrs. Allen had died when you – thought you saw her?"

"I did see her."

"Yes... Did you know she had died?"

"Not until I saw her."

"Did you know it then?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't know how I knew it. I seemed to know it."

"Did you know she had been ill?"

"No, mamma."

"Did it in any way frighten you – make you uneasy when you saw her standing there?"

"Why, no," said Athalie, surprised.

"Not even when you knew she was dead?"

"No. Why should it? Why should I be afraid?"

Her mother was silent.

"Why?" asked Athalie, curiously. "Is there anything to be afraid of with God and all his angels watching us? Is there?"

"No."

"Then," said the child with some slight impatience, "why is it that other people seem to be a little afraid of me and of what they say I can hear and see? I have good eyesight; I see clearly; that is all, isn't it? And there is nothing to frighten anybody in seeing clearly, is there?"

"No, dear."

"People make me so cross," continued Athalie, – "and so ashamed when they ask so many questions. What is there to be surprised at if sometimes I see things *inside* my mind. They are just as real as when I see them *outside*. They are no different."

Her mother nodded, encouragingly.

"When papa was in New York," went on Athalie, "and I saw him talking to some men in a hotel there, why should it be surprising just because papa was in New York and I was here when I saw him?"

"It surprises others, dear, because they cannot see what is beyond the vision of their physical senses."

Athalie said: "They tease me in school because they say I can see around corners. It makes me very cross and unhappy, and I don't want anybody to know that I see what they can't see. I'm ashamed to have them know it."

"Perhaps it is just as well you feel that way. People are odd. What they do not understand they ridicule. A dog that would not notice a horse-drawn vehicle will bark at an automobile."

"Mamma?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you know that dogs, and I think cats, too, see many things that I do; and that other people do not see."

"Why do you think so?"

"I have noticed it... The other evening when the white cat was dozing on your bed, and I was down here on the floor, sewing, I saw – something. And the cat looked up suddenly and saw it, too."

"Athalie!"

"She did, mamma. I knew perfectly well that she saw what I saw."

"What was it you saw?"

"Only a young man. He walked over to the window – "

"And then?"

"I don't know, mamma. I don't know where they go. They go, that's all I know."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know."

"Did he look at us?"

"Yes... He seemed to be thinking of something pleasant."

"Did he smile?"

"He – had a pleasant look... And once, – it was last Sunday – over by the bed I saw a little boy. He was kneeling down beside the bed. And Mr. Ledlie's dog was lying here beside me... Don't you remember how he suddenly lifted his head and barked?"

"Yes, I remember. But you didn't tell me why at the time."

"I didn't like to... I never like to speak about these – people – I see."

"Had you ever before seen the little boy?"

"No, mamma."

"Was he – alive – do you think?"

"Why, yes. They all are alive."

"Mrs. Allen was not alive when you saw her over by the door."

The child looked puzzled. "Yes," she said, "but that was a little different. Not *very* different. They are all perfectly alive, mamma."

"Even the ones we call dead? Are you sure of it?"

"Yes... Yes, I'm sure of it. They are not dead... Nothing seems to die. Nothing stays dead."

"What! Why do you believe that?"

Athalie said slowly: "Somebody shot and killed a poor little dog, once, – just across the causeway bridge... And the dog came into the garden afterward and ran all around, smelling, and wagging his tail."

"Athalie! Athalie! Be careful to control your imagination."

"Yes," said the child, thoughtfully, "I must be careful to control it. I can imagine almost anything if I try."

"How hard have you ever tried to imagine some of the things you see – or think you see?"

"Mamma, I never try. I – I don't care to see them. I'd rather not. Those things come. *I* haven't anything to do with it. I don't know these people, and I am not interested. I *did* try to see papa in New York – if you call that imagination."

But her mother did not know what to call it because at the hour when Athalie had seen him, that mild and utterly unimaginative man was actually saying and doing what his daughter had seen and heard.

"Also," said Athalie, "I *was* thinking about that poor little yellow dog and wondering whether he was past all suffering, when he came gaily trotting into the garden, waving his tail quite happily. There was no dust or blood on him. He rolled on the grass, too, and barked and barked. But nobody seemed to hear him or notice him excepting I."

For a long while silence reigned in the lamp-lit room. When the other children came in to say good night to their mother she received them with an unusual tenderness. They went away; Athalie rose, yawning the yawn of healthy fatigue:

"Good night, mamma."

"Good night, little daughter."

They kissed: the mother drew her into a sudden and almost convulsive embrace.

"Darling, are you sure that nothing really dies?"

"I have never seen anything really dead, mamma. Even the 'dead' birds, – why, the evening sky is full of them – the little 'dead' ones I mean – flock after flock, twittering and singing – "

"Dear!"

"Yes, mamma."

"When you see me —*that* way – will you – speak?"

"Yes."

"Promise, darling."

"Yes... I'll kiss you, too – if it is possible..."

"Would it be possible?"

The child gazed at her, perplexed and troubled: "I – don't – know," she said slowly. Then, all in a moment her childish face paled and she clung to her mother and began to cry.

And her mother soothed her, tenderly, smilingly, kissing the tears from the child's eyes.

The next morning after the children had gone to school Mrs. Greensleeve was operated on – without success.

CHAPTER III

THE black dresses of the children had become very rusty by spring, but business had been bad at the Hotel Greensleeve, and Athalie, Doris, and Catharine continued to wear their shabby mourning.

Greensleeve haunted the house all day long, roaming from bar to office, from one room to another, silently opening doors of unoccupied chambers to peer about in the dusty obscurity, then noiselessly closing them, he would slink away down the dim corridor to his late wife's room and sit there through the long sunny afternoon, his weak face buried in his hands.

Ledlie had grown fatter, redder of visage, whiter of hair and beard. When a rare guest arrived, or when local loafers wandered into the bar with the faint stench of fertilizer clinging to their boots, he shuffled ponderously from office to bar, serving as economically as he dared whoever desired to be served.

Always a sprig of something green protruded from his small tight mouth. His pale eyes, now faded almost colourless, had become weak and red-rimmed, and he blinked continually except in the stale semi-darkness of the house.

Always, now, he was muttering and grumbling his disapproval of the children – "Eatin' their heads off I tell you, Pete! What good is all this here schoolin' doin' 'em when they ought to git out some'rs an' earn their vittles?"

But if Greensleeve's attitude was one of passive acquiescence, he made no effort to withdraw the children from school. Once, when life was younger, and Jack, his first baby, came, he had dreamed of college for him, and of a career – in letters perhaps – something dignified, leisurely, profound beyond his own limits. And of a modest corner somewhere within the lustre of his son's environment where he and his wife, grey-haired, might dream and admire, finding there surcease from care and perhaps the peace which passes all understanding.

The ex-"professor" of penmanship had been always prone to dream. No dull and sordid reality, no hopeless sorrow had yet awakened him. Nor had his wife's death been more real than the half-strangled anguish of a dreamer, tossing in darkness. As for the children, they paid no more attention to Ledlie than they might have to a querulous but superannuated dog.

Jack, now fifteen, still dawdled at school, where his record was not good. Perhaps it was partly because he had no spending money, no clothing to maintain his boyish self-respect, no prospects of any sort, that he had become sullen, uncommunicative, and almost loutish.

Nobody governed him; his father was unqualified to control anybody or anything; his mother was dead.

With her death went the last vestige of any tie that had held the boy to the home anchorage – of any feeling of responsibility concerning the conduct expected and required of him.

He shirked his studies, came home only to eat and sleep, remained out late without explanation or any home interference, except for the constant disputes and quarrels with Doris and Catharine, now aged respectively fourteen and thirteen.

To Athalie he had little to say. Perhaps he did not realise it but he was slightly afraid of her. And it was from her that he took any pains at all to conceal his irregularities.

Once, coming in from school, she had found the house deserted, and Jack smelling of alcohol just slouching out of the bar.

"If you do that again I shall tell father," she said, horrified.

"What do I care!" he had retorted sullenly. And it was true; the boy no longer cared what anybody might think as long as Athalie already knew and detested what he had done.

There was a garage in the neighbouring village. He spent most of his time hanging around it. Sometimes he came home reeking of oil and gasoline, sometimes his breath was tainted with tobacco and alcohol.

He was so much bigger and older than Athalie that the child had never entirely lost her awe of him. His weakness of character, his failings, and the fact that he was a trifle afraid of her opinion, combined to astonish and bewilder her.

For a long while she tried to understand the gradual but certain reversal of their relations. And one night, still more or less in awe of him, she got out of bed and went softly into his room.

He was not asleep. The sudden apparition of his youngest sister considerably startled him, and he sat up in his ragged night-shirt and stared at her where she stood in the moonlight.

"You look like one of your own spooks!" he said. "What's the matter with you?"

"I wanted to talk with you, Jack."

"What about?"

"You."

For a moment he sat there eyeing her uneasily; then:

"Well, go ahead!" he said ungraciously; and stretched himself back on the pillows.

She came and seated herself on the bed's edge:

"Jack, please don't drink beer."

"Why not? Aw, what do you know about men, anyway? Don't they all smoke and drink?"

"Mamma asked you not to."

"Gee-whiz! I was a kid then. But a man isn't a baby."

Athalie sighed. Her brother eyed her restlessly, aware of that slight feeling of shame which always invaded his sullen, defiant discontent when he knew that he had lowered himself in her estimation.

For, if the boy was a little afraid of her, he also cared more for her than he ever had for any of the family except his mother.

He was only the average boy, stumbling blindly, almost savagely through the maze of adolescence, with no guide, nobody to warn or counsel him, nothing to stimulate his pride, no anchorage, no experience.

Whatever character he had he had been born with: it was environment and circumstance that were crippling it.

"See here, Athalie," he said, "you're a little girl and you don't understand. There isn't any harm in my smoking a cigarette or two or in drinking a glass of beer now and then."

"Isn't there, Jack?"

"No. So don't you worry, Sis... And, say! I'm not going back to school."

"What?"

"What's the use? I can't go to college. Anyway what's the good of algebra and physics and chemistry and history and all that junk? I guess I'll go into business."

"What business?"

"I don't know. I've been working around the garage. I can get a job there if I want it."

"Did you ask papa?"

"What's the use? He'll let me do what I please. I guess I'll start in to-morrow."

His father did not interfere when his only son came slouching up to inform him of his decision.

After Jack had gone away toward the village and his new business, his father remained seated on the shabby veranda, his head sunken on his soiled shirtfront, his wasted hands clasped over his stomach.

For a little while, perhaps, he remembered his earlier ambitions for the boy's career. Maybe they caused him pain. But if there was pain it faded gradually into the lethargy which had settled over him since his wife's death.

A grey veil seemed to have descended between him and the sun, – there was greyness everywhere, and dimness, and uncertainty – in his mind, in his eyesight – and sometimes the vagueness

was in his speech. He had noticed that – for, sometimes the word he meant to use was not the word he uttered. It had occurred a number of times, making foolish what he had said.

And Ledlie had glanced at him sharply once or twice out of his sore and faded eyes when Greensleeve had used some word while thinking of another.

