Gilman Charlotte Perkins

The Crux: A Novel

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Gilman C.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

This story is, first, for young women to read; second, for young men to read; after that, for anybody who wants to. Anyone who doubts its facts and figures is referred to "Social Diseases and Marriage," by Dr. Prince Morrow, or to "Hygiene and Morality," by Miss Lavinia Dock, a trained nurse of long experience.

Some will hold that the painful facts disclosed are unfit for young girls to know. Young girls are precisely the ones who must know them, in order that they may protect themselves and their children to come. The time to know of danger is before it is too late to avoid it.

If some say "Innocence is the greatest charm of young girls," the answer is, "What good does it do them?"

Who should know but the woman? – The young wife-to-be?
Whose whole life hangs on the choice;
To her the ruin, the misery;
To her, the deciding voice.

Who should know but the woman? – The mother-to-be?
Guardian, Giver, and Guide;
If she may not foreknow, forejudge and foresee,
What safety has childhood beside?

Who should know but the woman? – The girl in her youth?
The hour of the warning is then,
That, strong in her knowledge and free in her truth,
She may build a new race of new men.

CHAPTER I
THE BACK WAY

Along the same old garden path,
Sweet with the same old flowers;
Under the lilacs, darkly dense,
The easy gate in the backyard fence —
Those unforgotten hours!

The "Foote Girls" were bustling along Margate Street with an air of united purpose that was unusual with them. Miss Rebecca wore her black silk cloak, by which it might be seen that "a call" was toward. Miss Jessie, the thin sister, and Miss Sallie, the fat one, were more hastily attired. They were persons of less impressiveness than Miss Rebecca, as was tacitly admitted by their more familiar nicknames, a concession never made by the older sister.

Even Miss Rebecca was hurrying a little, for her, but the others were swifter and more impatient.

"Do come on, Rebecca. Anybody'd think you were eighty instead of fifty!" said Miss Sallie.

"There's Mrs. Williams going in! I wonder if she's heard already. Do hurry!" urged Miss Josie.

But Miss Rebecca, being concerned about her dignity, would not allow herself to be hustled, and the three proceeded in irregular order under the high-arched elms and fence-topping syringas of the small New England town toward the austere home of Mr. Samuel Lane.

It was a large, uncompromising, square, white house, planted starkly in the close-cut grass. It had no porch for summer lounging, no front gate for evening dalliance, no path-bordering beds of flowers from which to pluck a hasty offering or more redundant tribute. The fragrance which surrounded it came from the back yard, or over the fences of neighbors; the trees which waved greenly about it were the trees of other people. Mr. Lane had but two trees, one on each side of the straight and narrow path, evenly placed between house and sidewalk – evergreens.

Mrs. Lane received them amiably; the minister's new wife, Mrs. Williams, was proving a little difficult to entertain. She was from Cambridge, Mass., and emanated a restrained consciousness of that fact. Mr. Lane rose stiffly and greeted them. He did not like the Foote girls, not having the usual American's share of the sense of humor. He had no enjoyment of the town joke, as old as they were, that "the three of them made a full yard;" and had frowned down as a profane impertinent the man – a little sore under some effect of gossip – who had amended it with "make an 'ell, I say."

Safely seated in their several rocking chairs, and severally rocking them, the Misses Foote burst forth, as was their custom, in simultaneous, though by no means identical remarks.

"I suppose you've heard about Morton Elder?"

"What do you think Mort Elder's been doing now?"

"We've got bad news for poor Miss Elder!"

Mrs. Lane was intensely interested. Even Mr. Lane showed signs of animation.

"I'm not surprised," he said.

"He's done it now," opined Miss Josie with conviction. "I always said Rella Elder was spoiling that boy."

"It's too bad – after all she's done for him! He always was a scamp!" Thus Miss Sallie.

"I've been afraid of it all along," Miss Rebecca was saying, her voice booming through the lighter tones of her sisters. "I always said he'd never get through college."

"But who is Morton Elder, and what has he done?" asked Mrs. Williams as soon as she could be heard.

This lady now proved a most valuable asset. She was so new to the town, and had been so immersed in the suddenly widening range of her unsalaried duties as "minister's wife," that she had never even heard of Morton Elder.

A new resident always fans the languishing flame of local conversation. The whole shopworn stock takes on a fresh lustre, topics long trampled flat in much discussion lift their heads anew, opinions one scarce dared to repeat again become almost authoritative, old stories flourish freshly, acquiring new detail and more vivid color.

Mrs. Lane, seizing her opportunity while the sisters gasped a momentary amazement at anyone's not knowing the town scapegrace, and taking advantage of her position as old friend and near neighbor of the family under discussion, swept into the field under such headway that even the Foote girls remained silent perforce; surcharged, however, and holding their breaths in readiness to burst forth at the first opening.

"He's the nephew – orphan nephew – of Miss Elder – who lives right back of us – our yards touch – we've always been friends – went to school together, Rella's never married – she teaches, you know – and her brother – he owned the home – it's all hers now, he died all of a sudden and left two children – Morton and Susie. Mort was about seven years old and Susie just a baby. He's been an awful cross – but she just idolizes him – she's spoiled him, I tell her."

