

Kummer Frederic Arnold

The Brute



Frederic Kummer

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CHAPTER I

Every evening, almost, Donald Rogers and his wife Edith sat in a plain little living-room in their apartment in Harlem, and worked until ten or eleven o'clock. By that time they were both ready to go to bed. It was not very exciting. Edith darned stockings or sewed; Donald toiled at his desk, writing letters – going over reports. Sometimes, very rarely, they went to the theater. They had done the same thing for nearly eight years, and to Edith, at least, it seemed a very long time.

The room in which they sat reflected in its furnishings much of the life these two led. It seemed to suggest, in every line, an unceasing conflict between poverty and ambition – not, indeed, the poverty of the really poor, of those in actual want, but the poverty of the well born, of those whose desires are forever infinitely beyond their means.

This was evidenced by many curious contrasts. The furniture, for instance, was for the most part of that cheap and gloomy variety known as mission oak, yet the designs were good, as though its purchasers had striven toward some ideal which they had not the means to realize. The rug on the floor, an imitation oriental, was still of excellent coloring; the pictures showed taste in their selection – such taste, indeed, as is possible under the limitations imposed by a slender purse – among them might have been discovered a charming little water-color and some reproductions of etchings by Whistler.

The curtains were imitation lace, the ornaments on the mantel imitation bronze, the cushions in the Morris chair imitation Spanish leather. The keynote of the whole room was imitation – everything in it, almost, was the result of refinement and excellent taste on the one hand, hampered by lack of money on the other. The effect was somewhat that given by twenty dollar sets of ermine furs, or ropes of pearls at bargain-counter prices. Edith, caring more about such matters than her husband, realized this note of imitation keenly, but found it more satisfactory to have even the shadow of what she really desired than to drop back to another level of existence, and content herself with ingrain carpets, shiny yellow furniture, and the sort of pictures made of mother of pearl, which are given away with tea-store coupons. In her present environment, she chafed – in the other, she would have been suffocated.

On this particular night in March, they were at home as usual. Donald had composed himself at his desk, hunched over, his head resting upon his left hand, staring at the papers before him. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the trading-stamp clock on the mantel, and the clanking of the steam pipes. For a long time Donald stared, and wrote nothing. Suddenly he turned to his wife.

“For Heaven’s sake, Edith,” he exclaimed impatiently, “what’s the matter with those pipes?”

Edith glanced at him, but did not move. She came back slowly from her land of dreams.

“The janitor has probably just turned on the steam. It’s been off for the past week on account of the warm weather.”

Donald rose, and went nervously over to the radiator under the window.

“I can’t write with this infernal noise going on,” he grumbled, as he turned to his desk. “Will it be too cold for you?”

“Oh, no. I’m used to it.” Mrs. Rogers’ tone was patient, resigned.

Donald resumed his writing, and sat for a few moments in silence, but the tone of his wife’s remark had not been lost upon him. He turned toward her presently, with an anxious look, searching her face keenly.

“What’s the matter, Edith?” he inquired kindly. “Don’t you feel well?”

“Not particularly.” Mrs. Rogers’ voice was discouraging.

“Anything wrong?”

“No.”

“You haven’t seemed yourself for the past week. You don’t seem to take any interest in things.”

“What things?” inquired Edith, with sudden asperity. She took a sufficient interest in the things that seemed worth while to her, she well enough knew, but they were not those which made up her present surroundings.

Donald seemed hurt at her tone. He regarded her with an injured expression.

“Why,” he ventured hesitatingly, “all the things that make up our life – our home.”

The suggestion was not happy. It was, indeed, those very things that Edith had been mentally reviewing in her inner consciousness throughout the evening, and her conclusions had not been in their favor.

“The steam pipes, I suppose,” she returned scornfully, “and the price of eggs, and whether we are going to be able to pay our bills next month or not.”

“Don’t be so unkind, Edith,” said her husband, with an expression of pain. Her remark had hurt him, and, although she realized it, she somehow refused to admit to herself that she regretted it.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Surely you realize that I am doing the best I can,” he replied slowly. “I can’t do any more.”

“Well, suppose I do. Does that make it any easier?”

She felt angry and annoyed, first with Donald because he seemed unable to realize how barren her life with him was, and then with herself because she had allowed herself to become involved in this useless discussion. Donald, she knew, would always be the same. It was hopeless to expect him to change, or to try, by argument, to make him do so.

“Are you angry because I couldn’t afford to get you that new hat for Easter?” he asked, as he began to refill his pipe.

This falling back upon man’s universal belief that a woman’s happiness or unhappiness depends solely upon her clothes annoyed her still further.

“Don’t talk like a fool, Donald,” she exclaimed, throwing down her sewing angrily. “I’m tired, that’s all. For eight years I’ve darned stockings, collected trading stamps, done my own housework, and tried to imagine that the hats I’ve trimmed myself looked as though they came straight from Paris. When a woman has done that for eight years, she has a right to be tired.”

“But, Edith, it will not always be that way. You know how I am working for the future.”

Mrs. Rogers picked up her sewing and resumed her air of patient resignation. “The future is a long way off. When it comes, if it ever does, I shall probably be so old that I won’t care what sort of hats I wear.”

“Haven’t I had to endure it all, as well as you? Don’t you suppose it hurts me not to be able to give you everything you wish?”

“It’s different with a man.” She smiled a trifle bitterly, as she spoke. “You have your business, your friends, your ambitions. In ten years I shall be an old woman; you will be just ready to enjoy yourself.”

Donald rose from the desk and began to walk about the room nervously. He was too sincerely fond of Edith to want to quarrel with her, and he knew, as well as she did, the truth of what she had just said. After all, he thought, perhaps the woman does have the worst of the matrimonial bargain, in circumstances, at least, such as those with which he and Edith were struggling.

“There’s nothing I would care about enjoying, Edith, without you. Surely you know that.”

“I know. It’s very good of you to feel that way. It’s lack of money, I suppose, after all, that makes everything so hard.”

“I can’t do the impossible, Edith. You know what my income is, and what I have been scraping and saving for all these years.”

“To put every cent you had in the world into that glass factory in West Virginia. I know – very well.” It was clear, from the tone of Mrs. Rogers’ voice, that she felt little sympathy for this part of her husband’s plans, at any rate.

“Yes, I have. I know you have opposed it, but I am convinced that it is a great proposition. In five years, or possibly less, I expect to get big profits from it. Isn’t it worth waiting and saving for?”

“I don’t know whether it is or not.” Mrs. Rogers’ tone was not encouraging. “Five years is a long time. I’m not sure but I’d rather have a little bit more human pleasure and enjoyment as I go along. For years – ever since Bobbie was born – I’ve had to spend the summer here in this wretched, hot place. It hasn’t done me any good. It hasn’t done him any good. I’d rather you would put a little less into the glass business and a little more into your wife’s and child’s health and happiness.”

Mr. Rogers stopped in his pacing up and down the room. It was clear that his wife’s remarks had touched a sensitive spot.

“Edith,” he exclaimed, “you cannot mean what you say. Everything I have done has been for you and for him. Bobbie seems to me to be well enough. Think of the hundreds of thousands of children that have to spend the summer in the city. God knows I’d give my life for him, or for you, too, if you needed it; it’s what I am doing. I can’t do any more.”

“I know it,” said Edith, with a sigh. “I suppose I’m very unreasonable, but somehow my life has seemed so empty, all these years.”

“Haven’t you everything you need?”

“Everything I need? Do you think three meals a day and a place to sleep is everything a woman needs?”

“Many women have less.”