When he was not wandering around the house he sat on the veranda in a great splint-bottomed arm-chair – a little untidy figure, more or less caved in from chest to abdomen, which made his short thin legs hanging just above the floor seem stunted and withered.

To him, here, came his daughters in their soiled and rusty black dresses, just out of school, and always stopping on impulse of sympathy to salute him with, "Hello, papa!" and with the touch of fresh, warm lips on his colourless cheek.

Sometimes they lingered to chatter around him, or bring out pie and cake to eat in his company. But very soon his gaze became remote, and the children understood that they were at liberty to go, which they did, dancing happily away into the outer sunshine, on pleasure bent – the matchless pleasures of the very young whose poverty has not as yet disturbed them.

As the summer passed the sunlight grew greyer to Peter Greensleeve. Also, more often, he mixed his words and made nonsense of what he said.

The pain in his chest and arms which for a year had caused him discomfort, bothered him at night, now. He said nothing about it.

That summer Doris had taken a course in stenography and typewriting, going every day to Brooklyn by train and returning before sunset.

When school began she asked to be allowed to continue. Catharine, too, desired to learn. And if their father understood very clearly what they wanted, it is uncertain. Anyway he offered no objections.

That winter he saw his son very seldom. Perhaps the boy was busy. Once or twice he came to ask his father for money, but there was none to give him, – very little for anybody – and Doris and Catharine required that.

Some little money was taken in at the Hotel Greensleeve; commercial men were rather numerous that winter: so were duck-hunters. Athalie often saw them stamping around in the bar, the lamplight glistening on their oil-skins and gun-barrels, and touching the silken plumage of dead ducks – great strings of them lying on the bar or on the floor.

Once when she came home from school earlier than usual, she went into the kitchen and found a hot peach turnover awaiting her, constructed for her by the slovenly cook, and kept hot by the still more slovenly maid-of-all-work – the only servants at the Hotel Greensleeve.

Sauntering back through the house, eating her turnover, she noticed Mr. Ledlie reading his newspaper in the office and her father apparently asleep on a chair before the stove.

There were half a dozen guests at the inn, duck-hunters from New York, but they were evidently still out with their bay-men.

Nibbling her pastry Athalie loitered along the hall and deposited her strapped books on a chair under the noisy wall-clock. Then, at hazard, she wandered into the bar. It was growing dusky; nobody had lighted the ceiling lamp.

At first she thought the room was empty, and had strolled over toward the stove to warm her snow-wet shoes, when all at once she became aware of a boy.

The boy was lying back on a leather chair, stockinged feet crossed, hands in his pocket, looking at her. He wore the leather shooting clothes of a duck-hunter; on the floor beside him lay his cap, oil-skins, hip-boots, and his gun. A red light from the stove fell across his dark, curly hair and painted one side of his face crimson.

Athalie, surprised, was not, however, in the least disturbed or embarrassed. She looked calmly at the boy, at the woollen stockings on his feet.

"Did you manage to get dry?" she asked in a friendly voice.

Then he seemed to come to himself. He took his hands from his pockets and got up on his stockinged feet.

"Yes, I'm dry now."

"Did you have any luck?"

"I got fifteen – counting shell-drake, two redheads, a black duck, and some buffle-heads."

"Where were you shooting?"

"Off Silver Shoal."

"Who was your bay-man?"

"Bill Nostrand."

"Why did you stop shooting so early?"

"Fifteen is the local limit this year."

Athalie nodded and bit into her turnover, reflectively. When she looked up, something in the boy's eye interested her.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

He looked embarrassed, then laughed: "Yes, I am."

"Wait; I'll get you a turnover," she said.

When she returned from the kitchen with his turnover he was standing. Rather vaguely she comprehended this civility toward herself although nobody had ever before remained standing for her.

Not knowing exactly what to do or say she silently presented the pastry, then drew a chair up into the red firelight. And the boy seated himself.

"I suppose you came with those hunters from New York," she said.

"Yes. I came with my father and three of his friends."

"They are out still I suppose."

"Yes. They went over to Brant Point."

"I've often sailed there," remarked Athalie. "Can you sail a boat?"

"No."

"It is easy... I could teach you if you are going to stay a while."

"We are going back to New York to-morrow morning... How did you learn to sail a boat?"

"Why, I don't know. I've always lived here. Mr. Ledlie has a boat. Everybody here knows how to manage a cat-boat... If you'll come down this summer I'll teach you. Will you?"

"I will if I can."

They were silent for a few minutes. It grew very dark in the bar-room, and the light from the stove glimmered redder and redder.

The boy and girl lay back in their chairs, lingering over their peach pastry, and inspecting each other with all the frank insouciance of childhood.

Athalie still wore the red hood and cloak which had represented her outer winter wardrobe for years. Her dull, thick gold hair curled crisply over the edges of the hood which framed in its oval the lovely features of a child in perfect health.

The boy, dark-haired and dark-eyed, gazed fascinated and unembarrassed at this golden blond visitor hooded and cloaked in scarlet.

"Does your father keep this hotel?" he asked after a pause.

"Yes. I am Athalie Greensleeve. What is your name?"

"C. Bailey, Junior."

"What is the C for?"

"Clive."

"Do you go to school?"

"Yes, but I'm back for the holidays."

"Holidays," she repeated vaguely. "Oh, that's so. Christmas will come day after to-morrow."

He nodded. "I think I'm going to have a new pair of guns, some books, and a horse. What do you expect?"

"Nothing," said Athalie.

"What? Isn't there anything you want?" And then, too late, some glimmer of the real state of affairs illuminated his boyish brain. And he grew red with embarrassment.

They had finished their pastry; Athalie wiped her hands on a soiled and ragged and crumpled handkerchief, then scrubbed her scarlet mouth.

"I'd like to come down here for the summer vacation," said the boy, awkwardly. "I don't know whether my mother would like it."

"Why? It is pleasant."

He glanced instinctively around him at the dark and shabby bar-room, but offered no reason why his mother might not care for the Hotel Greensleeve. One thing he knew; he meant to urge his mother to come, or to let him come.

A few minutes later the outer door banged open and into the bar came stamping four men and two bay-men, their oil-skins shining with salt-spray, guns glistening. Thud! went the strings of dead ducks on the floor; somebody scratched a match and lighted the ceiling lamp.

"Hello, Junior!" cried one of the men in oil-skins, – "how did you make out on Silver Shoals?"

"All right, father," he began; but his father had caught sight of Athalie who had risen to retreat.

"Who are you, young lady?" he inquired with a jolly smile, – "are you little Red-Riding Hood or the Princess Far Away, or perhaps the Sleeping Beauty recently awakened?"

"I'm Athalie Greensleeve."

"Lady Greensleeves! I *knew* you were somebody quite as distinguished as you are beautiful. Would you mind saying to Mr. Greensleeve that there is much moaning on the bar, and that it will still continue until he arrives to instil the stillness of the still – "

"What?"

"We merely want a drink, my child. Don't look so seriously and distractingly pretty. I was joking, that's all. Please tell your father how very thirsty we are."

As the child turned to obey, C. Bailey, Sr., put one big arm around her shoulders: "I didn't mean to tease you on such short acquaintance," he whispered. "Are you offended, little Lady Greensleeves?"

Athalie looked up at him in puzzled silence.

"Smile, just once, so I shall know I am forgiven," he said. "Will you?"

The child smiled confusedly, caught the boy's eye, and smiled again, most engagingly, at C. Bailey, Sr.'s, son.

"Oho!" exclaimed the senior Bailey laughingly and looking at his son, "I'm forgiven for your sake, am I?"

"For heaven's sake, Clive," protested one of the gunners, "let the little girl go and find her father. If I ever needed a drink it's now!"

So Athalie went away to summon her father. She found him as she had last noticed him, sitting asleep on the big leather office chair. Ledlie, behind the desk, was still reading his soiled newspaper, which he continued to do until Athalie cried out something in a frightened voice. Then he laid aside his paper, blinked at her, got up leisurely and shuffled over to where his partner was sitting dead on his leather chair.

The duck-hunters left that night. One after another the four gentlemen came over to speak to Athalie and to her sisters. There was some confusion and crowding in the hallway, what with the doctor, the undertaker's assistants, neighbours, and the New York duck-hunters.

Ledlie ventured to overcharge them on the bill. As nobody objected he regretted his moderation. However, the taking off of Greensleeve helped business in the bar where sooner or later everybody drifted.

When the four-seated livery wagon drove up to take the gunning party to the train, the boy lingered behind the others and then hurried back to where Athalie was standing, white-faced, tearless, staring at the closed door of the room where they had taken her father.

Bailey Junior's touch on her arm made her turn: "I am sorry," he said. "I hope you will not be very unhappy... And – here is a Christmas present – "

He took the dazed child's icy little hand in his, and, fumbling the business rather awkwardly, he finally contrived to snap a strap-watch over the delicate wrist. It was the one he had been wearing.

"Good-bye, Athalie," he murmured, very red.

The girl gazed at him out of her lovely confused eyes for a moment. But when she tried to speak no sound came.

"Good-bye," he said again, choking slightly. "I'll surely, surely come back to see you. Don't be unhappy. I'll come."

But it was many years before he returned to the Hotel Greensleeve.

CHAPTER IV

SHE was fifteen years old before she saw him again. His strap-watch was still on her wrist; his memory, unfaded, still enshrined in her heart of a child, for she was as yet no more than that at fifteen. And the moment she saw him she recognised him.

It was on the Sixth Avenue Elevated Station at Twenty-third Street one sunny day in April; he stood waiting for the downtown train which she stepped out of when it stopped.

He did not notice her, so she went over to him and called him by name; and the tall, good-looking, fashionably dressed young fellow turned to her without recognition.

But the next instant his smooth, youthful face lighted up, and off came his hat with the gay college band adorning it:

"Athalie Greensleeve!" he exclaimed, showing his pleasure unmistakably.

"C. Bailey, Junior," she rejoined as steadily as she could, for her heart was beating wildly with the excitement of meeting him and her emotions were not under full control.

"You have grown so," he said with the easy, boyish cordiality of his caste, "I didn't recognise you for a moment. Tell me, do you still live down – er – down there?"

She said:

"I knew you as soon as I set eyes on you. You are very much taller, too... No, we went away from Spring Pond the year after my father died."

"I see," he said sympathetically. And back into his memory flashed that scene with her by the stove in the dusky bar. And then he remembered her as she stood in her red hood and cloak staring at the closed door of the room where her dead father lay. And he remembered touching her frosty little hand, and the incident of the watch.

"I never went back there," he mused, half to himself, looking curiously at the girl before him. "I wanted to go – but I never did."

"No, you never came back," she said slowly.

"I couldn't. I was only a kid, you see. My mother wouldn't let me go there that summer. And father and I joined a club down South so we did not go back for the duck-shooting. That is how it happened."

She nodded, gravely, but said nothing to him about her faith in his return, how confidently, how patiently she had waited through that long, long summer for the boy who never returned.

"I did think of you often," he volunteered, smiling at her.

"I thought of you, too. I hoped you would come and let me teach you to sail a boat."

"That's so! I remember now. You were going to show me how."

"Have you learned to sail a boat?"