Mrs. Lane had to breathe, and even the briefest pause left her stranded to wait another chance. The three social benefactors proceeded to distribute their information in a clattering torrent. They sought to inform Mrs. Williams in especial, of numberless details of the early life and education of their subject, matters which would have been treated more appreciatively if they had not been blessed with the later news; and, at the same time, each was seeking for a more dramatic emphasis to give this last supply of incident with due effect.

No regular record is possible where three persons pour forth statement and comment in a rapid, tumultuous stream, interrupted by cross currents of heated contradiction, and further varied by the exclamations and protests of three hearers, or at least, of two; for the one man present soon relapsed into disgusted silence.

Mrs. Williams, turning a perplexed face from one to the other, inwardly condemning the darkening flood of talk, yet conscious of a sinful pleasure in it, and anxious as a guest, *and* a minister's wife, to be most amiable, felt like one watching three kinetescopes at once. She saw, in confused pictures of blurred and varying outline, Orella Elder, the young New England girl, only eighteen, already a "school ma'am," suddenly left with two children to bring up, and doing it, as best she could. She saw the boy, momentarily changing, in his shuttlecock flight from mouth to mouth, through pale shades of open mischief to the black and scarlet of hinted sin, the terror of the neighborhood, the darling of his aunt, clever, audacious, scandalizing the quiet town.

"Boys are apt to be mischievous, aren't they?" she suggested when it was possible.

"He's worse than mischievous," Mr. Lane assured her sourly. "There's a mean streak in that family."

"That's on his mother's side," Mrs. Lane hastened to add. "She was a queer girl – came from New York."

The Foote girls began again, with rich profusion of detail, their voices rising shrill, one above the other, and playing together at their full height like emulous fountains.

"We ought not to judge, you know;" urged Mrs. Williams. "What do you say he's really done?"

Being sifted, it appeared that this last and most terrible performance was to go to "the city" with a group of "the worst boys of college," to get undeniably drunk, to do some piece of mischief. (Here was great licence in opinion, and in contradiction.)

"*Anyway* he's to be suspended!" said Miss Rebecca with finality.

"Suspended!" Miss Josie's voice rose in scorn. "*Expelled!* They said he was expelled."

"In disgrace!" added Miss Sallie.

Vivian Lane sat in the back room at the window, studying in the lingering light of the long June evening. At least, she appeared to be studying. Her tall figure was bent over her books, but the dark eyes blazed under their delicate level brows, and her face flushed and paled with changing feelings.

She had heard – who, in the same house, could escape hearing the Misses Foote? – and had followed the torrent of description, hearsay, surmise and allegation with an interest that was painful in its intensity.

"It's a *shame*!" she whispered under her breath. "A *shame*! And nobody to stand up for him!"

She half rose to her feet as if to do it herself, but sank back irresolutely.

A fresh wave of talk rolled forth.

"It'll half kill his aunt."

"Poor Miss Elder! I don't know what she'll do!"

"I don't know what *he'll* do. He can't go back to college."

"He'll have to go to work."

"I'd like to know where – nobody'd hire him in this town."

The girl could bear it no longer. She came to the door, and there, as they paused to speak to her, her purpose ebbed again.

"My daughter, Vivian, Mrs. Williams," said her mother; and the other callers greeted her familiarly.

"You'd better finish your lessons, Vivian," Mr. Lane suggested.

"I have, father," said the girl, and took a chair by the minister's wife. She had a vague feeling that if she were there, they would not talk so about Morton Elder.

Mrs. Williams hailed the interruption gratefully. She liked the slender girl with the thoughtful eyes and pretty, rather pathetic mouth, and sought to draw her out. But her questions soon led to unfortunate results.

"You are going to college, I suppose?" she presently inquired; and Vivian owned that it was the desire of her heart.

"Nonsense!" said her father. "Stuff and nonsense, Vivian! You're not going to college."

The Foote girls now burst forth in voluble agreement with Mr. Lane. His wife was evidently of the same mind; and Mrs. Williams plainly regretted her question. But Vivian mustered courage enough to make a stand, strengthened perhaps by the depth of the feeling which had brought her into the room.

"I don't know why you're all so down on a girl's going to college. Eve Marks has gone, and Mary Spring is going – and both the Austin girls. Everybody goes now."

"I know one girl that won't," was her father's incisive comment, and her mother said quietly, "A girl's place is at home – 'till she marries."

"Suppose I don't want to marry?" said Vivian.

"Don't talk nonsense," her father answered. "Marriage is a woman's duty."

"What do you want to do?" asked Miss Josie in the interests of further combat. "Do you want to be a doctor, like Jane Bellair?"

"I should like to very much indeed," said the girl with quiet intensity. "I'd like to be a doctor in a babies' hospital."

"More nonsense," said Mr. Lane. "Don't talk to me about that woman! You attend to your studies, and then to your home duties, my dear."