“And many have more. A woman’s needs depend upon her desires, her temperament. What may be a necessity to one, another would have no use for. Some women, down in Tenth Avenue, might think this Paradise.” She looked about the room scornfully. “And a lot more, up in Fifth Avenue, would think it – well – the other place. That’s the difference.”

Donald looked at her curiously, and noted her flushed face, her heaving breast. These things evidently were very near her heart. “What are your needs, Edith?” he asked kindly.

“How can you ask me such a question?” Edith failed to appreciate his kind intention. She was fairly launched upon her argument, and the tumult of discontent which had been gathering in her breast burst forth with bitter intensity. “Did you ever suppose for a moment that I was a woman who could be satisfied with the merest commonplaces of existence? Don’t you see that I need life – real, broadening, joyous, human life, with all its hopes, its fears, its longings, its successes, its failures? Do you think I find those things here?” She swept the room with an all-embracing gesture, and stood confronting him with flushed cheeks, her eyes flashing rebelliously.

Her evidence of feeling both startled and hurt him. He had supposed that all her years of patient waiting had covered a mind serenely satisfied with the present through a belief in the future. He looked at her for a few moments in surprise. “I am very sorry, Edith,” he began haltingly. “I, too, feel the need of those things, but I do not allow the lack of them to spoil my life. I have borne my trials and done my duty as best I could, and I expect you to do the same. If we have not money, and all the pleasures and luxuries it brings, we at least have health and our daily bread, and above all, our little boy. We ought to be very thankful.”

“Do you suppose for a moment that I do not appreciate Bobbie? He is the only thing that keeps me here.”

The troubled look on Donald’s face grew deeper as he answered her, and with it came an expression of alarm. He had never doubted Edith’s love for him, and her words were a great shock.

“The only thing that keeps you here!” he cried. “Is your love for me of no importance to you?”

Edith surveyed the plain, poorly furnished little room with ill-concealed dislike. “This sort of thing,” she said bitterly, “doesn’t offer much for love to feed upon.”

“Edith! You surely do not realize what you are saying. To hear you talk, anyone might suppose we were on the point of going to the poorhouse.”

“It couldn’t be worse. I’m tired of it, and I can’t help saying so. I suppose you will think me very ungrateful, but I can’t help it. We never have any pleasures, any happiness, any real enjoyment. It’s nothing but mere existence.”

“I don’t agree with you. I am not doing so badly. We are both of us young. In a few years I hope to be comparatively well off, and then things will be very different. I am working and striving for you every hour of the day. Do you think I would do it, if I did not feel that you love me – that you believed in me?”

He went over to her, and took her hand in his. “What has upset you so, to-night, dear? Is there anything you particularly want – anything that I could do for you? Tell me – if there is, you know I will do everything in my power to gratify you.”

“No – nothing that you could do.” She seemed unconscious of the pain she was giving him.

“I thought perhaps it was about this summer. You told me that your mother and sister were anxious to take a cottage at the seashore, and that they wanted you to go with them – is that it?”

“No,” she replied. “It isn’t important. You said you couldn’t afford it.”

Donald left her abruptly and, walking over to the desk, began to fumble nervously with the papers on it. It hurt him to the depths of his nature to be obliged to refuse Edith this request; indeed, what she had asked he had already himself thought of, and been forced to conclude that, much as he wanted to give her and Bobbie this pleasure, he could not do it. He turned to her with a nervous twitching of the mouth, which had of late become characteristic.

“Every year, Edith,” he said, “we have this discussion. Your mother and sister have no responsibilities. They can give up their rooms at the boarding house and go to the country without adding a dollar to their expenses. You cannot do that. It will cost a hundred dollars a month, at least, for your expenses and Bobbie’s, to say nothing of the extra expense of my taking my meals at restaurants. I can’t afford it this year, Edith. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?” Her tone was aggrieved – almost defiant. “Is business so bad? I thought things had been so much better this month.”

“It’s the glass plant, Edith. We are having a lot of trouble. It takes every cent I can scrape together to meet expenses. We are a new concern. Our goods are not known. Competition is severe.

“We are trying to build up a new business. I can’t weaken on it now. Surely you can stand one more summer in the city – if I can. Perhaps, next year – ”

“Next year!” she cried. “It’s always next year. It’s been that way now for eight years, and about the only outing I’ve had has been a trip to Coney Island on the boat. I’m sick of it. It’s drudgery. A hired girl has more freedom than I have – and more money, too, for that matter.”

“Edith!”

“Oh, I know what you are going to say. I made my bed, and I ought to be willing to lie in it. I knew you were a poor man when I married you. Well, suppose I did. I didn’t mind poverty then – the enthusiasm of youth made it all seem a pleasure, like camping out, and living on canned beans and corn bread. It’s fine, for a time, but after a while, when the novelty has worn off, you get sort of tired of it. There comes a time in every married woman’s life when she sits down and looks at things from both sides, and wonders whether, after all, it’s really worth while.”

“I don’t see why you should complain, if I don’t,” said Donald wearily. “I’m sorry we haven’t more money, on your account and on my own, as well. There are many things I should like to do.”

“Oh, you’re a man.” Edith flung herself across the room and began turning over the sheets of music upon the piano. “If you have a couple of new suits of clothes a year and can smoke the kind of cigars you like, you don’t bother your head if some other man has a dozen suits and keeps a valet. It’s different with a woman. Home-made dresses, dollar corsets, riding in surface cars, seem mighty hard, when you see other women in their autos, their Russian sables, their Paris gowns – women who

spend more money on their dogs every month than I have to spend on Bobbie. It's a thousand times harder for a woman to be poor than it is for a man. Most men don't know it, but that doesn't alter the fact – it's true, just the same."

She suddenly sat down at the piano, and after striking a few discords, began to play the "Jewel Song" from "Faust" in a rapid tempo.

Donald followed her with his eyes. "It seems to me," he said gravely, "that when a man wants to do so much for his wife and realizes that he can't it's the hardest of all – much harder than doing without things yourself."

Edith did not speak for several moments.

"I don't wonder Marguerite was tempted by the jewels, and all that," she remarked, presently, then concluded her playing with a series of crashing chords, and rose from her seat with a harsh laugh.

"Edith, I wish you wouldn't say such things."

"Why shouldn't I? Perhaps they are true. How do you know that I am not being tempted, too? I suppose, if the devil were to come along and offer me a million or two, I'd run away with him without stopping to pack my trunk." She resumed her chair, and picked up her sewing again. "Go on with your writing, Donald. I'm sorry this discussion came up. It hasn't done a bit of good. I suppose you think me heartless and unkind. I can't help it. I'm not the first woman who has found married life a harder road than she had anticipated."

She bent over her sewing with a sense of anger and annoyance with herself for having entered into such a purposeless discussion. Donald sat down at his desk and again took up his work. Only the ticking of the clock and the scratching of his pen broke the heavy silence. Life had once more resumed its monotonous procession.

After a long time, Edith put away her sewing, and retired to her bedroom. What sort of a life was this, she thought to herself, where one was forced to go to bed at ten o'clock because there was nothing further to keep one awake? She got into bed and read a magazine for an hour. Then she fell asleep. Donald was still writing.

CHAPTER II

When Donald Rogers left his apartment in One Hundred and Tenth Street the next morning, he had an unaccountable feeling that something out of the ordinary, something of a nature unforeseen and menacing, would occur to him before the day was over. Being of a somewhat matter-of-fact turn of mind, however, he laughed at his fears, and attributed them to a slight attack of the great American disease, brought on by over-much smoking. Perhaps, had he been a Frenchman, and a magpie or a hare had suddenly crossed his path, he might have been tempted to take off his hat to the one, or to bow politely to the other; as it was, he put forebodings out of his mind, as unworthy a practical man of affairs. The uncomfortable feeling persisted, however, in spite of his optimistic efforts to escape from it in the depths of his morning paper, all during the long ride down-town in the subway, and was forgotten only in the complexities of his morning's mail.