"No. I'll tell you what I'll do, Athalie, I'll come down this summer – "

"But I don't live there any more."

"That's so. Where do you live?"

She hesitated, and his eyes fell for the first time from her youthful and engaging face to the clothes she wore – black clothes that seemed cheap even to a boy who had no knowledge of feminine clothing. She was all in rusty black, hat, gloves, jacket and skirt; and the austere and slightly mean setting made the contrast of her hair and skin the more fresh and vivid.

"I live," she replied diffidently, "with my two sisters in West Fifty-fourth Street. I am stenographer and typewriter in the offices of a department store."

"I'd like to come to see you," he said impulsively. "Shall I – when vacation begins?"

"Are you still at school?"

He laughed: "I'm at Harvard. I'm down for Easter just now. Tell me, Athalie, would you care to have me come to see you when I return?"

"If you would care to come."

"I surely would!" he said cordially, offering his hand in adieu – "I want to ask you a lot of questions and we can talk over all those jolly old times," – as though years of comradeship lay behind them instead of an hour or two. Then his glance fell on the slim hand he was shaking, and he saw the strap-watch which he had given her still clasped around her wrist.

"You wear that yet? – that old shooting-watch of mine!" he laughed.

She smiled.

"I'll give you a better one than that next Christmas," he said, taking out a little notebook and pencil. "I'll write it down – 'strap-watch for Athalie Greensleeve next Christmas' – there it is! And – will you give me your address?"

She gave it; he noted it, closed his little Russia-leather book with a snap, and pocketed it.

"I'm glad I saw you," said the girl; "I hope you won't forget me. I am late; I must go – I suppose – "

"Indeed I won't forget you," he assured her warmly, shaking the slender black-gloved hand again.

He meant it when he said it. Besides she was so pretty and frank and honest with him. Few girls he knew in his own caste were as attractive; none as simple, as direct.

He really meant to call on her some day and talk things over. But days, and weeks, and finally months slipped away. And somehow, in thinking of her and of his promise, there now seemed very little left for them to talk about. After all they had said to each other nearly all there was to be said, there on the Elevated platform that April morning. Besides he had so many, many things to do; so many pleasures promised and accepted, visits to college friends, a fishing trip with his father, – really there seemed to be no hour in the long vacation unengaged.

He always wanted to see her when he thought of her; he really meant to find a moment to do it, too. But there seemed to be no moment suitable.

Even when he was back in Cambridge he thought about her occasionally, and planned, vaguely, a trip to New York so that he might redeem his promise to her.

He took it out in thinking.

At Christmas, however, he sent her a wrist-watch, a dainty French affair of gold and enamel; and a contrite note excusing himself for the summer delinquencies and renewing his promise to call on her.

The Dead Letter Office returned watch and letter.

CHAPTER V

THERE was a suffocating stench of cabbage in hallway and corridor as usual when Athalie came in that evening. She paused to rest a tired foot on the first step of the stairway, for a moment or two, quietly breathing her fatigue, then addressed herself to the monotonous labour before her, which was to climb five flights of unventilated stairs, let herself into the tiny apartment with her latch-key, and immediately begin her part in preparing the evening meal for three.

Doris, now twenty-one, sprawled on a lounge in her faded wrapper reading an evening paper. Catharine, a year younger, stood by a bureau, some drawers of which had been pulled out, sorting over odds and ends of crumpled finery.

"Well," remarked Doris to Athalie, as she came in, "what do *you* know?"

"Nothing," said Athalie listlessly.

Doris rattled the evening paper: "Gee!" she commented, "it's getting to be something fierce – all these young girls disappearing! Here's another – they can't account for it; her parents say she had no love affair – " And she began to read the account aloud while Catharine continued to sort ribbons and Athalie dropped into a big, shabby chair, legs extended, arms pendant.

When Doris finished reading she tossed the paper over to Athalie who let it slide from her knees to the floor.

"Her picture is there," said Doris. "She isn't pretty."

"Isn't she?" yawned Athalie.

Catharine jerked open another drawer: "It's always a man's doing. You bet they'll find that some fellow had her on a string. What idiots girls are!"

"I should worry," remarked Doris. "Any fresh young man who tries to get me jingled will wish he hadn't."

"Don't talk that way," remonstrated Athalie.

"What way?"

"That slangy way you think is smart. What's the use of letting down when you know better."

"What's the use of keeping up on fifteen per? I could do the Gladys to any Percy on fifty. My talk suits my wages – and it suits me, too... God! – I suppose it's fried ham again to-night," she added, jumping up and walking into the kitchenette. And, pausing to look back at her sisters: "If any Johnny asks me to-night I'll go! – I'm that hungry for real food."

"Don't be a fool," snapped Catharine.

Athalie glanced at the alarm clock, passed her hands wearily across her eyes, and rose: "It's after six, Doris. You haven't time for anything very much." And she went into the kitchenette.

Once or twice during the preparation of the meal Doris swore in her soft girlish voice, which made the contrast peculiarly shocking; and finally Athalie said bluntly: "If I didn't know you were straight I wouldn't think so from the way you behave."

Doris turned on her a flushed and angry face: "Will you kindly stop knocking me?"

"I'm not. I'm only saying that your talk is loose. And so it is."

"What's the difference as long as I'm not on the loose myself?"

"The difference is that men will think you are; that's all."

"Men mistake any girl who works for a living."

"Then see that the mistake is their fault not yours. I don't understand why a girl can't keep her self-respect even if she's a stenographer, as I am, or works in a shop as Catharine does, or in the theatre as you do. And if a girl talks loosely, she'll think loosely, sooner or later."

"Hurry up that supper!" called Catharine. "I'm going to a show with Genevieve, and I want time to dress."

Athalie, scrambling the eggs, which same eggs would endure no other mode of preparation, leaned over sideways and kissed Doris on her lovely neck.

"Darling," she said, "I'm not trying to be disagreeable; I only want us all to keep up."

"I know it, ducky. I guess you're right. I'll cut out that rough stuff if you like."

Athalie said: "It's only too easy to let down when you're thrown with careless and uneducated people as we are. I have to struggle against it all the while. For, somehow I seem to know that a girl who keeps up her grammar keeps up her self-respect, too. If you slouch mentally you slouch physically. And then it's not so difficult to slouch morally."

Doris laughed: "You funny thing! You certainly have educated yourself a lot since school, – you use such dandy English."

"I *read* good English."

"I know you do. I can't. If somebody would only write a rattling story in good English! – but I've got to have the story first of all or I can't read it. All those branch-library books you lug in are too slow for me. If it wasn't for hearing you talk every day I'd be talking like the rest of the chorus at the Egyptian Garden; – 'Sa-ay, ain't you done with my make-up box? Yaas, you *did* swipe it! I seen you. Who's a liar? All right, if you want to mix it – '"

"Don't!" pleaded Athalie. "Oh, Doris, I don't see why you can't find some other business – "

Doris began to strut about the kitchenette.

"Please don't! It makes me actually ill!"

"When I learn how to use my voice and my legs you'll see me playing leads. Here, ducky, I'll take the eggs – "

Athalie, her arms also full, followed her out to the table which Catharine had set very carelessly.

They drank Croton water and strong tea, and gravely discussed how, from their several limited wardrobes sufficient finery might be extracted to clothe Catharine suitably for her evening's entertainment.

"It's rotten to be poor," remarked the latter. "You're only young once, and this gosh-dinged poverty spoils everything for me."

"Quit kicking," said Doris. "I don't like these eggs but I'm eating them. If I were wealthy I'd be eating terrapin, wouldn't I?"

"Genevieve has a new gown for to-night," pouted Catharine. "How can I help feeling shabby and unhappy?"

"Genevieve seems to have a number of unaccountable things," remarked Doris, partly closing her velvet eyes. "She has a fur coat, too."

"Doris! That isn't square of you!"

"That isn't the question. Is Genevieve on the square? That's what worries me, Kit!"

"What a perfectly rotten thing to say!" insisted Catharine resentfully. "You know she's on the level!"

"Well then, *where* does she get it? You know what her salary is?"

Athalie said, coolly: "Every girl ought to believe every other girl on the square until the contrary is proven. It's shameful not to."

"Come over to the Egyptian Garden and try it!" laughed Doris. "If you can believe that bunch of pet cats is on the square you can believe anything, Athalie."

Catharine, still very deeply offended, rose and went into the bedroom which she shared with Doris. Presently she called for somebody to assist her in dressing.

Doris, being due at the theatre by seven o'clock, put on her rusty coat and hat, and, nodding to Athalie, walked out; and the latter went away to aid Catharine.

"You *do* look pretty," she insisted after Catharine had powdered her face and neck and had wiped off her silky skin with the chamois rag.

The girl gazed at her comely, regular features in the mirror, patted her hair, moistened her red lips, then turned her profile and gazed at it with the aid of a hand-glass.

"Who else is going?" inquired Athalie.

"Some friends of Genevieve's."

"Men?"

"I believe so."

"Two, I suppose."

Catharine nodded.

"Don't you know their names?"

"No. Genevieve says that one of them is crazy to meet me."

"Where did he see you?"

"At Winton's. I put on some evening gowns for his sister."

Athalie watched her pin on her hat, then held her coat for her. "They'll all bear watching," she remarked quietly. "If it's merely society they want you know as well as I that they seek it in their own circles, not in ours."

Catharine made no audible response. She began to re-pin her hat, then, pettishly: "I wish I had a taxi to call for me so I needn't wear a hat!"

"Why not wish for an automobile?" suggested Athalie, laughing. "Women who have them don't wear hats to the theatre."

"It *is* tough to be poor!" insisted Catharine fiercely. "It drives me almost frantic to see what I see in all those limousines, – and then walk home, or take a car if I'm flush."

"How are you going to help it, dear?" inquired Athalie in that gently humorous voice which usually subdued and shamed her sisters.

But Catharine only mumbled something rebellious, turned, stared at herself in the glass, and walked quickly toward the door.

"As for me," she muttered. "I don't blame any girl –"

"What?"

But Catharine marched out with a twitch of her narrow skirts, still muttering incoherencies.

Athalie, thoughtful, but not really disturbed, went into the empty sitting-room, picked up the evening paper, glanced absently at the head-lines, dropped it, and stood motionless in the centre of the room, one narrow hand bracketed on her hip, the other pinching her under lip.

For a few minutes she mused, then sighing, she walked into the kitchenette, unhooked a blue-checked apron, rolled up her sleeves as far as her white, rounded arms permitted, and started in on the dishes.

Occasionally she whistled at her task – the clear, soft, melodious whistle of a bullfinch – carolling some light, ephemeral air from the "Review" at the Egyptian Garden.

When the crockery was done, dried and replaced, she retired to her bedroom and turned her attention to her hands and nails, minutely solicitous, always in dread of the effects of housework.

There was an array of bottles, vials, jars, lotions, creams, scents on her bureau. She seated herself there and started her nightly grooming, interrupting it only to exchange her street gown and shoes for a dainty negligée and slippers.

Her face, now, as she bent over her slender, white fingers, took on a seriousness and gravity more mature; and there was in its pure, fresh beauty something almost austere.