The talk rose anew, the three sisters contriving all to agree with Mr. Lane in his opinions about college, marriage and Dr. Bellair, yet to disagree violently among themselves.

Mrs. Williams rose to go, and in the lull that followed the liquid note of a whippoorwill met the girl's quick ear. She quietly slipped out, unnoticed.

The Lane's home stood near the outer edge of the town, with an outlook across wide meadows and soft wooded hills. Behind, their long garden backed on that of Miss Orella Elder, with a connecting gate in the gray board fence. Mrs. Lane had grown up here. The house belonged to her mother, Mrs. Servilla Pettigrew, though that able lady was seldom in it, preferring to make herself useful among two growing sets of grandchildren.

Miss Elder was Vivian's favorite teacher. She was a careful and conscientious instructor, and the girl was a careful and conscientious scholar; so they got on admirably together; indeed, there was a real affection between them. And just as the young Laura Pettigrew had played with the younger Orella Elder, so Vivian had played with little Susie Elder, Miss Orella's orphan niece. Susie regarded the older girl with worshipful affection, which was not at all unpleasant to an emotional young creature with unemotional parents, and no brothers or sisters of her own.

Moreover, Susie was Morton's sister.

The whippoorwill's cry sounded again through the soft June night. Vivian came quickly down the garden path between the bordering beds of sweet alyssum and mignonette. A dew-wet rose brushed against her hand. She broke it off, pricking her fingers, and hastily fastened it in the bosom of her white frock.

Large old lilac bushes hung over the dividing fence, a thick mass of honeysuckle climbed up by the gate and mingled with them, spreading over to a pear tree on the Lane side. In this fragrant, hidden corner was a rough seat, and from it a boy's hand reached out and seized the girl's, drawing her down beside him. She drew away from him as far as the seat allowed.

"Oh Morton!" she said. "What have you done?"

Morton was sulky.

"Now Vivian, are you down on me too? I thought I had one friend."

"You ought to tell me," she said more gently. "How can I be your friend if I don't know the facts? They are saying perfectly awful things."

"Who are?"

"Why – the Foote girls – everybody."

"Oh those old maids aren't everybody, I assure you. You see, Vivian, you live right here in this old oyster of a town – and you make mountains out of molehills like everybody else. A girl of your intelligence ought to know better."

She drew a great breath of relief. "Then you haven't – done it?"

"Done what? What's all this mysterious talk anyhow? The prisoner has a right to know what he's charged with before he commits himself."

The girl was silent, finding it difficult to begin.

"Well, out with it. What do they say I did?" He picked up a long dry twig and broke it, gradually, into tiny, half-inch bits.

"They say you – went to the city – with a lot of the worst boys in college – "

"Well? Many persons go to the city every day. That's no crime, surely. As for 'the worst boys in college,'" – he laughed scornfully – "I suppose those old ladies think if a fellow smokes a cigarette or says 'darn' he's a tough. They're mighty nice fellows, that bunch – most of 'em. Got some ginger in 'em, that's all. What else?"

"They say – you drank."

"O ho! Said I got drunk, I warrant! Well – we did have a skate on that time, I admit!" And he laughed as if this charge were but a familiar joke.

"Why Morton Elder! I think it is a – disgrace!"

"Pshaw, Vivian! – You ought to have more sense. All the fellows get gay once in a while. A college isn't a young ladies' seminary."

He reached out and got hold of her hand again, but she drew it away.

"There was something else," she said.

"What was it?" he questioned sharply. "What did they say?"

But she would not satisfy him – perhaps could not.

"I should think you'd be ashamed, to make your aunt so much trouble. They said you were suspended – or —*expelled*!"

He shrugged his big shoulders and threw away the handful of broken twigs.

"That's true enough – I might as well admit that."

"Oh, *Morton*! – I didn't believe it. *Expelled!*"

"Yes, expelled – turned down – thrown out – fired! And I'm glad of it." He leaned back against the fence and whistled very softly through his teeth.

"Sh! Sh!" she urged. "Please!"

He was quiet.

"But Morton – what are you going to do? – Won't it spoil your career?"

"No, my dear little girl, it will not!" said he. "On the contrary, it will be the making of me. I tell you, Vivian, I'm sick to death of this town of maiden ladies – and 'good family men.' I'm sick of being fussed over for ever and ever, and having wristers and mufflers knitted for me – and being told to put on my rubbers! There's no fun in this old clamshell – this kitchen-midden of a town – and I'm going to quit it."

He stood up and stretched his long arms. "I'm going to quit it for good and all."

The girl sat still, her hands gripping the seat on either side.

"Where are you going?" she asked in a low voice.

"I'm going west – clear out west. I've been talking with Aunt Rella about it. Dr. Bellair'll help me to a job, she thinks. She's awful cut up, of course. I'm sorry she feels bad – but she needn't, I tell her. I shall do better there than I ever should have here. I know a fellow that left college – his father failed – and he went into business and made two thousand dollars in a year. I always wanted to take up business – you know that!"