The unfortunate discussion with his wife, Edith, the night before, which was the real cause of his depression, he had religiously put out of his mind, attributing her discontent to some purely temporary irritability which would soon be forgotten.

They had neither of them referred to the matter at breakfast; Donald had been in his usual hurry, Edith occupied with Bobbie, who had a habit of awakening somewhat querulous and difficult to please. Her manner had been serene, if a trifle distant and reserved. Donald felt that already the storm had passed, and dismissed the matter from his mind.

He spent the forenoon busily occupied in his office. It was not much of an office, as such things go in New York, being merely a small private room with a larger and lighter one adjoining it, but it sufficed for all the needs of his business, which was that of a consulting mechanical engineer.

The inner room, which was the smaller of the two, served to receive his clients, of which there were not many; the outer contained the draughting tables and his assistant. Yet, small and plain as these rooms were, they reflected to a surprising extent the character of the man. There were no attempts at decoration; no concessions to any sense of the artistic; everything was plain, solid, durable, honest, like the man himself. Only the photographs of Edith, his wife, and Bobbie, his little boy, in a silver frame upon the flat-topped oak desk, bespoke the sentiment which was so deep and vital a part of Donald Rogers' nature.

Existence had not dealt over kindly with this descendant of the dour land of Wallace and Bruce, but he met it with high courage, and head up, as befitted one of his race. Born in a small town along the upper reaches of the Hudson, he had known the love of a father only long enough to clutch his fingers in the first futile efforts to face the world upon two feet, instead of on all fours; the mother, however, had survived longer, and it was to her that Donald owed the sturdy lessons in the eternal rightness of things that underlay and governed all his actions.

He was sixteen when she was laid beside her long-expectant husband, and Donald, her only child, went out into the world with a very small patrimony and a very great grief. Yet this sweet-faced woman, locked in her long leaden sleep, was not dead; her faith, her courage, her high ideals, lived and breathed in her son, and no act of his life but showed in some way, however slight, their purifying effect.

Donald Rogers' father had been a steam engineer without a college education; his son determined to follow in his footsteps with one, and, with this purpose strong within him, gathered together the small store of worldly goods with which the fates had endowed him and went to New York and the engineering course at Columbia. It took him five years to complete the course, partly because his early education had been somewhat incomplete, partly owing to the necessity under which he labored, of earning sufficient money, as he went along, to piece out the fragments of his small inheritance and maintain himself. This he did by doing draughting work at night; it was hard on the eyes, but the experience helped him in his profession. At twenty-two he was graduated with

honors; these, with his diploma, constituted his stock in trade; his weapons with which to win fame and fortune.

Five years of employment in subordinate positions had not only given him practical experience, but had taught him the futility of expecting the aforementioned fame and fortune while working on a salary; his courage, his savings and some staunch business friends all favored the idea of launching out for himself. The results had been encouraging; he now, after eight years, had a substantial, if small, practice, and an unshaken belief in himself and his future.

It was about the time he first opened his office as consulting engineer that he had met Edith Pope, and they were married within a year. She was a girl of unusual beauty, and through both inheritance and training quite his opposite. Perhaps it was because of this that she had attracted him.

Her father had been a real-estate dealer, and through his ability and industry had made during his somewhat short business career a large income. His wife, on the other hand, had shown such ability and industry in spending it that, when he died, which he did about the time that Edith was just entering her 'teens, he left only enough to provide a meager living for herself, her mother and her sister Alice, two years her junior. Mrs. Pope had never been able to accustom herself to the blow; she lived in a constant atmosphere of past glories and was never tired of recounting to her daughters all the comforts she had enjoyed when her "dear J. B.," as she mournfully designated her deceased better half, was alive. Never a day passed, but Edith and her sister were warned against the evils and dangers of marrying a man without money; to some extent it might have appeared that Mrs. Pope hoped to regain, through the matrimonial successes of her daughters, those luxuries of existence which she fondly believed were, to her, absolute necessities.

Whether or not her children paid any serious attention to her advice it would be difficult to say; perhaps the best answer to the question lay in the fact that, when Edith met Donald in the boarding-house on Tenth Street, which was for the time being their mutual home, she straightway fell head over heels in love with him, and married him before the year was out, in spite of her mother's strenuous objections. That was eight years ago, and, if Edith Rogers was not entirely reconciled to living in a Harlem flat and doing her own housework, she at least found a large measure of compensation in her little boy, Bobbie, who was now six, and a darling, as even his grandmother was forced grudgingly to admit. Her assent was grudging because Mrs. Pope had never forgiven her son-in-law for depriving her of her daughter; one matrimonial asset thus rudely snatched away forced her to concentrate all her hopes upon Alice, and that young lady, at the age of rising twenty-six, had begun to show signs of extreme restiveness, possibly due to an inward conviction that even a Harlem flat and a four-by-six kitchenette possesses some advantages not to be found in boarding-houses of the less-expensive variety, and that a real live man with a living income is better than an old maid's dreams of a possible, but hitherto undisclosed, millionaire. Emerson Hall, a friend of Donald's, whom she had met a few months before, assisted her greatly in arriving at these not unusual conclusions.

It was long after one o'clock when Donald Rogers, absorbed in a problem of power transmission, bethought himself of luncheon. One was his usual hour; he dropped his calculations, seized his hat, and in a moment was threading his way through the never ending throngs of lower Broadway, on his way to a little chop house in John Street, long famous for its English mutton chops and cream ale.

As he came abreast of the Singer Building, he felt someone grasp his arm from behind and heard a cheery voice, with a familiar ring about it, calling to him. He turned and looked into the handsome, smiling face of a tall bronzed man, whose costume indicated clearly that he hailed from the West.

"Billy West!" he exclaimed, gripping the new-comer's hand joyfully. "Where on earth did you drop from? I thought you were in Colorado."

"I was, until four days ago. Thought I'd come East for awhile and look the old town over. How's everything?" His glance was full of smiling inquiry. "Making lots of money?"

“Not so much that I have to sit up nights thinking how to spend it,” replied Rogers, a trifle bitterly. “Had your lunch?”

“No. Didn’t want to eat alone. I’ve been away so long I hardly know a soul in this blessed burg.”

Rogers took his arm. “Come along with me,” he said. “I’m just on my way.”

West nodded. “Got to see my lawyers some time to-day, but later will do just as well.” In five minutes they were seated in the chop house, ordering luncheon.

“How are you getting along out there among the miners?” laughed Donald, as he dismissed the waiter with their order. “Hope you like it better than doing laboratory work down in Jersey. Ought to be wonderful opportunities for a man, out there.” He paused for a moment, thoughtful. “You know I always used to say, when we were in college, that I meant to go West some day. I’ve never got there, though. New York has become a habit, I’m afraid. Can’t seem to break away from it.”

West looked at his friend with a faintly quizzical smile, and hesitated for a moment, as though he almost feared to tell the other what had come into his mind. Then he leaned across the table, and his face suddenly became grave. “Don,” he said earnestly, “the luck I’ve had out there has been so wonderful, so almost unbelievable, that, even though it happened nearly two years ago, I still can hardly realize that it’s true.”

“Strike a gold mine?” inquired Rogers, with a laugh.