The care of her hands took her a long time; and they were not finished then, for she had yet her bath to take and her hair to do before the cream-of-something-or-other was applied to hands and feet so that they should remain snowy and satin smooth.

Bathed, and once more in negligée, she let down the dull gold mass of hair which fell heavily curling to her shoulders. Then she started to comb it out as earnestly, seriously, and thoroughly as a beautiful, silky Persian cat applies itself to its toilet.

But there was now an absent expression in her dark blue eyes as she sat plaiting the shining gold into two thick and lustrous braids.

Perhaps she wondered, vaguely, why the spring-tide and freshness of a girl's youth should exhale amid the sere and sordid circumstances which made up, for her, the sum-total of existence; why it happened that whatever was bright and gay and attractive in the world should be so utterly outside the circle in which her life was passing.

Yet in her sober young face there was no hint of discontent, nothing of meanness or envy to narrow the blue eyes, nothing of bitterness to touch the sensitive lips, nothing, even, of sadness; only a gravity – like the seriousness of a youthful goddess musing alone on mysteries unexplained even on Olympus.

Seven years' experience in earning her own living had made her wiser but had not really disenchanted her. And for seven years now, she had held the first position she secured in New York – stenographer and typist for Wahlbaum, Grossman & Co.

It had been perplexing and difficult at first; so many men connected with the great department store had evinced a desire to take her to luncheon and elsewhere. But when at length by chance she took personal dictation from Wahlbaum himself in his private office – his own stenographer having triumphantly secured a supporting husband, and a general alarm having been sent out for another to replace her – Athalie suddenly found herself in a permanent position. And, automatically, all annoyances ceased.

Wahlbaum was a Jew, big, hearty, honest, and keen as a razor. Never was he in a hurry, never flustered or impatient, never irritable. And she had never seen him angry, or rude to anybody. He laughed a great deal in a tremendously resonant voice, smoked innumerable big, fat, light-coloured cigars, never neglected to joke with Athalie when she came in the morning and when she left at night, and never as much as by the flutter of an eyelid conveyed to her anything that any girl might not hear without offence.

Grossman's reputation was different, but except for a smirk or two he had never bothered her. Nor did anybody else connected with the firm. They all were too much afraid of Wahlbaum.

So, except for the petty, contemptible annoyances to which all young girls are more or less subjected in any cosmopolitan metropolis, Athalie had found business agreeable enough except for the confinement.

That was hard on a country-bred girl; and she could scarcely endure the imprisonment when the warm sun of April looked in through the windows of Mr. Wahlbaum's private office, and when soft breezes stirred the curtains and fluttered the papers on her desk.

Always in the spring the voice of brook and surf, of woodland and meadow called to her. In her ears was ever the happy tumult of the barn-yard, the lowing of cattle at the bars, the bleat of sheep. And her heart beat passionate response.

Athalie was never ill. The nearest she came to it was a dull feeling of languor in early spring. But it did not even verge on either resentment or despondency.

In winter it was better. She had learned to accept with philosophy the noises of the noisiest of cities. Even, perhaps, she rather liked them, or at least, on her two weeks' vacation in the country, she found, to her surprise, that she missed the accustomed and incessant noises of New York.

Her real hardships were two; poverty and loneliness.

The combined earnings of herself and her sisters did not allow them a better ventilated, or more comfortable apartment than the grimy one they lived in. Nor did their earnings permit them more or better clothing and food.

As for loneliness, she had, of course, her sisters. But healthy, imaginative, ardent youth requires more than sisters, – more even than feminine friends, of which Athalie had a few. What she needed, as all girls need, were acquaintances and friends among men of her own age.

And she had none – that is, no friends. Which is the usual fate of any business girl who keeps up such education and cultivation as she possesses, and attempts to add to it and to improve her quality.

Because the men of her social and business level are vastly inferior to the women, – inferior in manners, cultivation, intelligence, quality – which seems almost to make their usually excellent morals peculiarly offensive.

That was why Athalie knew loneliness. Doris, recently, had met a few idle men of cultivated and fashionable antecedents. Catharine, that very evening, was evidently going to meet a man of that sort for the first time in her career.

As for Athalie, she had had no opportunity to meet any man she cared to cultivate since she had last talked with C. Bailey, Jr., on the platform of the Sixth Avenue Elevated; – and that was now nearly four years ago.

Braiding up her hair she sat gazing at herself in the mirror while her detached thoughts drifted almost anywhere – back to Spring Pond and the Hotel Greensleeve, back to her mother, to the child cross-legged on the floor, – back to her father, and how he sat there dead in his leather chair; – back to the bar, and the red gleam of the stove, and a boy and girl in earnest conversation there in the semi-darkness, eating peach turnovers —

She turned her head, leisurely: the electric bell had sounded twice before she realised that she ought to pull the wire which opened the street door below.

So she got up, pulled the wire, and then sauntered out into the sitting-room and set the door ajar, not worrying about her somewhat intimate costume because it was too late for tradesmen, and there was nobody else to call on her or on her sisters excepting other girls known to them all.

The sitting-room seemed chilly. Half listening for the ascending footsteps and the knocking, partly absorbed in other thoughts, she seated herself and lay back in the dingy arm-chair, before the radiator, elevating her dainty feet to the top of it and crossing them.

A gale was now blowing outside; invisible rain, or more probably sleet, pelted and swished across the curtained panes. Far away in the city, somewhere, a fire-engine rushed clanging through cañons, storm-swept, luminously obscure. Her nickel alarm clock ticked loudly in the room; the radiator clicked and fizzed and snapped.

Presently she heard a step on the stair, then in the corridor outside her door. Then came the knocking on the door but unexpectedly loud, vigorous and impatient.

And Athalie, surprised, twisted around in her chair, looking over her shoulder at the door.

"Please come in," she said in her calm young voice.

CHAPTER VI

A RATHER tall man stepped in. He wore a snow-dusted, fur-lined overcoat and carried in his white-gloved hands a top hat and a silver-hooked walking stick.

He had made a mistake, of course; and Athalie hastily lowered her feet and turned half around in her chair again to meet his expected apologies; and then continued in that attitude, rigid and silent.

"Miss Greensleeve?" he asked.

She rose, mechanically, the heavy lustrous braids framing a face as white as a flower.

"Is that *you*, Athalie!" he asked, hesitating.

"C. Bailey, Junior," she said under her breath.

There was a moment's pause, then he stepped toward her and, very slowly, she offered a hand still faintly fragrant with "cream of lilacs."

A damp, chilly wind came from the corridor; she went over and closed the door, stood for a few seconds with her back against it looking at him.

Now under the mask of manhood she could see the boy she had once known, – under the short dark moustache the clean-cut mouth unchanged. Only his cheeks seemed firmer and leaner, and the eyes were now the baffling eyes of a man.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked, quite unconscious of her own somewhat intimate attire, so entirely had the shock of surprise possessed her.

"Athalie, you have not changed a bit – only you are so much prettier than I realised," he said illogically... "How did I know you lived here? I didn't until we bought this row of flats last week – my father's company – I'm in it now... And glancing over the list of tenants I saw your name."

She said nothing.

"Do you mind my coming? I was going to write and ask you. But walking in this way rather appealed to me. Do you mind?"

"No."

"May I stay and chat for a moment? I'm on my way to the opera. May I stay a few minutes?"

She nodded, not yet sufficiently composed to talk very much.

He glanced about him for a place to lay coat and hat; then slipping out of the soft fur, disclosed himself in evening dress.

She had dropped into the arm-chair by the radiator; and, as he came forward, stripping off his white gloves, suddenly she became conscious of her bare, slippered feet and drew them under the edges of her negligée.

"I was not expecting anybody, – " she began, and checked herself. Certainly she did not care to rise, now, and pass before him in search of more suitable clothing. Therefore the less said the better.

He had found a rather shaky chair, and had drawn it up in front of the radiator.

"This is very jolly," he said. "Do you realise that this is our third encounter?"

"Yes."

"It really begins to look inevitable, doesn't it?"

She smiled.

"Three times, you know, is usually considered significant," he added laughingly. "It doesn't dismay you, does it?"

She laughed, resting her cheek against the upholstered wing of her chair and looked at him with shy but undisguised pleasure.

"You haven't changed a single bit, Athalie," he declared.

"No, I haven't changed."

"Do you remember our last meeting – on the Elevated?"

"Yes."

"Lord!" he said; "that was four years ago. Do you realise it?"

"Yes."

A slight colour grew on his cheeks.

"I *was* a piker, wasn't I?"

After a moment, looking down at her idly clasped hands lying on her knees: "I hoped you would come," she said gravely.

"I wanted to. I don't suppose you'll believe that; but I did... I don't know how it happened that I didn't make good. There were so many things to do, all sorts of engagements, – and the summer vacation seemed ended before I could understand that it had begun." – He scowled in retrospection, and she watched his expression out of her dark blue eyes – clear, engaging eyes, sweet as a child's.

"That's no excuse," he concluded. "I should have kept my word to you – and I really wanted to... And I was not quite such a piker as you thought me."

"I didn't think that of you, C. Bailey, Junior."

"You must have!"

"I didn't."

"That's because you're so decent, but it makes my infamy the blacker... Anyway I *did* write you and *did* send you the strap-watch. I sent both to Fifty-fourth Street. The Dead Letter Office returned them to me."... He drew from his inner pocket a letter and a packet. "Here they are."

She sat up slowly and very slowly took the letter from his hand.

"Four years old," he commented. "Isn't that the limit?" And he began to tear the sealed paper from the packet.

"What a shame," he went on contritely, "that you wore that old gun-metal watch of mine so long. I was mortified when I saw it on your wrist that day – "

"I wear it still," she said with a smile.

"Nonsense!" he glanced at her bare wrist and laughed.

"I *do*," she insisted. "It is only because I have just bathed and am prepared for the night that I am not wearing it now."

He looked up, incredulous, then his expression changed subtly.

"Is that so?" he asked.

But the hint of seriousness confused her and she merely nodded.

He had freed the case from the sealed paper and now he laid it on her knees, saying: "Thank the Lord I'm not such a piker now as I was, anyway. I hope you'll wear it, Athalie, and fire that other affair out of your back window."

"There is no back window," she said, raising her charming eyes to his, – "there's only an air-shaft... Am I to open it? – I mean this case?"

"It is yours."

She opened it daintily.

"Oh, C. Bailey, Junior!" she said very gently. "You mustn't do this!"

"Why?"

"It's *too* beautiful. Isn't it?"

"Nonsense, Athalie. Here, I'll wind it and set it for you. This is how it works – " pulling out the jewelled lever and setting it by the tin alarm-clock on the mantel. Then he wound it, unclasped the woven gold wrist-band, took her reluctant hand, and, clasping the jewel over her wrist, snapped the catch.

For a few moments her fair head remained bent as she gazed in silence at the tiny moving hands. Then, looking up:

"Thank you, C. Bailey, Junior," she said, a little solemnly perhaps.

He laughed, somewhat conscious of the slight constraint: "You're welcome, Athalie. Do you really like it?"

"It is wonderfully beautiful."