She knew it – he had talked of it freely before they had argued and persuaded him into the college life. She knew, too, how his aunt's hopes all centered in him, and in his academic honors and future professional life. "Business," to his aunt's mind, was a necessary evil, which could at best be undertaken only after a "liberal education."

"When are you going," she asked at length.

"Right off – to-morrow."

She gave a little gasp.

"That's what I was whippoorwilling about – I knew I'd get no other chance to talk to you – I wanted to say good-by, you know."

The girl sat silent, struggling not to cry. He dropped beside her, stole an arm about her waist, and felt her tremble.

"Now, Viva, don't you go and cry! I'm sorry – I really am sorry – to make *you* feel bad."

This was too much for her, and she sobbed frankly.

"Oh, Morton! How could you! How could you! – And now you've got to go away!"

"There now – don't cry – sh! – they'll hear you."

She did hush at that.

"And don't feel so bad – I'll come back some time – to see you."

"No, you won't!" she answered with sudden fierceness. "You'll just go – and stay – and I never shall see you again!"

He drew her closer to him. "And do you care – so much – Viva?"

"Of course, I care!" she said, "Haven't we always been friends, the best of friends?"

"Yes – you and Aunt Rella have been about all I had," he admitted with a cheerful laugh. "I hope I'll make more friends out yonder. But Viva," – his hand pressed closer – "is it only – friends?"

She took fright at once and drew away from him. "You mustn't do that, Morton!"

"Do what?" A shaft of moonlight shone on his teasing face. "What am I doing?" he said.

It is difficult – it is well nigh impossible – for a girl to put a name to certain small cuddlings not in themselves terrifying, nor even unpleasant, but which she obscurely feels to be wrong.

Viva flushed and was silent – he could see the rich color flood her face.

"Come now – don't be hard on a fellow!" he urged. "I shan't see you again in ever so long. You'll forget all about me before a year's over."

She shook her head, still silent.

"Won't you speak to me – Viva?"

"I wish – " She could not find the words she wanted. "Oh, I wish you – wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't what, Girlie? Wouldn't go away? Sorry to disoblige – but I have to. There's no place for me here."

The girl felt the sad truth of that.

"Aunt Rella will get used to it after a while. I'll write to her – I'll make lots of money – and come back in a few years – astonish you all! – Meanwhile – kiss me good-by, Viva!"

She drew back shyly. She had never kissed him. She had never in her life kissed any man younger than an uncle.

"No, Morton – you mustn't – " She shrank away into the shadow.

But, there was no great distance to shrink to, and his strong arms soon drew her close again.

"Suppose you never see me again," he said. "Then you'll wish you hadn't been so stiff about it."

She thought of this dread possibility with a sudden chill of horror, and while she hesitated, he took her face between her hands and kissed her on the mouth.

Steps were heard coming down the path.

"They're on," he said with a little laugh. "Good-by, Viva!"

He vaulted the fence and was gone.

"What are you doing here, Vivian?" demanded her father.

"I was saying good-by to Morton," she answered with a sob.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself – philandering out here in the middle of the night with that scapegrace! Come in the house and go to bed at once – it's ten o'clock."

Bowing to this confused but almost equally incriminating chronology, she followed him in, meekly enough as to her outward seeming, but inwardly in a state of stormy tumult.

She had been kissed!

Her father's stiff back before her could not blot out the radiant, melting moonlight, the rich sweetness of the flowers, the tender, soft, June night.

"You go to bed," said he once more. "I'm ashamed of you."

"Yes, father," she answered.

Her little room, when at last she was safely in it and had shut the door and put a chair against it – she had no key – seemed somehow changed.

She lit the lamp and stood looking at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were star-bright. Her cheeks flamed softly. Her mouth looked guilty and yet glad.

She put the light out and went to the window, kneeling there, leaning out in the fragrant stillness, trying to arrange in her mind this mixture of grief, disapproval, shame and triumph.

When the Episcopal church clock struck eleven, she went to bed in guilty haste, but not to sleep.

For a long time she lay there watching the changing play of moonlight on the floor.

She felt almost as if she were married.

CHAPTER II
BAINVILLE EFFECTS

Lockstep, handcuffs, ankle-ball-and-chain,
Dulltoil and dreary food and drink;
Small cell, cold cell, narrow bed and hard;
High wall, thick wall, window iron-barred;
Stone-paved, stone-pent little prison yard —
Young hearts weary of monotony and pain,
Young hearts weary of reiterant refrain:
"They say – they do – what will people think?"

At the two front windows of their rather crowded little parlor sat Miss Rebecca and Miss Josie Foote, Miss Sallie being out on a foraging expedition – marketing, as it were, among their neighbors to collect fresh food for thought.

A tall, slender girl in brown passed on the opposite walk.

"I should think Vivian Lane would get tired of wearing brown," said Miss Rebecca.

"I don't know why she should," her sister promptly protested, "it's a good enough wearing color, and becoming to her."

"She could afford to have more variety," said Miss Rebecca. "The Lanes are mean enough about some things, but I know they'd like to have her dress better. She'll never get married in the world."