“That’s exactly what I did do, and believe me, Don, it’s some mine. We capitalized it last year at a million, of which yours truly, owns half, and it paid over five per cent. from the start. I haven’t got used to figuring up my income yet, but just at present I think it’s running pretty close to thirty thousand a year, and more coming.” He leaned back in his chair with a satisfied smile. “I’m vice-president of the concern. The Lone Star mine, it’s called, up on the Little Ash river; but I haven’t anything much to do with the management – leave all that to the Boston crowd that put in the money. They’re a fine, conservative lot of fellows, with plenty of experience, and I know my interests are perfectly safe in their hands. So you see, I’m a sort of a gentleman of leisure just at present, with plenty of money to spend, and nobody in particular to spend it on, so I thought I’d take a run down to little old New York and put in a year or so getting acquainted with some of my old friends. I was on my way to my lawyers, as I said, when I met you, and, after attending to a little matter of business, I was coming right up to your office to see you. I looked up your address in the telephone book.”

Donald, who by this time had succeeded in digesting this remarkable piece of news, reached across the table and took his friend’s hand. “Billy,” he said, with a look which left no doubt as to the sincerity of his feelings, “congratulations from the bottom of my heart.”

“Thanks, old man. I knew you would be glad to know about my good luck.” He attacked the chop, which the waiter set before him with a flourish. “And now tell me about yourself. How’s your wife, and the boy – it was a boy, wasn’t it? The happy event occurred just before I went West, and I’m not exactly sure.” He flashed on Rogers one of those brilliant smiles which had always made him loved by both sexes, and particularly the one in petticoats.

“Edith is very well, and the boy is fine. I don’t wonder you did not remember. They will be delighted to see you. Why not come up to dinner to-night. We can’t offer you a feast, but you won’t mind taking pot luck.”

“Well, I should say not. I was hoping you would ask me. You can’t imagine how lost I feel in this town. I suppose it would be different if I had any family, but you know I haven’t even a second cousin I can call my own. I’ve often thought of you and Edith. You know that she might have been Mrs. West, once, years ago, if you hadn’t stepped in and taken her away from me. I’d have been jealous of anyone but you, Don, but I guess the best man won.” He laughed with a hearty frankness, and took up his mug of ale. “Here’s to the youngster. May he live long and prosper.”

Donald drained his glass. “I suppose you will be busy for a couple of hours,” he said, “with your legal matters. Why not come up to my office when you get through – I’m in the Columbia Building, you know – and we’ll go up-town together?”

“I’ll do it. We can stop at my hotel on the way, and give me a chance to clean up a bit. I only got in this morning on the sleeper, you know, and I feel a bit grubby.”

Some half-hour later they were making their way slowly toward Broadway. “What a great town it is, after all!” remarked West, as they turned the corner at John Street. “Every time a fellow goes away for a few years they seem to build it all over again before he gets back.” He turned to look at the towering mass of the Singer Building. “That’s a new one on me. Wouldn’t it make some of my friends back in Colorado have cricks in their backs?”

“It is a wonderful city,” replied Rogers grimly. “I don’t think I should ever care about living anywhere else, but the man who wins out in it has got to deliver the goods. Big as it is, there is no room in it for failures.” He waved his hand to West as the latter turned into Wall Street. “See you around four-thirty. So long.”

“I’ll be there. Wait for me if I’m a little late,” was the reply, as the two separated.

Donald went back to his plain little office and his power-transmission problem with a curious feeling of futility. Thirteen years of hard work had given him but little more than the right to fight that never ceasing battle with the grim city which could excuse anything but failure. West – pleasure-loving Billy West – who from his freshman days had looked upon the world as little more than an amazing joke, had by one stroke of fortune suddenly found all the pleasures, all the luxuries that life contained, at his feet. He did not envy West this good fortune, he was too staunch a friend for that, but he thought of Edith, and their little up-town flat, and as her tired face rose before him he suffered the pangs of that greatest of all forms of poverty, the inability to do for those we love.

CHAPTER III

During the year that preceded her marriage to Donald Rogers, Edith had seen a great deal of Billy West, and had liked him more than anyone except herself had realized. His was a personality, indeed, to compel the admiration of women. Tall, good-looking, of a reckless and laughter-loving type, he naturally appealed to that peculiar chord in the feminine make-up which responds so readily to the Cavalier in the opposite sex, while paying scant attention to the sturdy adherence to duty characteristic of his Roundhead adversary. For this reason, it is probable that, at one period of Donald's courtship, she would have listened more kindly to the love-making of his friend, had the latter, indeed, seen fit to make any. That he did not was due to no Quixotic sense of friendship for Donald, but to a very real and honest belief on his part that marriage on the slender pay of an assistant chemist was not for one of his type, an opinion in which he was entirely correct. Therefore he had hidden his love, which was in truth a real and lasting one, beneath his careless laughter, and had gone to Colorado when the occasion offered, neither heart whole nor fancy free, but just as determined to make much money with the utmost quickness as though he and Edith Pope had never laid eyes upon each other. After all, he and Edith were very much alike. They belonged to that class which demands of life its luxuries almost before its necessities, and it is a curious fact that they nearly always get them.

After eight years of married life, Edith Rogers, busy with her child, her household cares and the various complexities of domesticity, had forgotten her husband's friend as completely as though he had never come into her life at all. He, on the contrary, had thought of her continually, for his life in the West had been too keenly devoted to business to leave either time or opportunity for dalliance with the opposite sex. Hence the memory of his first and last love had not been effaced by the passage of time, but remained in his heart as a sweet and pleasing memory, gathering increased strength from the years as they rolled swiftly by. It should not be inferred from this, however, that William West had the slightest thought of ever renewing his courtship of Edith, now that she had become Donald Rogers' wife. His love for her was like a pleasant recollection, a package of old letters, a book read and closed forever. For all that, he was conscious of a queer feeling in the region of his heart as he followed Donald into the tiny living-room of the Rogers' apartment in Harlem.

Mrs. Rogers had not been apprised of her husband's intention to bring a guest home for dinner, least of all so unexpected a one as Billy West. The reason for this was that the Rogers' apartment boasted no telephone. The servant problem they had solved by the simple expedient of not keeping any. Hence it was that West's first glimpse of the Edith of his dreams was of a tired little woman, flushed from her efforts over the gas range, and in no sweet temper with her husband for having taken her unawares and at such a disadvantage. It is a fact worthy of record, however, that West found her, in this homely garb, more humanly delightful and attractive than would have been the case had she spent hours of preparation at her toilette table. He had been living for five years among men who found women more attractive as helpmates than as ornaments, and she appealed to him accordingly. As for Donald, no thought crossed his mind that these two were, or ever had been, anything more to each other than the best of friends.

"Billy!" Mrs. Rogers had gasped as she came into the room to greet her husband on his arrival, and had thus, by using the old familiar title, established a footing between them that somehow refused to return to the more formal one of "Mrs. Rogers" and "Mr. West." After all it was of no great importance – Billy and Edith they had always been to each other, and Billy and Edith they remained. Donald, if he noticed it at all, was glad of the fact that his wife and his old friend liked each other so well. The meeting became a little reunion, in the pleasure of which Mrs. Rogers soon forgot her plain, cheap house-gown and her flushed face, and entered into the spirit of the occasion with an unwonted gayety. She was a beautiful woman, in spite of her twenty-eight years; perhaps it would be

more correct to say because of them, for while at twenty she had been exceedingly pretty, it was little more than a youthful promise of what she had now become.

Her grandmother had been a Southern woman, and a noted beauty in those much talked of days “before the war,” and whether this lady’s beauty had, as time passed, taken on added glory, like most other things of that hallowed period, certain it is that Edith Rogers had received from some source a priceless inheritance as far as the perfection of her figure or the beauty of her coloring was concerned. Perhaps it was some forgotten strain of Irish blood that was responsible for her deep violet eyes and her dark chestnut hair, although her dusky complexion belied it.