"Then I'm perfectly happy and contented – or I will be when you read that letter and admit I'm not as much of a piker as I seemed."

She laughed and coloured: "I never thought that of you. I only – missed you."

"Really?"

"Yes," she said innocently.

For a second he looked rather grave, then again, conscious of his own constraint, spoke gaily, lightly:

"You certainly are the real thing in friendship. You are far too generous to me."

She said: "Incidents are not frequent enough in my life to leave me unimpressed. I never knew any other boy of your sort. I suppose that is why I never forgot you."

Her simplicity pricked the iridescent and growing bubble of his vanity, and he laughed, discountenanced by her direct explanation of how memory chanced to retain him. But it did not occur to him to ask himself how it happened that, in all these years, and in a life so happily varied, so delightfully crowded as his own had always been, he had never entirely forgotten her.

"I wish you'd open that letter and read it," he said. "It's my credential. Date and postmark plead for me."

But she had other plans for its unsealing and its perusal, and said so.

"Aren't you going to read it, Athalie?"

"Yes – when you go."

"Why?"

"Because – it will make your visit seem a little longer," she said frankly.

"Athalie, are you really glad to see me?"

She looked up as though he were jesting, and caught in his eye another gleam of that sudden seriousness which had already slightly confused her. For a moment only, both felt the least sense of constraint, then the instinct that had forbidden her to admit any significance in his seriousness, parted her lips with that engaging smile which he had begun to know so well, and to await with an expectancy that approached fascination.

"Peach turnovers," she said. "Do you remember? If I had not been glad to see you in those days I would not have gone into the kitchen to bring you one... And I have already told you that I am unchanged... Wait! I am changed... I am very much wealthier." And she laughed her delicious, unembarrassed laugh of a child.

He laughed, too, then shot a glance around the shabby room.

"What are you doing, Athalie?" he asked lightly.

"The same."

"I remember you told me. You are stenographer and typist."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I am with Wahlbaum, Grossman & Co."

"Are they decent to you?"

"Very."

He thought a moment, hesitated, appeared as though about to speak, then seemed to reject the idea whatever it might have been.

"You live with your sisters, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

He planted his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, his head on his hands, apparently buried in thought.

After a little while: "C. Bailey, Junior," she ventured, "you must not let me keep you too long."

"What?" He lifted his head.

"You are on your way to the opera, aren't you?"

"Am I? That's so... I'd rather stay here if you'll let me."

"But the *opera*!" she protested with emphasis.

"What do I care for the opera?"

"Don't you?"

He laughed: "No; do you?"

"I'm mad about it."

Still laughing he said: "Then, in my place, *you* wouldn't give up the opera for *me*, would you, Athalie?"

She started to say "No!" very decidedly; but checked herself. Then, deliberately honest:

"If," she began, "I were going to the opera, and you came in here – after four years of not seeing you – and if I had to choose – I don't believe I'd go to the opera. But it would be a dreadful wrench, C. Bailey, Junior!"

"It's no wrench to me."

"Because you often go."

"Because, even if I seldom went there could be no question of choice between the opera and Athalie Greensleeve."

"C. Bailey, Junior, you are not honest."

"Yes, I am. Why do you say so?"

"I judge by past performances," she said, her humorous eyes on him.

"Are you going to throw past performances in my face every time I come to see you?"

"Are you coming again?"

"That isn't generous of you, Athalie – "

"I really mean it," said the girl. "Are you?"

"Coming here? Of course I am if you'll let me!"

The last time he had said, "If you *want* me." Now it was modified to "If you'll *let* me," – a development and a new footing to which neither were yet accustomed, perhaps not even conscious of.

"C. Bailey, Junior, do you want to come?"

"I do indeed. It is so bully of you to be nice to me after – everything. And it's so jolly to talk over – things – with you."

She leaned forward in her chair, her pretty hands joined between her knees.

"Please," she said, "don't say you'll come if you are not coming."

"But I am – "

"I know you said so twice before... I don't mean to be horrid or to reproach you, but – I am going to tell you – I was disappointed – even a – a little – unhappy. And it – lasted – some time... So, if you are not coming, tell me so now... It is hard to wait – too long."

"Athalie," he said, completely surprised by the girl's frank avowal and by the unsuspected emotion in himself which was responding, "I am – I had no idea – I don't deserve your kindness to me – your loyalty – I'm a – I'm a – a pup! That's what I am – an undeserving, ungrateful, irresponsible, and asinine pup! That's what all boys in college are – but it's no excuse for not keeping my word – for making you unhappy – "

"C. Bailey, Junior, you were just a boy. And I was a child... I am still, in spite of my nineteen years – nearly twenty at that – not much different, not enough changed to know that I'm a woman. I feel exactly as I did toward you – not grown up, – or that you have grown up... Only I know, somehow, I'd have a harder time of it now, if you tell me you'll come, and then – "

"I *will* come, Athalie! I *want* to," he said impetuously. "You're more interesting, – a lot jollier, – than any girl I know. I always suspected it, too – the bigger fool I to lose all that time we might have had together – "

She, surprised for a moment, lifted her pretty head and laughed outright, checking his somewhat impulsive monologue. And he looked at her, disturbed.

"I'm only laughing because you speak of all those years we might have had together, as though – " And suddenly she checked herself in her turn, on the brink of saying something that was not so funny after all.

Probably he understood what impulse had prompted her to terminate abruptly both laughter and discourse, for he reddened and gazed rather fixedly at the radiator which was now clanking and clinking in a very noisy manner.

"You ought to have a fireplace and an open fire," he said. "It's the cosiest thing on earth – with a cat on the hearth and a big chair and a good book... Athalie, do you remember that stove? And how I sat there in wet shooting clothes and stockinged feet?"

"Yes," she said, drawing her own bare ones further under her chair.

"Do you know what you looked like to me when you came in so silently, dressed in your red hood and cloak?"

"What did I look like?"

"A little fairy princess."

"I? In that ragged cloak?"

"I didn't see the rags. All I saw was your lithe little fairy figure and your yellow hair and your wonderful dark eyes in the ruddy light from the stove. I tell you, Athalie, I was enchanted."

"How odd! I never dreamed you thought that of me when I stood there looking at you, utterly lost in admiration – "

"Oh, come, Athalie!" he laughed; "you are getting back at me!"

"It's true. I thought you the most wonderful boy I had ever seen."

"Until I disillusioned you," he said.

"You never did, C. Bailey, Junior."

"What! Not when I proved a piker?"

But she only smiled into his amused and challenging eyes and slowly shook her head.

Once or twice, mechanically, he had slipped a flat gold cigarette case from his pocket, and then, mechanically still, had put it back. Not accustomed to modern men of his caste she had not paid much attention to the unconscious hint of habit. Now as he did it again it occurred to her to ask him why he did not smoke.

"May I?"

"Yes. I like it."

"Do you smoke?"

"No – now and then when I'm troubled."

"Is that often?" he asked lightly.

"Very seldom," she replied, amused; "and the proof is that I never smoked more than half a dozen cigarettes in all my life."

"Will you try one now?" he asked mischievously.

"I'm not in trouble, am I?"

"I don't know. *I* am."

"What troubles you, C. Bailey, Junior?" she asked, humorously.

"My disinclination to leave. And it's after eleven."

"If you never get into any more serious trouble than that," she said, "I shall not worry about you."

"Would you worry if I were in trouble?"

"Naturally."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you are my friend. Why shouldn't I worry?"

"Do you really take our friendship as seriously as that?"

"Don't *you*?"

He changed countenance, hesitated, flicked the ashes from his cigarette. Suddenly he looked her straight in the face:

"Yes. I *do* take it seriously," he said in a voice so quietly and perhaps unnecessarily emphatic that, for a few moments, she found nothing to say in response.

Then, smilingly: "I am glad you look at it that way. It means that you will come back some day."

"I will come to-morrow if you'll let me."

Which left her surprised and silent but not at all disquieted.

"Shall I, Athalie?"

"Yes – if you wish."

"Why not?" he said with more unnecessary emphasis and as though addressing himself, and perhaps others not present. "I see no reason why I shouldn't if you'll let me. Do you?"

"No."

"May I take you to dinner and to the theatre?"

A quick glow shot through her, leaving a sort of whispering confusion in her brain which seemed full of distant voices.

"Yes, I'd like to go with you."

"That's fine! And we'll have supper afterward."

She smiled at him through the ringing confusion in her brain.

"Do you mind taking supper with me after the play?"

"No."

"Where then?"

"Anywhere – with you, C. Bailey, Junior."

Things began to seem to her a trifle unreal; she saw him a little vaguely: vaguely, too, she was conscious that to whatever she said he was responding with something more subtly vital than mere words. Faintly within her the instinct stirred to ignore, to repress something in him – in herself – she was not clear about just what she ought to repress, or which of them harboured it.

One thing confused and disturbed her; his tongue was running loose, planning all sorts of future pleasures for them both together, confidently, with an enthusiasm which, somehow, seemed to leave her unresponsive.

"Please don't," she said.

"What, Athalie?"

"Make so many promises – plans. I – am afraid of promises."

He turned very red: "What on earth have I done to you!"

"Nothing – yet."

"Yes I have! I once made you unhappy; I made you distrust me –"

"No: – that is all over now. Only – if it happened again – I should really – miss you – very much – C. Bailey, Junior... So don't promise me too much – now... Promise a little – each time you come – if you care to."

In the silence that grew between them the alarm went off with a startling clangour that brought them both to their feet.

It was midnight.

"I set it to wake myself before my sisters came in," she explained with a smile. "I usually have something prepared for them to eat when they've been out."

"I suppose they do the same for you," he said, looking at her rather steadily.

"I don't go out in the evening."

"You do sometimes."

"Very seldom... Do you know, C. Bailey, Junior, I have never been out in the evening with a man?"

"What?"

"Never."

"Why?"

"I suppose," she admitted with habitual honesty, "it's because I don't know any men with whom I'd care to be seen in the evening. I don't like ordinary people."

"How about me?" he asked, laughing.

She merely smiled.

CHAPTER VII

DORIS came in about midnight, her coat and hat plastered with sleet, her shoes soaking. She looked rather forlornly at the bowl of hot milk and crackers which Athalie brought from the kitchenette.

"I'd give next week's salary for a steak," she said, taking the bowl and warming her chilled hands on it.

"You know what meat costs," said Athalie. "I'd give it to you for supper if I could."

Doris seated herself by the radiator; Athalie knelt and drew off the wet shoes, unbuttoned the garters and rolled the stockings from the icy feet.

"I had another chance to-night: they were college boys: some of the girls went – " remarked Doris disjointedly, forcing herself to eat the crackers and milk because it was hot, and snuggling into the knitted slippers which Athalie brought. After a moment or two she lifted her pretty, impudent face and sniffed inquiringly.

"Who's been smoking? You?"

"No."

"Who? Genevieve?"

"No. Who do you suppose called?"

"Search *me*."

"C. Bailey, Junior!"

Doris looked blank, then: "Oh, that boy you had an affair with about a hundred years ago?"

"That same boy," said Athalie, smiling.