"I don't know why not. She's only twenty-five – and good-looking."

"Good-looking! That's not everything. Plenty of girls marry that are not good-looking – and plenty of good-looking girls stay single."

"Plenty of homely ones, too. Rebecca," said Miss Josie, with meaning. Miss Rebecca certainly was not handsome. "Going to the library, of course!" she pursued presently. "That girl reads all the time."

"So does her grandmother. I see her going and coming from that library every day almost."

"Oh, well – she reads stories and things like that. Sallie goes pretty often and she notices. We use that library enough, goodness knows, but they are there every day. Vivian Lane reads the queerest things – doctor's books and works on pedagoggy."

"Godgy," said Miss Rebecca, "not goggy." And as her sister ignored this correction, she continued: "They might as well have let her go to college when she was so set on it."

"College! I don't believe she'd have learned as much in any college, from what I hear of 'em, as she has in all this time at home." The Foote girls had never entertained a high opinion of extensive culture.

"I don't see any use in a girl's studying so much," said Miss Rebecca with decision.

"Nor I," agreed Miss Josie. "Men don't like learned women."

"They don't seem to always like those that aren't learned, either," remarked Miss Rebecca with a pleasant sense of retribution for that remark about "homely ones."

The tall girl in brown had seen the two faces at the windows opposite, and had held her shoulders a little straighter as she turned the corner.

"Nine years this Summer since Morton Elder went West," murmured Miss Josie, reminiscently. "I shouldn't wonder if Vivian had stayed single on his account."

"Nonsense!" her sister answered sharply. "She's not that kind. She's not popular with men, that's all. She's too intellectual."

"She ought to be in the library instead of Sue Elder," Miss Rebecca suggested. "She's far more competent. Sue's a feather-headed little thing."

"She seems to give satisfaction so far. If the trustees are pleased with her, there's no reason for you to complain that I see," said Miss Rebecca with decision.

Vivian Lane waited at the library desk with an armful of books to take home. She had her card, her mother's and her father's – all utilized. Her grandmother kept her own card – and her own counsel.

The pretty assistant librarian, withdrawing herself with some emphasis from the unnecessary questions of a too gallant old gentleman, came to attend her.

"You *have* got a load," she said, scribbling complex figures with one end of her hammer-headed pencil, and stamping violet dates with the other. She whisked out the pale blue slips from the lid pockets, dropped them into their proper openings in the desk and inserted the cards in their stead with delicate precision.

"Can't you wait a bit and go home with me?" she asked. "I'll help you carry them."

"No, thanks. I'm not going right home."

"You're going to see your Saint – I know!" said Miss Susie, tossing her bright head. "I'm jealous, and you know it."

"Don't be a goose, Susie! You know you're my very best friend, but – she's different."

"I should think she was different!" Susie sharply agreed. "And you've been 'different' ever since she came."

"I hope so," said Vivian gravely. "Mrs. St. Cloud brings out one's very best and highest. I wish you liked her better, Susie."

"I like you," Susie answered. "You bring out my 'best and highest' – if I've got any. She don't. She's like a lovely, faint, bright – bubble! I want to prick it!"

Vivian smiled down upon her.

"You bad little mouse!" she said. "Come, give me the books."

"Leave them with me, and I'll bring them in the car." Susie looked anxious to make amends for her bit of blasphemy.

"All right, dear. Thank you. I'll be home by that time, probably."

In the street she stopped before a little shop where papers and magazines were sold.

"I believe Father'd like the new Centurion," she said to herself, and got it for him, chatting a little with the one-armed man who kept the place. She stopped again at a small florist's and bought a little bag of bulbs.

"Your mother's forgotten about those, I guess," said Mrs. Crothers, the florist's wife, "but they'll do just as well now. Lucky you thought of them before it got too late in the season. Bennie was awfully pleased with that red and blue pencil you gave him, Miss Lane."

Vivian walked on. A child ran out suddenly from a gate and seized upon her.

"Aren't you coming in to see me – ever?" she demanded.

Vivian stooped and kissed her.

"Yes, dear, but not to-night. How's that dear baby getting on?"

"She's better," said the little girl. "Mother said thank you – lots of times. Wait a minute – "

The child fumbled in Vivian's coat pocket with a mischievous upward glance, fished out a handful of peanuts, and ran up the path laughing while the tall girl smiled down upon her lovingly.

A long-legged boy was lounging along the wet sidewalk. Vivian caught up with him and he joined her with eagerness.

"Good evening, Miss Lane. Say – are you coming to the club to-morrow night?"

She smiled cordially.

"Of course I am, Johnny. I wouldn't disappoint my boys for anything – nor myself, either."

They walked on together chatting until, at the minister's house, she bade him a cheery "good-night."

Mrs. St. Cloud was at the window pensively watching the western sky. She saw the girl coming and let her in with a tender, radiant smile – a lovely being in a most unlovely room.