West observed the change which the years had made in her, at once, and complimented her on it. “I have never seen you look so well,” he said, as he grasped her hand. “You were a rosebud when I went away, now you are an American beauty.” It pleased her mightily, for she felt that he meant it, and, like most married women, she heard few compliments from her husband. Mrs. Pope, her mother, never lost an opportunity to tell her that with her looks she could have married any man she pleased, but she paid no attention to remarks of this nature, knowing as she did that her mother was only trying to hit, indirectly, at Donald, whom she affected not to like.

She knew from West’s voice that he was very glad to see her, and after all these years, when he grasped her hand, and pressed it in his strong, firm grip, she felt the old familiar shock, the sensation of gladness for she knew not what, that almost took her breath away. It had always been that way with him. He was very different from Donald in many ways, for, while Donald was serious and earnest and very conscientious, West was always merry and gay and careless, never seeming to worry about money, although his income, at the time of her marriage, had been smaller even than Donald’s.

There was something about him that always attracted women. She felt this whenever she was with him, yet it did not come from any appreciation of his character, or his mind, for she knew very little about either. There was some sort of psychic magnetism about the man, some vibrating sense of physical vitality, which she felt whenever she was near him. His mere presence made her strangely silent and in a way afraid, yet, whatever it was that she feared, it at the same time attracted her, and made her sorry when it had passed. She had never felt that way with Donald, although always she had liked to be with him, for somehow she felt more comfortable and sure, and could talk things over better, and plan out the future. She had not thought much about the future when she was with West – there did not seem to be any need for a future – the present had been all she had desired, but that she had desired very much. All this had passed, years ago, but still it came back to her, in a measure, when she thus first met him again.

He looked at her, in that curiously intimate way he had, and even his smile made her happy. She felt his glance sweep over her face, her whole body, and almost embrace her in its pleasant radiance – it thrilled her, yet she almost resented the way in which it left her helpless and confused. In a moment he had looked beyond her, at Donald, and was making some laughing inquiry about their boy – and then she felt sorry and wanted him to look at her again.

Mrs. Pope had taught her daughters many things, but cooking was not one of them. Edith had been forced, like many another married woman, to learn it in the school of hard practical experience, and, to her credit be it said, she had learned it surprisingly well. She excused herself after the first greetings had been said, added an extra dish to the partially prepared meal, and hastened to her room to change her dress. Of West’s new fortunes she as yet knew nothing; it was to the man that she wanted to appeal, to the old friend, before whom her natural woman’s vanity made her wish to appear at her best. When she served the dinner half an hour later, it was in a light-green pongee that seemed to West a triumph of the dressmaker’s art. As a matter of fact she had made the dress herself, but it would have taken a far worse costume to have spoiled the lines of her superb figure, or dulled the sparkling mobility of her face.

Donald, with a father’s pride in his boy, dug out Bobbie from the recesses of his mother’s room, and brought him to West to be admired. He was a manly little fellow, with a large share of his mother’s

good looks, and West took him upon his knee, wondering inwardly if he would ever have a son of his own to inherit his newly acquired fortune.

To the boy he told stories about the Indians that made the youngster open his eyes very wide indeed, and Uncle Billy, as West admonished him to call him, became at once a very important personage in his childish eyes.

It was when dinner had progressed to the stage of the salad that Donald mentioned the matter of West's sudden rise to fortune. "Billy had made a ten-strike in the West," he remarked to his wife. "Discovered a gold mine."

"Really!" Edith laughed. "Is there any gold in it? Almost all the gold mines I ever heard of were lacking in that important particular."

"This one wasn't." Donald looked at West and laughed. "Billy tells me it's made him worth half a million."

Mrs. Rogers gasped, then turned to her guest. "You are not in earnest?" she inquired wonderingly. "Half a million?"

"About that," said West, trying to look as if he were speaking of the price of a new hat, or something equally unimportant.

"But you – you don't seem a bit excited about it, or anything." Mrs. Rogers' own eyes were big with interest. "I should think you would be simply overcome. I know I should. Half a million!" She glanced unconsciously about the poorly furnished little room and sighed. Donald noticed it; her thoughts, for the moment, had been his own.

"I was excited enough when I found it," remarked West with a chuckle. "It came like a snowstorm in August. Last thing in the world I had expected – at least just then."

"I suppose you just stood up and shouted," said his hostess.

"No, I didn't. I lit my pipe. I didn't want the rest of the bunch to know about it."

"Tell us the whole story." She was as interested as a child. Half a million dollars sounded like such a vast amount of money. All her life she had imagined what she would do if she were only rich. She had often thought it all out, in her day dreams – how she would give her mother so much for the trip to Europe that she was always talking about, and her sister so much more for the diamond necklace she wanted, and have an automobile and a place at the seashore and many other things. She had an exalted opinion of wealth and its possibilities; if she had known any wealthy people she would probably have found them very much like everyone else, complaining about the price of beef, and the difficulty of keeping one's servants and paying one's bills. She believed that it was not what one has, but what one has not, that counts. The sound of West's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"There isn't much to tell. I was on my vacation at the time, and there were about a dozen of us, camping up on the Little Ash river. There hadn't been any gold found in that section, before that, but I was always looking out for it – you see I had studied the formation up that way the summer before, and I was certain the rock was there. The boys used to make a good deal of fun of me, poking about with my geologist's hammer, instead of fishing or the like. It was the last day of our stay, I remember, and we had already begun to get our things together, in readiness to break camp in the morning. I had strolled up the river a few hundred yards, feeling a little disappointed at going back to Denver without even a piece of iron pyrites, when I noticed a sort of whitish streak in the rocky bank just a little above where it rose from the edge of the river. It was mostly covered with underbrush and thick bushes, and I wonder that I saw it at all. I climbed down and took a good look, and then I just sat down on a rock and got out my pipe and had a good smoke. I felt somehow as though a new life had begun for me, and I wanted time to think things out. After a while I broke off a few samples of the quartz – it was a beautiful outcropping, with a pay streak in it as thick as your two fingers – and I stowed them away in my pocket and strolled back to camp as though nothing had happened. One of the boys said, as I came up, 'Find your gold mine yet?' and laughed. 'Yes,' I said, 'and it's worth a million.' They all

laughed, for they thought I was joking, but I felt my bits of quartz in my pocket and said nothing. We got back to town the next afternoon and I had made my assays before I turned in that night.”

“And then you knew?” she asked eagerly.

“Yes. I staked out my claim very quietly. Of course I gave up my position the next day. After I had had the claim registered, I went to see a man in Denver that I had come to know pretty well – he was the representative of a wealthy crowd in Boston who dealt extensively in mining properties, and I told him what I had. I won’t bother you with the details. We formed a company, and they gave me half of the stock and made me vice-president, and then we started in to work the claim. In six months we had got in our stamping mills and were taking out ore. The rock got better, as we went into the hill, and we began to pay dividends almost from the start. There isn’t any of our stock for sale now. I don’t have much of anything to do with the management. It’s in good hands, and last month, when I saw that everything was working smoothly, I made up my mind to come East, and look up some of my old friends.” He glanced at Donald as he said this, and then at Edith, and she felt somehow, that he wanted her to feel that it was she that he meant.

She began to see, that very evening, something of what it meant to have so much money that it was not necessary to think about how one spent it. When West suggested, after dinner, that they all go to the theater, she said at once that it was too late – that they would never be able to get tickets at that hour. It was then close to eight o’clock, but West laughed, and said he would see to the tickets, so she put on her hat and they went.

When Donald and she went to the theater, which was not very often, they used to think about it for days ahead and were delighted if they were able to get good seats in the balcony at less than the prices charged downstairs.