"He'll come again next century I suppose – like a comet," shrugged Doris, nestling closer to the radiator.

Athalie said nothing; her sister slowly stirred the crackers in the milk and from time to time took a spoonful.

"Next time," she said presently, "I shall go out to supper when an attractive man asks me. I know how to take care of myself – and the supper, too."

Athalie started to say something, and stopped. Perhaps she remembered C. Bailey, Jr., and that she had promised to dine and sup with him, "anywhere."

She said in a low voice: "It's all right, I suppose, if you know the man."

"I don't care whether I know him or not as long as it's a good restaurant."

"Don't talk that way, Doris!"

"Why not? It's true."

There was a silence. Doris set aside the empty bowl, yawned, looked at the clock, yawned again.

"This is too late for Catharine," she said, drowsily.

"I know it is. Who are the people she's with?"

"Genevieve Hunting – I don't know the men: – some of Genevieve's friends."

"I hope it's nobody from Winton's."

There had been in the Greensleeve family, a tacit understanding that it was not the thing to accept social attentions from anybody connected with the firm which employed them. Winton, the male milliner and gown designer, usually let his models alone, being in perpetual dread of his wife; but one of the unhealthy looking sons had become a nuisance to the girls employed there. Recently he had annoyed Catharine, and the girl was afraid she might have to lunch with him or lose her position.

Doris yawned again, then shivered.

"Go to bed, ducky," said Athalie. "I'll wait up for Catharine."

So Doris took herself off to bed and Athalie sank into the shabby arm-chair by the radiator to wait for her other sister.

It was two o'clock when she came in, flushed, vague-eyed, a rather silly and fixed smile on her doll-like face. Athalie, on the verge of sleep, rose from her chair, rubbing her eyes:

"What on earth, Catharine – "

"We had supper, – that's why I'm late... I've got to have a dinner gown I tell you. Genevieve's is the smartest thing – "

"Where did you go?"

"To the Regina. I didn't want to – dressed this way but Cecil Reeve said – "

"Who?"

"Cecil – Mr. Reeve – one of Genevieve's friends – the man who was so crazy to meet me – "

"Oh! Who else was there?" asked Athalie drily.

"A Mr. Ferris – Harry Ferris they call him. He's quite mad about Genevieve – "

"Why did you drink anything?"

"I?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"I had a glass of champagne."

"What else?"

"Nothing – except something pink in a glass – before we sat down to supper... And something violet coloured, afterward."

"Your breath is dreadful; do you realise it?"

Catharine seemed surprised, then her eyes wandered vaguely, drowsily, and she laid her gloved hand on Athalie's arm as though to steady herself.

"What sort of man is your new friend, Cecil Reeve?" inquired Athalie.

"He's nice – a gentleman. And they were so amusing; – we laughed so much... I told him he might call... He's really all right, Athalie – "

"And Mr. Ferris?"

"Well – I don't know about him; he's Genevieve's friend; – I don't know him so well... But of course he's all right – a gentleman – "

"That's the trouble," said Athalie in a low voice.

"What is the trouble?"

"These friends of yours – and of Doris, and of mine ... they're gentlemen... And that is why we find them agreeable, socially... But when they desire social amusement they know where to find it."

"Where?"

"Where girls who work for a living are unknown. Where they never are asked, never go, never are expected to go. But that is where such men are asked, where such men are expected; and it is where they go for social diversion – not to the Regina with two of Winton's models, nor to the Café Arabesque with an Egyptian Garden chorus girl, nor – " she hesitated, flushed, and was silent, staring mentally at the image of C. Bailey, Jr., which her logic and philosophy had inevitably evoked.

"Then, what is a business girl to do?" asked Catharine, vaguely.

Athalie shook her golden head, slowly: "Don't ask me."

Catharine said, still more vaguely: "She must do something – pleasant – before she's too old and sick to – to care what happens."

"I know it... Men, of that kind, *are* pleasant... I don't see why we shouldn't go out with them. It's all the chance we have. Or will ever have... I've thought it over. I don't see that it helps for us to resent their sisters and mothers and friends. Such women would never permit us to know them. The nearest we can get to them is to know their sons."

"I don't want to know them – "

"Yes, you do. Be honest, Catharine. Every girl does. And really I believe if the choice were offered a business girl, she would rather know the mothers and sisters than the sons."

"There's no use thinking about it," said Catharine.

"No, there is no use... And so I don't see any harm in being friends with their sons... It will hurt at times – humiliate us – maybe embitter us... But it's that or nothing."

"We needn't be silly about their sons."

Athalie opened her dark blue eyes, then laughed confidently: "Oh, as for anything like *that*! I should hope not. We three ought to know *something* by this time."

"I should think so," murmured Catharine; and her warm, wine-scented breath fell on Athalie's cheek.

CHAPTER VIII

BEFORE February had ended C. Bailey, Jr., and Athalie Greensleeve had been to more than one play, had dined and supped together more than once at the Regina.

The magnificence of the most fashionable restaurant in town had thrilled and enchanted Athalie. At close range for the first time she had an opportunity to inspect the rich, the fashionable, and the great. As for celebrities, they seemed to be merely a by-product of the gay, animated, beautifully gowned throngs: people she had heard of, people more important still of whom she had never heard, people important only to themselves of whom nobody had ever heard thronged the great rococo rooms. The best hotel orchestra in America played there; the loveliest flowers, the most magnificent jewels, the most celebrated cuisine in the entire Republic – all were there for Athalie Greensleeve to wonder at and to enjoy. There were other things for her to wonder at, too, – the seemingly exhaustless list of C. Bailey, Jr.'s, acquaintances; for he was always nodding to somebody or returning salutes wherever they were, in the theatre, or the street, in his little limousine car, at restaurants. Men sometimes came up and spoke and were presented to Athalie: women, never.

But although she was very happy after her first evening out with C. Bailey, Jr., she realised that a serious inroad upon her savings was absolutely necessary if she were to continue her maiden's progress with this enchanting young man. Clothing of a very different species than any she had ever permitted herself was now becoming a necessity. She made the inroad. It was worth while if only to see his surprise and his naïve pride in her.

And truly the girl was very lovely in the few luxuries she ventured to acquire – so lovely, indeed, that many heads turned and many eyes followed her calm and graceful progress in theatre aisle, amid thronged tables, on the Avenue, anywhere and everywhere she moved along the path of life now already in flowery bloom for her.

And beside her, eager, happy, flattered, walked C. Bailey, Jr., very conscious that he was being envied; very proud of the beautiful young girl with whom he was so constantly identifying himself, and who, very obviously, was doing him honour.

Of his gratified and flattered self-esteem the girl was unconscious; that he was really happy with her, proud of her appearance, kind to her beyond reason and even beyond propriety perhaps, – invariably courteous and considerate, she was vividly aware. And it made her intensely happy to know that she gave him pleasure and to accept it from him.

It *was* pleasure to Clive; but not entirely unmitigated. His father asked him once or twice who the girl was of whom "people" were talking; and when his son said: "She's absolutely all right, father," Bailey, Sr., knew that she was – so far.

"But what's the use, Clive?" he asked with a sort of sad humour. "Is it necessary for you, too, to follow the path of the calf?"

"I like her."

"And other men are inclined to, and have no opportunity; is that it, my son? The fascination of monopoly? The chicken with the worm?"

"I *like* her," repeated Clive, Jr., a trifle annoyed.

"So you have remarked before. Who is she?"

"Do you remember that charming little child in the red hood and cloak down at Greensleeve's tavern when we were duck-shooting?"

"Is *that* the girl?"

"Yes."

"What is she?"

"Stenographer."

Bailey, Sr., shrugged his shoulders, patiently.

"What's the *use*, Clive?"

"Use? Well there's no particular use. I'm not in love with her. Did you think I was?"

"I don't think any more. Your mother does that for me... Don't make anybody unhappy, my son."

His mother, also, had made very frank representations to him on several occasions, the burden of them being that common people beget common ideas, common associations corrupt good manners, and that "nice" girls would continue to view with disdain and might ultimately ostracise any misguided young man of their own caste who played about with a woman for whose existence nobody who was anybody could account.

"The daughter of a Long Island road-house keeper! Why, Clive! where is your sense of fitness! Men don't do that sort of thing any more!"

"What sort of thing, mother?"

"What you are doing."

"What am I doing?"

"Parading a very conspicuous young woman about town."

"If you saw her in somebody's drawing-room you'd merely think her beautiful and well-bred."

"Clive! Will you please awake from that silly dream?"

"That's the truth, mother. And if she spoke it would merely confirm the impression. You won't believe it but it's true."

"That's absurd, Clive! She may not be uneducated but she certainly cannot be either cultivated or well-bred."

"She is cultivating herself."

"Then for goodness' sake let her do it! It's praiseworthy and commendable for a working girl to try to better herself. But it doesn't concern you."

"Why not? If a business girl does better herself and fit herself for a better social environment, it seems to me her labour is in vain if people within the desired environment snub her."

"What kind of argument is that? Socialistic? I merely know it is unbaked. What theory is it, dear?"

"I don't know what it is. It seems reasonable to me, mother."

"Clive, are you trying to make yourself sentimentalise over that Greensleeve woman?"

"I told you that I am not in love with her; nor is she with me. It's an agreeable and happy comradeship; that's all."

"People think it something more," retorted his mother, curtly.

"That's their fault, not Athalie's and not mine."

"Then, why do you go about with her? *Why?* You know girls enough, don't you?"

"Plenty. They resemble one another to the verge of monotony."

"Is that the way you regard the charming, well-born, well-bred, clever, cultivated girls of your own circle, whose parents were the friends of your parents?"

"Oh, mother, I like them of course... But there's something about a business girl – a girl in the making – that is more amusing, more companionable, more interesting. A business girl seems to wear better. She's better worth talking to, listening to, – it's better fun to go about with her, see things with her, discuss things – "

"What on earth are you talking about! It's perfect babble; it's nonsense! If you really believe you have a penchant for sturdy and rather grubby worthiness unadorned you are mistaken. The inclination you have is merely for a pretty face and figure. I know you. If I don't, who does! You're rather a fastidious young man, even finicky, and very, very much accustomed to the best and only the best. Don't talk to me about your disinterested admiration for a working girl. You haven't anything in common with her, and you never could have. And you'd better be very careful not to make a fool of yourself."

"How?"

"As all men are likely to do at your callow age."

"Fall in love with her?"

"You can call it that. The result is always deplorable. And if she's a smart, selfish, and unscrupulous girl, the result may be more deplorable still, as far as we all are concerned. What is the need of my saying this? You are grown; you know it already. Up to the present time you've kept fastidiously clear of such entanglements. You say you have, and your father and I believe you. So what is the use of beginning now, – creating an unfortunate impression in your own set, spending your time with such a girl as this Greensleeve girl –"

"Mother," he said, "you're going about this matter in the wrong way. I am not in love with Athalie Greensleeve. But there is no girl I like better, none perhaps I like quite as well. Let me alone. There's no sentiment between her and me so far. There won't be any – unless you and other people begin to drive us toward each other. I don't want you to do that. Don't interfere. Let us alone. We're having a good time, – a perfectly natural, wholesome, happy time together."