There was a chill refinement above subdued confusion in that Cambridge-Bainville parlor, where the higher culture of the second Mrs. Williams, superimposed upon the lower culture of the first, as that upon the varying tastes of a combined ancestry, made the place somehow suggestive of excavations at Abydos.

It was much the kind of parlor Vivian had been accustomed to from childhood, but Mrs. St. Cloud was of a type quite new to her. Clothed in soft, clinging fabrics, always with a misty, veiled effect to them, wearing pale amber, large, dull stones of uncertain shapes, and slender chains that glittered here and there among her scarfs and laces, sinking gracefully among deep cushions, even able to sink gracefully into a common Bainville chair – this beautiful woman had captured the girl's imagination from the first.

Clearly known, she was a sister of Mrs. Williams, visiting indefinitely. Vaguely – and very frequently – hinted, her husband had "left her," and "she did not believe in divorce." Against her background of dumb patience, he shone darkly forth as A Brute of unknown cruelties. Nothing against him would she ever say, and every young masculine heart yearned to make life brighter to the Ideal Woman, so strangely neglected; also some older ones. Her Young Men's Bible Class was the pride of Mr. Williams' heart and joy of such young men as the town possessed; most of Bainville's boys had gone.

"A wonderful uplifting influence," Mr. Williams called her, and refused to say anything, even when directly approached, as to "the facts" of her trouble. "It is an old story," he would say. "She bears up wonderfully. She sacrifices her life rather than her principles."

To Vivian, sitting now on a hassock at the lady's feet and looking up at her with adoring eyes, she was indeed a star, a saint, a cloud of mystery.

She reached out a soft hand, white, slender, delicately kept, wearing one thin gold ring, and stroked the girl's smooth hair. Vivian seized the hand and kissed it, blushing as she did so.

"You foolish child! Don't waste your young affection on an old lady like me."

"Old! You! You don't look as old as I do this minute!" said the girl with hushed intensity.

"Life wears on you, I'm afraid, my dear… Do you ever hear from him?"

To no one else, not even to Susie, could Vivian speak of what now seemed the tragedy of her lost youth.

"No," said she. "Never now. He did write once or twice – at first."

"He writes to his aunt, of course?"

"Yes," said Vivian. "But not often. And he never – says anything."

"I understand. Poor child! You must be true, and wait." And the lady turned the thin ring on her finger. Vivian watched her in a passion of admiring tenderness.

"Oh, you understand!" she exclaimed. "You understand!"

"I understand, my dear," said Mrs. St. Cloud.

When Vivian reached her own gate she leaned her arms upon it and looked first one way and then the other, down the long, still street. The country was in sight at both ends – the low, monotonous, wooded hills that shut them in. It was all familiar, wearingly familiar. She had known it continuously for such part of her lifetime as was sensitive to landscape effects, and had at times a mad wish for an earthquake to change the outlines a little.

The infrequent trolley car passed just then and Sue Elder joined her, to take the short cut home through the Lane's yard.

"Here you are," she said cheerfully, "and here are the books."

Vivian thanked her.

"Oh, say – come in after supper, can't you? Aunt Rella's had another letter from Mort."

Vivian's sombre eyes lit up a little.

"How's he getting on? In the same business he was last year?" she asked with an elaborately cheerful air. Morton had seemed to change occupations oftener than he wrote letters.

"Yes, I believe so. I guess he's well. He never says much, you know. I don't think it's good for him out there – good for any boy." And Susie looked quite the older sister.

"What are they to do? They can't stay here."

"No, I suppose not – but we have to."

"Dr. Bellair didn't," remarked Vivian. "I like her – tremendously, don't you?" In truth, Dr. Bellair was already a close second to Mrs. St. Cloud in the girl's hero-worshipping heart.

"Oh, yes; she's splendid! Aunt Rella is so glad to have her with us. They have great times recalling their school days together. Aunty used to like her then, though she is five years older – but you'd never dream it. And I think she's real handsome."

"She's not beautiful," said Vivian, with decision, "but she's a lot better. Sue Elder, I wish – "

"Wish what?" asked her friend.

Sue put the books on the gate-post, and the two girls, arm in arm, walked slowly up and down.

Susie was a round, palely rosy little person, with a delicate face and soft, light hair waving fluffily about her small head. Vivian's hair was twice the length, but so straight and fine that its mass had no effect. She wore it in smooth plaits wound like a wreath from brow to nape.

After an understanding silence and a walk past three gates and back again, Vivian answered her.

"I wish I were in your shoes," she said.

"What do you mean – having the Doctor in the house?"

"No – I'd like that too; but I mean work to do – your position."

"Oh, the library! You needn't; it's horrid. I wish I were in your shoes, and had a father and mother to take care of me. I can tell you, it's no fun – having to be there just on time or get fined, and having to poke away all day with those phooty old ladies and tiresome children."

"But you're independent."

"Oh, yes, I'm independent. I have to be. Aunt Rella *could* take care of me, I suppose, but of course I wouldn't let her. And I dare say library work is better than school-teaching."

"What'll we be doing when we're forty, I wonder?" said Vivian, after another turn.