Their evening was a delightful one. They whirled down-town to the theater in a taxicab, and went to supper afterwards at one of the best-known restaurants, where Edith wondered how the countless array of young and very beautiful women managed to get such gorgeous gowns and such magnificent jewelry. She and Donald did not often patronize such places.

They came home in a whirl of excitement, and Edith lay awake a long time after she had gone to bed, wondering if after all her mother had not been right in urging her to marry for money. She looked at Donald, who lay at her side, and thought long, long thoughts. She was not conscious of any disloyalty to him – she liked Donald very much – he seemed almost like a dear friend. Presently she began to try to analyze her love for him, her marriage, and her after life. She respected and admired his mind, his character, but was there not, after all, something else in life – something deeper and more vital in the marriage relationship, something that she had missed? Why was it that Donald’s presence, his touch, his look even, gave her no such glow of happiness as she had suddenly found with this man who had been a stranger to her for so many years? It was wrong, she knew, but clearly there was something lacking. Bobbie, waking fretfully, brought her to a sudden sense of the realities of life. She got up and placed an extra cover over him, and when she had once more succeeded in putting him to sleep her questions seemed for the time being answered.

CHAPTER IV

West spent the next few days in getting comfortably located in New York, laying in a supply of new clothes, and purchasing an automobile. His life in Colorado had been unusually simple, since, with his time almost entirely given over to business affairs, he had had neither inclination nor opportunity for amusement. Now, however, he felt himself on a holiday. His bank account was bulging with unspent income, and he frankly admitted to himself that he had come to New York to spend it. Edith, who seemed almost continually in his mind, provided the necessary outlet, and he pictured the two of them making many delightful excursions into the country about New York in the big touring car which he had selected.

During his visits to tailors, bootmakers, haberdashers, and the like, he found time to send her a huge box of violets on two different occasions, and, with a vague idea of salving his conscience, hunted up Donald one day and took him to luncheon.

It was nearly a week after his first visit to the Rogers' apartment that he suddenly made up his mind to call, and, as luck would have it, Donald was not at home on that particular evening, having gone to a meeting of one of the engineering societies of which he was a member. The absence of a telephone brought West before the Rogers' door without any previous knowledge of his friend's absence. Edith, who was sitting alone, reading a magazine, and, to tell the truth, thinking of West himself and wondering what had become of him, received her caller with unfeigned gladness and insisted upon his remaining until Donald's return, which, she assured him, would not be late. Between spending the evening alone at his hotel, and here with the woman he had half-begun to believe was dearer to him, in spite of the lapse of years, than anyone else in the world, there was no choice. West came in and sat down, delighted at the opportunity which fate had thus generously accorded him.

They talked along conventional lines for a time, West entertaining her with an account of his experiences during the past week, and dilating upon the merits of his new automobile, which he insisted she must try at once. Edith was delighted at the prospect – he told her that he was taking lessons in driving, and would soon be able to manage it with the best of them.

After a time, the topic having been exhausted, a silence came upon them, one of those portentous intervals that form a prelude to the expression of the unspoken thought, the unbidden wish.

Edith was more than ever conscious of some powerful attraction in this man; he seemed to represent vast possibilities – possibilities for future happiness – of what nature she did not dare even to ask herself. She felt, whenever she was with him, a strange confidence in the outcome of things; although what things she did not know. "I should be so glad to go," she had said, in reply to his suggestion regarding the proposed automobile trips. "I am alone so much!" There had been a touch of sadness in her voice that did not escape him. He looked at her keenly. "Are you happy, Edith?" he asked with directness which startled her.

"Why – yes – of course I am. I hope you do not think that I was complaining. I only meant that I am a good deal alone during the day, and – and –" She hesitated. He knew quite well that she was not happy – or, at least, that she found her life far more empty than she had ever dreamed it would be when she married.

"– And you will take pity on a lonely bachelor," he completed her sentence for her. "As a matter of fact, I haven't anyone else to go about with, you know."

"And so you fall back on me. You're not very complimentary, Billy. I'll have to find someone to help you spend your money." She laughed, watching him narrowly as she spoke. After her eight years of married life, the subtle flattery of this man's attentions seemed doubly sweet, and, woman-like, she wanted to hold on to them, and enjoy them, as long as she could.

"I don't think I'd care about any young girl," he remarked gravely. "You know I always liked you better than anyone else, Edith, and I'm glad to say I still do."

“In spite of my gray hairs,” she laughed. She had none, as a matter of fact, being especially youthful in appearance for a woman of nearly thirty, but she longed for the compliment she felt sure her remark would elicit.

“In spite of everything,” he declared, “I have never forgiven Donald for cutting in and marrying you while I was away trying to make a fortune to lay at your feet.” He spoke banteringly, with a laugh, but something in his voice told her that he was far more in earnest than his manner indicated. “Now that I have made it, I am determined that you shall have some pleasure out of it.”

“That’s very sweet of you, Billy,” she said, with a touch of gravity in her manner. “I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it.”

“Nonsense. Think what old friends we are. If you will take pity on my loneliness, and all that, I shall feel that I am the one who should be grateful.” He rose from his chair and came over to where she sat, near the desk. “Do you know, Edith,” he said suddenly, “that in all the time I have been away I don’t suppose a single day went by that I did not think of you?”

“Don’t tell me that, Billy. If you thought of me once in six months you did well.” Her nervous laugh, as she attempted to meet his gaze, sounded unconvincing. She almost began to believe that he had thought of her every day.

“Do you remember that picture you once gave me – the one in the big Leghorn hat?”

“Why, yes,” she answered slowly.

“I’ve had it on my dresser always, wherever I’ve been – it was the last thing I looked at when I went to bed at night. So, you see, I did think of you every day – honestly.”

She felt her color coming – something in his manner, as he stood there gazing down at her, alarmed her. She felt that he still loved her, and that it would be only a question of time until he should tell her so. She was by no means prepared for any such rupture in their friendly relations, for rupture she knew it would certainly be, should he speak. She rose hastily and went toward the piano.

“Shall I play for you?” she asked. In the past it had been his invariable habit to ask her to do so.

“Will you?” His voice showed his appreciation of the fact that she had remembered.

“What would you like?”

“Oh, anything – it’s been so long since I’ve heard any good music!” He joined her at the piano. “How about that beautiful thing you used to sing sometimes – Massenet’s ‘Elegy,’ wasn’t it? Don’t you remember I always said I’d rather hear you sing that than listen to a grand opera?”

“Oh – I couldn’t. I haven’t sung for years.”

“What a pity! I shouldn’t think Donald would let you give it up.”

“Donald doesn’t care much for music.” She felt as she spoke that she had in some way criticized her husband and hastened to make amends. “He’s too busy – that’s the reason. Donald is working very hard, and has to do a lot of work at home – nights. If I sang, it would bother him.” She began to play the piece with considerable feeling and skill, and West, who was intensely fond of music, leaned over the piano and watched her happily. To have this woman all to himself seemed to him the only thing that fortune had denied him. The love which had lain so quiet all these years surged up within him with unsuspected force. His arms longed to draw her to him, to clasp her to his heart. He looked at her expressive, delicate face, her round, smooth neck, her dark, heavy hair, and wondered how Donald could bring himself to think that she could possibly be happy in the position of a mere household drudge. His reflections did Donald scant justice; the latter, poor fellow, was trying with all his strength to lift both Edith and himself out of their present environment, but Donald was a silent man, who endured all things patiently, and he expected his wife to do the same.