"What is it leading to?" demanded his mother impatiently.

"To nothing except more good times. That's absolutely all. That's all that good times lead to where any of the girls you approve of are concerned – not to sentiment, not to love, merely to more good times. Why on earth can't people understand that even if the girl happens to be earning her own living?"

"People don't understand. That is the truth, and you can't alter it, Clive. The girl's reputation will always suffer. And that's where you ought to show yourself generous."

"What?"

"If you really like and respect her."

"How am I to show myself generous, as you put it?"

"By keeping away from her."

"Because people gossip?"

"Because," said his mother sharply, "they'll think the girl is your mistress if you continue to decorate public resorts with her."

"Would —*you* think so, mother?"

"No. You happen to be my son. And you're truthful. Otherwise I'd think so."

"You would?"

"Certainly."

"That's rotten," he said, slowly.

"Oh, Clive, don't be a fool. You can't do what you're doing without arousing suspicion everywhere – from a village sewing-circle to the smartest gathering on Manhattan Island! You know it."

"I have never thought about it."

"Then think of it now. Whether it's rotten, as you say, or not, it's so. It's one of the folk-ways of the human species. And if it is, merely saying it's rotten can't alter it."

Mrs. Bailey's car was at the door; Clive took the great sable coat from the maid who brought it and slipped it over the handsome afternoon gown that his handsome mother wore.

For a moment he stood, looking at her almost curiously – at the brilliant black eyes, the clear smooth olive skin still youthful enough to be attractive, at the red lips, mostly nature's hue, at the cheeks where the delicate carmine flush was still mostly nature's.

He said: "You have so much, mother... It seems strange you should not be more generous to a girl you have never seen."

His handsome, capable, and experienced mother gazed at him out of friendly and amused eyes from which delusion had long since fled. And that is where she fell short, for delusion is the offspring of imagination; and without imagination no intelligence is complete. She said: "I can be

generous with any woman except where my son concerns himself with her. Where anybody else's son is involved I could be generous to any girl, even – " she smiled her brilliant smile – "even perhaps not too maliciously generous. But the situation in your case doesn't appeal to me as humorous. Keep away from her, Clive; it's easier than ultimately to run away from her."

CHAPTER IX

THE course of irresponsible amusement which C. Bailey, Jr., continued to pursue at intervals with the fair scion of the house – road-house – of Greensleeve, did not run as smoothly as it might have, and was not unmixed with carping reflections and sordid care on his part, and with an increasing number of interruptions, admonitions, and warnings on the part of his mother.

That pretty lady, flint-hardened in the igneous social lava-pot, continued to hear disquieting tales of her son's doings. They came to her right and left, from dance and card-table, opera-box and supper party, tea and bazaar and fashionable reception.

One grim-visaged old harridan of whom Manhattan stood in fawning fear, bluntly informed her that she'd better look out for her boy if she didn't want to become a grandmother.

Which infuriated and terrified Mrs. Bailey and set her thinking with all the implacable concentration of which she was capable.

So far in life she had accomplished whatever she set out to do... And of all things on earth she dreaded most to become a grandmother of any description whatever.

But between Athalie and Clive, if there had been any doubts concerning the propriety or expediency of their companionship neither he nor she had, so far, expressed them.

Their comradeship, in fact, had now become an intimacy – the sort that permits long silences without excuse or embarrassment on either side. She continued to charm and surprise him; and to discover, daily, in him new traits to admire in a character which perhaps he did not really possess.

In this girl he seemed to find an infinite variety. Moods, impulsive or deliberate, and capricious or logical, continued to stimulate his interest in her every time they met. On no two days was she exactly the same – or so he seemed to think. And yet her basic qualities were, it appeared to him, characteristic and unvarying, – directness, loyalty, generosity, freedom from ulterior motive and a gay confidence in a world which, for the first time in her life, she had begun to find unexpectedly exciting.

They had been one evening to a musical comedy which by some fortunate chance was well written, well sung, and well done. And they were in excellent spirits as they left the theatre and stood waiting for his small limousine car, she in her pretty furs held close to her throat, humming under her breath a refrain from the delightful finale, he smoking a cigarette and watching the numbers being flashed for the long line of carriages and motors which moved up continually through the lamp-lit darkness.

"Athalie," he said, "suppose we side-step the Regina and try Broadway. Are you in the humour for it?"

She laughed and her eyes sparkled in the electric glow: "Are you, Clive?"

"Yes, I am. I feel very devilish."

"So do I, – devilishly hungry."

"That's fine. Where shall we go?"

"The Café Arabesque?.. The name sounds exciting."

"All right – " as his car drew up and the gold-capped porter opened the door; – so he directed his chauffeur to drive them to the Café Arabesque.

"If you don't like it," he added to Athalie, drawing the fur robe over her knees and his, "we can go somewhere else."

"That's very nice of you. I don't have to suffer for my mistakes."

"Nobody ever ought to suffer for mistakes because nobody would ever make mistakes on purpose," he said, laughing.

"Such a delightful philosophy! Please remind me of it when I'm in agony over something I'm sorry I did."

"I'm afraid you'll have to remind me too," he said, still laughing. "Is it a bargain?"

"Certainly."

The car stopped; he sprang out and aided her to the icy sidewalk.

"I don't think I ever saw you as pretty as you are to-night," he whispered, slipping his arm under hers.

"Are you really growing more beautiful or do I merely think so?"

"I don't know," she said, happily; "I'll tell you a secret, shall I?"

He inclined his ear toward her, and she said in a laughing whisper: "Clive, I *feel* beautiful to-night. Do you know how it feels to feel beautiful?"

"Not personally," he admitted; and they separated still laughing like two children, the focus of sympathetic, amused, or envious glances from the brilliantly dressed throng clustering at the two cloak rooms.

She came to him presently where he was waiting, and, instinctively the groups around the doors made a lane for the fair young girl who came forward with the ghost of a smile on her lips as though entirely unconscious of herself and of everybody except the man who moved out to meet her.

"It's true," he murmured; "you *are* the most beautiful thing in this beauty-ridden town."

"You'll spoil me, Clive."

"Is that possible?"

"I don't know. Don't try. There is a great deal in me that has never been disturbed, never been brought out. Maybe much of it is evil," she added lightly.

He turned; she met his eyes half seriously, half mockingly, and they laughed. But what she had said so lightly in jest remained for a few moments in his mind to occupy and slightly trouble it.

From their table beside the bronze-railed gallery, they could overlook the main floor where a wide lane for dancing had been cleared and marked out with crimson-tasselled ropes of silk.

A noisy orchestra played imbecile dance music, and a number of male and female imbeciles took advantage of it to exercise the only portions of their anatomy in which any trace of intellect had ever lodged.

Athalie, resting one dimpled elbow on the velvet cushioned rail, watched the dancers for a while, then her unamused and almost expressionless gaze swept the tables below with a leisurely absence of interest which might have been mistaken for insolence – and envied as such by a servile world which secretly adores it.

"Well, Lady Greensleeves?" he said, watching her.

"Some remarkable Poiret and Lucille gowns, Clive... And a great deal of paint." She remained a moment in the same attitude – leisurely inspecting the throng below, then turned to him, her calm preoccupation changing to a shyly engaging smile.

"Are you still of the same mind concerning my personal attractiveness?"

"I *have* spoiled you!" he concluded, pretending chagrin.

"Is that spoiling me – to hear you say you approve of me?"

"Of course not, you dear girl! Nothing could ever spoil you."

She lifted her Clover Club, looking across the frosty glass at him; and the usual rite was silently completed. They were hungry; her appetite was always a natural and healthy one, and his sometimes matched it, as happened that night.

"Now, this is wonderful," he said, lighting a cigarette between courses and leaning forward, elbows on the cloth, and his hands clasped under his chin; "a good show, a good dinner, and good company. What surfeited monarch could ask more?"

"Why mention the company last, Clive?"

"I've certainly spoiled you," he said with a groan; "you've tasted adulation; you prefer it to your dinner."

"The question is do *you* prefer my company to the dinner and the show? *Do* you! If so why mention me last in the catalogue of your blessings?"

"I always mention you last in my prayers – so that whoever listens will more easily remember," he said gaily.

The laughter still made the dark blue eyes brilliant but they grew more serious when she said: "You don't really ever *pray* for me, Clive. Do you?"

"Yes. Why not?"

The smile faded in her eyes and in his.

"I didn't know you prayed at all," she remarked, looking down at her wine glass.

"It's one of those things I happen to do," he said with a slight shrug.

They mused for a while in silence, her mind pursuing its trend back to childhood, his idly considering the subject of prayer and wondering whether the habit had become too mechanical with him, or whether his less selfish petitions might possibly carry to the Source of All Things.

Then having drifted clear of this nebulous zone of thought, and coffee having been served, they came back to earth and to each other with slight smiles of recognition – delicate salutes acknowledging each other's presence and paramount importance in a world which was going very gaily.

They discussed the play; she hummed snatches of its melodies below her breath at intervals, her dark blue eyes always fixed on him and her ears listening to him alone. Particularly now; for his mood had changed and he was drifting back toward something she had said earlier in the evening – something about her own possible capacity for good and evil. It was a question, only partly serious; and she responded in the same vein:

"How should I know what capabilities I possess? Of course I have capabilities. No doubt, dormant within me lies every besetting sin, every human failing. Perhaps also the cardinal, corresponding, and antidotic virtues to all of these."

"I suppose," he said, "every sin has its antithesis. It's like a chess board – the human mind – with the black men ranged on one side and the white on the other, ready to move, to advance, skirmish, threaten, manoeuvre, attack, and check each other, and the intervening squares represent the checkered battlefield of contending desires."

The simile striking her as original and clever, she made him a pretty compliment. She was very young in her affections.

"If," she nodded, "a sin, represented by a black piece, dares to stir or intrude or threaten, then there is always the better thought, represented by a white piece, ready to block and check the black one. Is that it?"

"Exactly," he said, secretly well pleased with himself. And as for Athalie, she admired his elastic and eloquent imagination beyond words.

"Do you know," she said, "you have never yet told me anything about your business. Is it all right for me to ask, Clive?"

"Certainly. It's real estate – Bailey, Reeve, and Willis. Willis is dead, Reeve out of it, and my father and I are the whole show."

"Reeve?" she repeated, interested.

"Yes, he lives in Paris, permanently. He has a son here, in the banking business."

"Cecil Reeve?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"No. My sister Catharine does."

Clive seemed interested and curious: "Cecil Reeve and I were at Harvard together. I haven't seen much of him since."

"What sort is he, Clive?"

"Nice – Oh, very nice. A good sport; – a good deal of a sport... Which sister did you say?"

"Catharine."

"That's the cunning little one with the baby stare and brown curls?"

"Yes."

There was a silence. Clive sat absently fidgeting with his glass, and Athalie watched him. Presently without looking up he said: "Yes, Cecil Reeve is a very decent sport... Rather gay. Good-looking chap. Nice sort... But rather a sport, you know."

The girl nodded.

"Catharine mustn't believe all he says," he added with a laugh. "Cecil has a way – I'm not knocking him, you understand – but a young – inexperienced girl – might take him a little bit too seriously... Of course your sister wouldn't."