"Forty! Why I expect to be a grandma by that time," said Sue. She was but twenty-one, and forty looked a long way off to her.

"A grandma! And knit?" suggested Vivian.

"Oh, yes – baby jackets – and blankets – and socks – and little shawls. I love to knit," said Sue, cheerfully.

"But suppose you don't marry?" pursued her friend.

"Oh, but I shall marry – you see if I don't. Marriage" – here she carefully went inside the gate and latched it – "marriage is – a woman's duty!" And she ran up the path laughing.

Vivian laughed too, rather grimly, and slowly walked towards her own door.

The little sitting-room was hot, very hot; but Mr. Lane sat with his carpet-slippered feet on its narrow hearth with a shawl around him.

"Shut the door, Vivian!" he exclaimed irritably. "I'll never get over this cold if such draughts are let in on me."

"Why, it's not cold out, Father – and it's very close in here."

Mrs. Lane looked up from her darning. "You think it's close because you've come in from outdoors. Sit down – and don't fret your father; I'm real worried about him."

Mr. Lane coughed hollowly. He had become a little dry old man with gray, glassy eyes, and had been having colds in this fashion ever since Vivian could remember.

"Dr. Bellair says that the out-door air is the best medicine for a cold," remarked Vivian, as she took off her things.

"Dr. Bellair has not been consulted in this case," her father returned wheezingly. "I'm quite satisfied with my family physician. He's a man, at any rate."

"Save me from these women doctors!" exclaimed his wife.

Vivian set her lips patiently. She had long since learned how widely she differed from both father and mother, and preferred silence to dispute.

Mr. Lane was a plain, ordinary person, who spent most of a moderately useful life in the shoe business, from which he had of late withdrawn. Both he and his wife "had property" to a certain extent; and now lived peacefully on their income with neither fear nor hope, ambition nor responsibility to trouble them. The one thing they were yet anxious about was to see Vivian married, but this wish seemed to be no nearer to fulfillment for the passing years.

"I don't know what the women are thinking of, these days," went on the old gentleman, putting another shovelful of coal on the fire with a careful hand. "Doctors and lawyers and even ministers, some of 'em! The Lord certainly set down a woman's duty pretty plain – she was to cleave unto her husband!"

"Some women have no husbands to cleave to, Father."

"They'd have husbands fast enough if they'd behave themselves," he answered. "No man's going to want to marry one of these self-sufficient independent, professional women, of course."

"I do hope, Viva," said her mother, "that you're not letting that Dr. Bellair put foolish ideas into your head."

"I want to do something to support myself – sometime, Mother. I can't live on my parents forever."

"You be patient, child. There's money enough for you to live on. It's a woman's place to wait," put in Mr. Lane.

"How long?" inquired Vivian. "I'm twenty-five. No man has asked me to marry him yet. Some of the women in this town have waited thirty – forty – fifty – sixty years. No one has asked them."

"I was married at sixteen," suddenly remarked Vivian's grandmother. "And my mother wasn't but fifteen. Huh!" A sudden little derisive noise she made; such as used to be written "humph!"

For the past five years, Mrs. Pettigrew had made her home with the Lanes. Mrs. Lane herself was but a feeble replica of her energetic parent. There was but seventeen years difference in their ages, and comparative idleness with some ill-health on the part of the daughter, had made the difference appear less.

Mrs. Pettigrew had but a poor opinion of the present generation. In her active youth she had reared a large family on a small income; in her active middle-age, she had trotted about from daughter's house to son's house, helping with the grandchildren. And now she still trotted about in all weathers, visiting among the neighbors and vibrating as regularly as a pendulum between her daughter's house and the public library.

The books she brought home were mainly novels, and if she perused anything else in the severe quiet of the reading-room, she did not talk about it. Indeed, it was a striking characteristic of Mrs. Pettigrew that she talked very little, though she listened to all that went on with a bright and beady eye, as of a highly intelligent parrot. And now, having dropped her single remark into the conversation, she shut her lips tight as was her habit, and drew another ball of worsted from the black bag that always hung at her elbow.

She was making one of those perennial knitted garments, which, in her young days, were called "Cardigan jackets," later "Jerseys," and now by the offensive name of "sweater." These she constructed in great numbers, and their probable expense was a source of discussion in the town. "How do you find friends enough to give them to?" they asked her, and she would smile enigmatically and reply, "Good presents make good friends."

"If a woman minds her P's and Q's she can get a husband easy enough," insisted the invalid. "Just shove that lamp nearer, Vivian, will you."

Vivian moved the lamp. Her mother moved her chair to follow it and dropped her darning egg, which the girl handed to her.

"Supper's ready," announced a hard-featured middle-aged woman, opening the dining-room door.

At this moment the gate clicked, and a firm step was heard coming up the path.

"Gracious, that's the minister!" cried Mrs. Lane. "He said he'd be in this afternoon if he got time. I thought likely 'twould be to supper."

She received him cordially, and insisted on his staying, slipping out presently to open a jar of quinces.