West’s intentions, if, indeed, he admitted to himself that he had any at this time, were directed toward two ends – his own amusement and Edith’s. Perhaps amusement is not the exact word – it was more than that to him, for he could have amused himself with many women. He was really very fond of Edith, more so, perhaps, than he himself fully realized, and in giving her pleasure he gave himself pleasure as well. The idea of making love to her, of coming in any way between herself and Donald,

had never entered his mind. After all, we so rarely erect barriers against certain experiences in life until after they have occurred, by which time barriers are no longer of any avail.

When Edith stopped playing, West begged her to go on, and presently, running into the accompaniment of "Oh, Promise Me," she began to sing in a clear, sweet voice which brought back to him the evenings, long before, when she had sung this song to him. Unconsciously the years passed from them – he joined in the chorus of the song with his uncultivated, yet not unmusical, baritone, and once more they seemed back in the boarding-house parlor, she the young girl with life all before her, and he the happy-go-lucky Billy West, making and spending his small salary with joyous indifference as to the future.

He stayed until nearly half-past ten, hoping that Donald would return, but the latter evidently had been kept longer than he expected. Edith did not press him to remain – somehow, in spite of her old friendship for West, it seemed a bit queer, this sensation of being here alone in her apartment with a man other than her husband. She did not propose to conceal the fact of his having been there from Donald, but it seemed to her easier to tell Donald that Billy had called during his absence than to have him come in and find them together even as innocently engaged as they were. She knew that this feeling on her part was absurd, that Donald would not have the least idea of jealousy or suspicion – he was too clean minded a man for that. Her scruples arose from a deeper cause. She had begun to think about West in a way that caused her to feel guilty of disloyalty to her husband when no disloyalty had occurred – to desire to avoid the appearance of evil where no evil existed. All that she had done had been to liken her life with Donald, to what it might have been had she married West. It is a curious fact that the best of women are willing at times to compare the husband at his worst, with the lover at his casual best, and judge both accordingly.

West rode back to his hotel in a maze of doubts. He was genuinely fond of Donald – he liked him better than any man he knew, and this, probably, because he was in all things so nearly the other's opposite. He wondered whether Donald would object in any way to the attentions he proposed showing Edith – whether he would become jealous, and feel that his wife's place was at home, rather than dashing about in a five-thousand-dollar automobile with another man. Perhaps it would be but natural that he should, although not by nature a jealous man, and West realized the confidence that he placed in both his wife and himself. What West did not realize was the effect which his money and the pleasures and luxuries it could command would have upon this woman whose married life had been one long lesson in economy. He had no conception of the contrast in Edith's life between a quiet existence in a Harlem flat and the land of dreams to which his money was the open sesame, the golden key, unlocking the barriers between poverty on the one hand and all that the heart could desire on the other. He did not, could not, realize the upheaval which would necessarily take place in her life, the dissatisfaction which must inevitably ensue, if she were once drawn into a whirl of pleasures and excitements to which her existence for so many years had been totally foreign. If she and Donald lunched or dined together at an expensive restaurant it was an event, commemorating some anniversary – such as their wedding or a birthday. West, on the contrary, regarded dropping into any of the hotels or cafés for luncheon or dinner as a most ordinary performance – he was forced to do it himself, and his only desire was for company. As for going to the theater, he knew that the best seats were always obtainable at the hotels, or on the sidewalk – at a small advance in price, it is true. But what difference did that make to a man who had a hundred dollars a day to spend and no reason whatever for not spending it?

Even before West's coming, the subtle poison of dissatisfaction had begun to eat its way into Edith's heart. Money had always appeared to her a vital necessity in life – her mother had taken care of that – but in the flush of youthful enthusiasm she had believed that, with Donald at her side, she could endure comparative poverty with a light heart, until he had made his fortune, as so many another man had done before him. She had not thought, however, that the time would be so long.

West came into her life at a moment when she was fertile soil for the seeds of discontent which he so unconsciously was planting in her nature.

She greeted her husband with indifferent coldness upon his return, about half-past eleven, and told him of West's call. Donald was unfeignedly sorry that he had missed his friend, but showed no least trace of annoyance on learning that West and Edith had spent the evening together. "I hope he will come often," he said. "We have both been a bit lonely of late. It will do you good, dear, to have new interests in life. I am only sorry that I cannot do more for you myself." He drew her to him, and kissed her tenderly, but, somehow, under his caress she shivered and grew cold. "Billy is a splendid fellow, and I don't doubt you will be doing him a real kindness to help him amuse himself a bit until he has got settled in town. It makes a great difference to a man, to be away from New York for five years."

West had suggested to Edith that they take a trial trip in the new automobile the following Friday, but of this Edith said nothing at the time. It was not that she wished to conceal the fact, but it seemed to her pointed, and as though drawing especial attention to an unimportant matter, to speak of it at this time. So she said nothing. After all, she had nothing to conceal or be ashamed of. It is true that, in her more introspective moments, she saw a dim shadow of danger ahead; but she put it resolutely aside, and contented herself with a sophistry which has led many another along devious paths. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

CHAPTER V

It was early in March that West came to New York, and from then on Edith Rogers lived what was to her a new life. She had persuaded Donald to let her have a nurse for Bobbie, a young girl who came in every morning, took the child out in the park, amused him during the day, and helped with the housework. This left her comparatively free to spend a large part of her time with West. Their automobile trips became a matter of almost daily occurrence.

Thrown thus so much together, these two closed their eyes to the danger which they both knew was impending; they walked gayly upon the edge of a yawning chasm and refused to admit that one false step would send them both crashing down into an abyss of chaos and destruction. In a few weeks, from talking first of themselves, then of each other, during long days when Donald labored patiently in his office down-town, it was but a question of time when “you” and “me” became “we,” and Edith would have missed Billy West from her life more than she would have missed Donald, because he had become more a part of it. Like a ship at anchor, with all sails set and filled by a strong and ever increasing gale, it was inevitably certain that before long either the anchor must give, or the white sails of her reputation be blown to rags and tatters – bitter state, indeed, for a wife and mother!

One of the things about West which appealed to her most was his ever ready sympathy. Donald, made of sterner stuff, realized that sympathy, overdone, weakens one’s powers of resistance, and exaggerates one’s burdens. He expected his wife to bear what life accorded to her in the way of hardship as patiently as he himself did. West, on the contrary, was always sympathetic. Edith’s cares, her worries, her troubles, he at once made his own, and seemed only content if he could in some way relieve them. That he had the means to do so, and could not, made it all the harder for him. He would have given her anything he possessed, yet knew she could accept only the veriest trifles. Flowers, theater tickets, automobile rides, served to intensify, rather than lessen, her longings for the things she must perforce do without. Expensive restaurants implied expensive costumes, hats, jewels, which she did not have and could not get, and she often wondered that her companion did not feel ashamed of her in her home-made clothes.

By some system of more-than-rigid economy known only to herself she had managed to procure a few of the things she felt she most needed: a long automobile coat – reduced because shop-worn – a motor hat and veil, and an evening gown which had once been part of the theatrical outfit of a well-known star, and which she had picked up, second-hand, at a little shop on Sixth Avenue. It was very magnificent; she felt almost ashamed to wear it so often, but she knew that it showed off her charms to the greatest advantage, having been designed, primarily, with that end in view. Had she ever stopped to ask herself why she wanted to exhibit these charms to West she would probably have been unable to answer her own question, but she had long ago ceased to catechize herself – sufficient it was that Billy was pleased that she looked well, and that Donald did not blame her. She was floating happily along from day to day, not daring to ask herself what the outcome of it all would be.