"No, I don't think so... Are *you* that way, too?"

He raised his eyes: "Do you think I am, Athalie?"

"No... But I can't help wondering – a little uneasily at times – how you can find me as – as companionable as you say you do... I can't help wondering how long it will last."

"It will last as long as you do."

"But you are sure to find me out sooner or later, Clive."

"Find you out?"

"Yes – discover my limits, exhaust my capacity for entertaining you, extract the last atom of amusement out of me. And – what *then*?"

"Athalie! What nonsense!"

"Is it?"

"Certainly it's nonsense. How can I possibly tire of such a girl as you? I scarcely even know you yet. I don't begin to know you. Why you are a perfectly unexplored, undiscovered girl to me, yet!"

"Am I?" she asked, laughing. "I supposed you had discovered about all there is to me."

He shook his head, looking at her curiously perplexed: "Every time we meet you are different. You always have interesting views on any subject. You stimulate my imagination. How could I tire?"

"Besides, somehow I am always aware of reserved and hidden forces in you – of a character which I only partly know and admire – capabilities, capacities of which I am ignorant except that, intuitively, I seem to know they are part of you."

"Am I as complex as that to you?"

"Sometimes," he admitted. "You are just now for example. But usually you are only a wonderfully interesting and charming girl who brings out the best side of me and keeps me amused and happy every moment that I am with you."

"There really is not much more to me than that," she said in a low voice. "You sum me up – a gay source of amusement: nothing more."

"Athalie, you know you are more vital than that to me."

"No, I don't know it."

"You do! You know it in your own heart. You know that it is a straight, clean, ardent friendship that inspires me and – " she looked up, serious, and very quiet.

– "You know," he continued impulsively, "that it is not only your beauty, your loveliness and grace and that inexplicable charm you seem to radiate, that brings me to seek you every time that I have a moment to do so.

"Why, if it were that alone, it would all have been merely a matter of sentiment. Have I ever been sentimental with you?"

"No."

"Have I ever made love to you?"

She did not reply. Her eyes were fixed on her glass.

"Have I, Athalie?" he repeated.

"No, Clive," she said gently.

"Well then; is there not on my part a very deep, solidly founded, and vital friendship for you? Is there not a – "

"Don't let's talk about it," she interrupted in a low voice. "You always make me very happy; you say I please you – interest and amuse you. That is enough – more than enough – more than I ever hoped or asked –"

"I said you make me happy; – happier than I have ever been," he explained with emphasis. "Do you suppose for a moment that your regard for me is warmer, deeper, more enduring, than is mine for you? Do you, Athalie?"

She lifted her eyes to his. But she had nothing more to say on the subject.

However, he began to insist, – a little impatiently, – on a direct answer. And finally she said:

"Clive, you came into a rather empty life when you came into mine. Judge how completely you have filled it... And what it would be if you went out of it. Your own life has always been full. If I should disappear from it –" she ceased.

The quiet, accentless, almost listless dignity of the words surprised and impressed him for a moment; then the reaction came in a faint glow through every vein and a sudden impulse to respond to her with an assurance of devotion a little out of key with the somewhat stately and reserved measure of their duet called friendship.

"You also fill my life," he said. "You give me what I never had – an intimacy and an understanding that satisfies. Had I my way I would be with you all the time. No other woman interests me as you do. There *is* no other woman."

"Oh, Clive! And all the charming people you know –"

"I know many. None like you, Athalie."

"That is very sweet of you... I'm trying to believe it... I want to... There are many days to fill in when I am not with you. To fill them with such a belief would be to shorten them... I don't know. I often wonder where you are; what you are doing; with what stately and beautiful creature you are talking, laughing, walking, dancing." – She shrugged her shoulders and gazed down at the dancers below. "The days are very long, sometimes," she added, half to herself.

When again, calmly, she turned to him there was an odd expression on his face, and the next second he reddened and shifted his gaze. Neither spoke for a few moments.

Presently she began to draw on her gloves, but he continued staring into space, not noticing her, and finally she bent forward and rested her slim gloved fingers on his hand, lightly, interrogatively.

"Yes; all right," he muttered.

"I have to go to business in the morning," she pleaded. He turned almost impatiently:

"If I had my way you wouldn't go to business at all."

"If I had my way I wouldn't either," she rejoined, smilingly. But his youthful visage remained sober and flushed. And when they were seated in the limousine and the fur rug enveloped them both, he said abruptly:

"I'm getting tired of this business."

"What business, Clive?"

"Everything – the way you live – your inadequate quarters – your having to work all day long in that stuffy office, day after day, year after year!"

She said, surprised and perplexed: "But it can't be helped, Clive! I have to work."

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean – what good am I to you – what's the use of me, if I can't make things easier for you?"

"The *use* of you? Did you think I ever had any idea of using you?"

"But I want you to."

"How?" she asked, still uneasily perplexed, her eyes fixed on him.

But he had no definite idea, no plan fixed, nothing further to say on a subject that had so suddenly taken shape within his mind.

She asked him again for an explanation, but, receiving none, settled back thoughtfully in her furs. Only once did he break the silence.

"You know," he said indifferently, "that row of houses, of which yours is one, belongs to me. I mean to me, personally."

"No, I didn't know it."

"Well it does. It's my own investment... I've reduced rents – pending improvements."

She looked up at him.

"The rent of your apartment has been reduced fifty per cent.," he said carelessly; "so your rent is now paid until the new term begins next October."

"Clive! That is perfectly ridiculous!" she began, hotly; but he swung around, silencing her:

"Are you criticising my business methods?" he demanded.

"But that is too silly –"

"Will you mind your business!" he exclaimed, turning and taking her by both shoulders. She looked into his eyes, searching them in silence. Then:

"You're such a dear," she sighed; "why do you want to do a thing like that when my sisters and I can afford to pay the present rent. You are always doing such things, Clive; you have simply covered my dressing-table with silver; my bureau is full of pretty things, all gifts from you; you've given me the loveliest furniture of my own, and books and desk-set and – and everything. And now you are asking me to live rent-free... And what have I to offer you in return?"

"The happiness of being with you now and then."

"Oh, Clive! You know that isn't very much to offer you. You know that our being together is far more to me than it is to you! I dare not even consider what I'd do without you, now. You mould me, alter my thoughts, make me such a delightfully different girl, take entire charge and possession of me... I don't want you to give me anything more – do anything more for me... When you first began to give me beautiful things I didn't want to take them. Do you remember how awkward and shy I was – how I blushed. But I always end by doing everything you wish... And it seems to give us both so much pleasure – all you do for me... But please *don't* ask me to live without paying rent –"

The limousine drew up by the curb; Clive jumped out, aided Athalie to descend; and started for the grilled door where a light glimmered.

"This is not the house!" exclaimed Athalie, stopping short. "Where are you taking me, Clive?"

"Come on," he said, "I merely want to show you how I've had the new apartment house built –"

"But – it's too late! What an odd idea, taking me to inspect a new apartment house at two in the morning! Are you really serious?"

He nodded and rang. A sleepy night porter opened, recognised Clive, and touched his hat.

"Take us to the top, Mike," he said.

"Have you the keys, sorr?"

"Yes."

They entered the cage and it shot up to the top floor.

"Wait for us, Mike."... And to Athalie: "This is Michael Daly who will do anything you ask of him – won't you, Mike?"

"I will that, sorr," said the big Irishman, tipping his hat to Athalie.

"But, Clive," she persisted, bewildered, still clinging to his arm, "I don't understand why –"

"Little goose, hush!" he replied, subduing the excitement in his voice and fitting the key into the door.

"One moment, Athalie," he added, "until I light up. Now!"

She entered the lighted hallway, walking on a soft green carpet, and turned, obeying the guiding pressure of his arm, into a big square room which sprang into brilliant illumination as he found the switch.

Green and gold were the hangings and prevailing colours; there were rugs, wide, comfortable chairs and lounges, bookcases, a picture or two in deep glowing colours, a baby-grand piano, and an open fire loaded for business.

"Is it done in good taste, Athalie?" he asked.

"It is charming. Is it yours, Clive?"

He laughed, slipped his arm under hers and led her along the hallway, opening door after door; and first she was invited to observe a very modern and glistening bathroom, then a bedroom all done in grey and rose with dainty white furniture and a white-bear rug beside the bed.

"Why this is a woman's room!" she exclaimed, puzzled.

He only laughed and drew her along the hall, showing her another bedroom with twin beds, a maid's room, a big clothes press, and finally, a completely furnished kitchen, very modern with its porcelain baseboard and tiled walls.

"What do you think of all this, Athalie?" he insisted.

"Why it's exquisite, Clive. Whose is it?"

They walked back to the square living-room. He said, teasingly: "Do you remember, the first time I saw you after those four years, – that first evening when I came in to surprise you and found you sitting by the radiator – in your nightie, Athalie?"

"Yes," she said, laughing and blushing as she always did when he tormented her with that souvenir.

"And I said that you ought to have an open fire. And a cat. Didn't I?"

"Yes."

"There's your fire, Athalie;" he drew a match from his tiny flat gold case, struck it, and lighted the nest of pine shavings under the logs; – "and Michael has the cat when you want it."

He drew a big soft arm-chair to the mounting blaze. Athalie stood motionless, staring at the flames, then with a sudden, nervous gesture she sank down on the arm-chair and covered her face with her gloved hands.

He stood waiting, happy and excited, and finally he went over and touched her; and the girl caught his hand convulsively in both of hers and looked up at him with wet eyes.

"How can I do this, Clive? How *can* I?" she whispered.

"Any brother would do as much for his sister – "

"Oh, Clive! You are different! You are *more* than that. You know you are. How can I take all this? Will you tell me? How can I live here – this way – "

"Your sisters will be here. You saw their room just now – "

"But what can I *tell* them? How can I explain? They know we cannot afford such luxury as this?"

"Tell them the rent is the same."

"They won't believe it. They couldn't. They don't understand even now how it is with you and me – that you are so dear and generous and kind just because you are my friend – and no more than my friend... Not that they really believe – anything – unpleasant – of *me* – but – but – "

"What do you care – as long as it isn't so?" he said, coolly.

"I don't care. Except that it weakens my authority over them... Catharine is very impulsive, and she dearly loves a good time – and she is becoming sullen with me when I try to advise her or curb her... And it's so with Doris, too... I'd like to keep my influence... But if they ever really began to believe that between you and me there was – more – than friendship, I – I don't know what they might feel free to think – or do – "

"They're older than you."

"Yes. But I seem to have the authority, – or I did have."

They looked into the leaping flames; he threw open his fur coat and seated himself on the padded arm of her chair.

"All I know is," he said, "that it gives me the deepest and most enduring happiness to do things for you. When the architect planned this house I had him design a place for you. Ultimately all the row of old houses are to be torn down and replaced by modern apartments with moderate rentals. So you will have to move anyway sooner or later. Why not come here *now*?"

Half unconsciously she had rested her cheek against the fur lining of his coat where it fell against his arm. He looked down at her, touched her hair – a thing he had never thought of doing before.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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