She was seldom alone with West – alone, that is, in the sense of being to themselves. She had not dared, after that first night, to have him at the apartment – they had met at the doorstep, and their hours together were spent over restaurant tables, or in theater seats, or the automobile. She had a terrible fear that some time or other West would reach out his arms to her and she knew that, if he did, she would go to him without a question. He had assisted her in avoiding such a *contretemps*, for he, too, knew his power, and was fighting to hold what he had, rather than lose it in a vague and mysterious future, at the character of which he could only guess. On one or two occasions, when they had come in from automobiling, and West was waiting until Donald should arrive from the office, preparatory to their all going to dinner together, she had purposely brought Bobbie into the room. Once when they had so come in, Bobbie was out with his nurse, and she had wondered if Billy would take advantage of the fact. Much as she feared it, she was conscious of a fierce hope that he would.

These two were like firebrands – he longed in every fiber to take her into his arms and kiss her, and she knew it. She equally hungered for his embraces, and he knew that this was so; in both their minds this maddening thought had become a reality – a thousand times. She had acted it to herself over and over, as he had done, and had felt, in her imagination, every thrill of delight which this physical contact would give her, yet something, some leash of conscience as yet not worn to the breaking point, held them apart.

On this particular occasion he sat far from her, and held on to his half-smoked cigar as though it had been his salvation. She busied herself turning idly the leaves of a magazine. He knew, if he threw that cigar away, he would go over to her and take her in his arms, and kiss her, and he dared not to do it – for fear of what might come thereafter.

In April, he had been obliged to go away for three weeks, in connection with some business affairs in the West, and the separation had come almost as a relief to both of them. They had endured as far as human flesh and blood could endure. West told her of the matters which made it necessary for him to go, but she felt that they were not so important as he represented, and knew in her heart that he was going away because he wanted to give both himself and her an opportunity to readjust themselves, to think matters over calmly, without the presence of each other to affect their judgment.

The time of his absence seemed interminably long. Edith found that most of the long series of introspective analyses to which she subjected herself terminated in a mad desire to have him back again in New York. His absence had shown her how absolutely she had been depending upon him, how his going had taken from her everything that made her life joyous and happy, leaving only the dull background of duty and work, two things that she had come to regard merely as unfortunate necessities of existence.

During his absence she spent a great deal more time with Bobbie than she had been in the habit of doing of late, and found to her surprise that the child depended upon her and thought of her less than he had done before. His nurse was a kind-hearted young girl, who had come to love the little boy deeply and mothered him in all sorts of ways. He had got out of the habit of seeing his mother all day as he had done in the past and, with the easy forgetfulness of childhood, clamored for Nellie, as the girl was called, and their daily walks in the park, the games she had thought out to amuse him, the easy comradeship that made her his playfellow rather than a superior and distant grown-up. Edith resented this, at first, but soon ceased her attempts to change matters and busied herself in making dresses for the coming summer.

She saw West again on a drizzly afternoon in May. His frequent letters had told her of his life while away and of the day of his return. He had called rather unexpectedly about three o'clock, and they had gone for a walk in the park. He seemed strangely silent, at first, and neither of them spoke much for a few moments; they walked along side by side, inwardly trying to bridge the gap which the past few weeks had made in their lives. Presently he spoke.

“I cannot tell you how glad I am to be back again. I used to like the West, but I do not think I could ever live there again.”

She said what was nearest her heart. “I am glad, too – very glad,” then grew confused and silent.

“I brought you a little souvenir,” he said, taking a small package from his pocket, and handing it to her. She opened the box it contained and drew out a magnificent gold chain purse. “I had it made from some of the gold from our mine,” he continued hesitatingly; “I thought you might like it.”

“Oh, Billy!” she cried, and looked up at him with darkening eyes. “How lovely of you to think of me! It is beautiful – beautiful.” She gloated over its exquisite workmanship with all the joy of suddenly possessing something which had always seemed very far away.

“I hoped you would like it,” he said.

“Oh – I do – more than I can tell you. I never expected to have one, though I have longed for it all my life.” She smiled, dangling the purse delightedly from its gold chain. “I only wish I had more to put in it,” she concluded thoughtlessly.

“So do I – Edith – so do I.” His tone betrayed the intensity of his feelings. “I wish I could do more for you – but I haven’t the right – I haven’t the right.” His voice trailed off helplessly. “I only wish I had.”

She said nothing to this. It was perilous ground and they both knew it. “How is Donald?” he asked suddenly.

“Oh, he’s very well. Busy as ever. Won’t you come in and see us this evening?”

“No – not this evening. I have a man with me from Denver that I must be with. He is going on to Boston at midnight. One of our directors,” he added by way of explanation. “But we must take a ride in the machine to-morrow. I suppose it will be quite rusty for want of use.”

“I suppose so. I’ve missed our trips.”

He looked at her closely. “Yes, I can see that,” he said, “you do not look so well – you are pale and tired. What have you been doing with yourself?”

“Oh, nothing much. Sewing, mostly.” She did not tell him that her principal occupation had been waiting for him to return.

“You need the fresh air. Suppose we take a run down to Garden City and have luncheon there. I’ll look in and see Donald in the morning and say hello. Does he know I am back?”

“No – I don’t think so. I didn’t mention it.”

He said nothing to this at first and did not even look at her. “I wonder if Donald minds my – our – our going about so much together,” he ventured, at last. “Do you think he does?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “Why should he? I think he is rather glad that I have had so much pleasure.” She hesitated a moment, then went on. “He has never said anything. You know how fond he is of you.”

“Yes – I know it.” He spoke as though the thought brought up unpleasant ideas. “Isn’t life a terrible tragedy?” he said, as though to himself. “The things we want most, it seems, we can never, never have, without hurting someone else to get them.”

“Donald says that is sure proof that we ought not to have them,” she said in a low voice.

“And do you think so, too?” he asked eagerly.

“I – I do not know.”

He hesitated a moment, then went on impetuously. “Is duty after all everything in the world? Is there not a duty to ourselves as well as to others? May not one duty conflict with another, and make it hard to know which one we ought to follow? Must two people make themselves utterly wretched, to give happiness to a third? Isn’t it somehow sort of unequal – paying too great a price for a thing that is not worth it?”

She did not answer him, nor did he expect her to do so. He was in reality only thinking aloud – expressing the thoughts which had been uppermost in his mind for the past three weeks, and, woman-like, she took refuge in silence, for she knew that were she to answer him truthfully she would agree with him.

“If two people love each other enough, doesn’t it make up for anything else in the world? We can’t control our feelings. We can’t help it, if love comes to us and takes from us everything in our lives, and leaves nothing behind but itself. There must be some purpose in it all. If there is nothing left to us but love, why should we have to give that up as well, and go on and on in wretched misery to the end? I can’t do it – and yet, I know that I must.”

She trembled as she heard his words – so unlike the care-free man she had come to know. He had changed very much, in these past few weeks. The lines of suffering in his face were new to it, and only a great emotion could have set them there. He loved her with a strong, compelling love, and he was wrestling with the vital problems of duty and right. She, on her part, loved him because of what pleasure he had given her, and was wrestling with no problems whatever. Her only thought at the moment was a great desire to have him put his arms about her and crush her to him. This, however, he did not know, for he had idealized her and invested her with all manner of high

qualities and virtues which she by no means possessed. She had begun to feel just a trifle annoyed by his constant self-control. Somehow it seemed to belittle her own powers of attraction. She feared, at times, that he might, casting prudence, duty – honor to the winds, overwhelm her in a wild and rapturous outburst of love, but the fact that he had not done so, up to now, annoyed her a little, and almost made her desire the more that he would. She liked to feel that West was a firebrand, that she herself was keeping him at a distance – she did not enjoy the thought that he was controlling himself in spite of her. He pedestaled her as a paragon of virtue, a creature of restraint, which he, a devastating male, had caused to love him. She was in reality far more frail than he, and the more he held aloof, the more she burned for his caresses. Passion had made her shameless.

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