The Reverend Otis Williams was by no means loathe to take occasional meals with his parishioners. It was noted that, in making pastoral calls, he began with the poorer members of his flock, and frequently arrived about meal-time at the houses of those whose cooking he approved.

"It is always a treat to take supper here," he said. "Not feeling well, Mr. Lane? I'm sorry to hear it. Ah! Mrs. Pettigrew! Is that jacket for me, by any chance? A little sombre, isn't it? Good evening, Vivian. You are looking well – as you always do."

Vivian did not like him. He had married her mother, he had christened her, she had "sat under" him for long, dull, uninterrupted years; yet still she didn't like him.

"A chilly evening, Mr. Lane," he pursued.

"That's what I say," his host agreed. "Vivian says it isn't; I say it is."

"Disagreement in the family! This won't do, Vivian," said the minister jocosely. "Duty to parents, you know! Duty to parents!"

"Does duty to parents alter the temperature?" the girl asked, in a voice of quiet sweetness, yet with a rebellious spark in her soft eyes.

"Huh!" said her grandmother – and dropped her gray ball. Vivian picked it up and the old lady surreptitiously patted her.

"Pardon me," said the reverend gentleman to Mrs. Pettigrew, "did you speak?"

"No," said the old lady, "Seldom do."

"Silence is golden, Mrs. Pettigrew. Silence is golden. Speech is silver, but silence is golden. It is a rare gift."

Mrs. Pettigrew set her lips so tightly that they quite disappeared, leaving only a thin dented line in her smoothly pale face. She was called by the neighbors "wonderfully well preserved," a phrase she herself despised. Some visitor, new to the town, had the hardihood to use it to her face once. "Huh!" was the response. "I'm just sixty. Henry Haskins and George Baker and Stephen Doolittle are all older'n I am – and still doing business, doing it better'n any of the young folks as far as I can see. You don't compare them to canned pears, do you?"

Mr. Williams knew her value in church work, and took no umbrage at her somewhat inimical expression; particularly as just then Mrs. Lane appeared and asked them to walk out to supper.

Vivian sat among them, restrained and courteous, but inwardly at war with her surroundings. Here was her mother, busy, responsible, serving creamed codfish and hot biscuit; her father, eating wheezily, and finding fault with the biscuit, also with the codfish; her grandmother, bright-eyed, thin-lipped and silent. Vivian got on well with her grandmother, though neither of them talked much.

"My mother used to say that the perfect supper was cake, preserves, hot bread, and a 'relish,'" said Mr. Williams genially. "You have the perfect supper, Mrs. Lane."

"I'm glad if you enjoy it, I'm sure," said that lady. "I'm fond of a bit of salt myself."

"And what are you reading now, Vivian," he asked paternally.

"Ward," she answered, modestly and briefly.

"Ward? Dr. Ward of the *Centurion*?"

Vivian smiled her gentlest.

"Oh, no," she replied; "Lester F. Ward, the Sociologist."

"Poor stuff, I think!" said her father. "Girls have no business to read such things."

"I wish you'd speak to Vivian about it, Mr. Williams. She's got beyond me," protested her mother.

"Huh!" said Mrs. Pettigrew. "I'd like some more of that quince, Laura."

"My dear young lady, you are not reading books of which your parents disapprove, I hope?" urged the minister.

"Shouldn't I – ever?" asked the girl, in her soft, disarming manner. "I'm surely old enough!"

"The duty of a daughter is not measured by years," he replied sonorously. "Does parental duty cease? Are you not yet a child in your father's house?"

"Is a daughter always a child if she lives at home?" inquired the girl, as one seeking instruction.

He set down his cup and wiped his lips, flushing somewhat.

"The duty of a daughter begins at the age when she can understand the distinction between right and wrong," he said, "and continues as long as she is blessed with parents."

"And what is it?" she asked, large-eyed, attentive.

"What is it?" he repeated, looking at her in some surprise. "It is submission, obedience – obedience."

"I see. So Mother ought to obey Grandmother," she pursued meditatively, and Mrs. Pettigrew nearly choked in her tea.

Vivian was boiling with rebellion. To sit there and be lectured at the table, to have her father complain of her, her mother invite pastoral interference, the minister preach like that. She slapped her grandmother's shoulder, readjusted the little knit shawl on the straight back – and refrained from further speech.

When Mrs. Pettigrew could talk, she demanded suddenly of the minister, "Have you read Campbell's New Theology?" and from that on they were all occupied in listening to Mr. Williams' strong, clear and extensive views on the subject – which lasted into the parlor again.

Vivian sat for awhile in the chair nearest the window, where some thin thread of air might possibly leak in, and watched the minister with a curious expression. All her life he had been held up to her as a person to honor, as a man of irreproachable character, great learning and wisdom. Of late she found with a sense of surprise that she did not honor him at all. He seemed to her suddenly like a relic of past ages, a piece of an old parchment – or papyrus. In the light of the studies she had been pursuing in the well-stored town library, the teachings of this worthy old gentleman appeared a jumble of age-old traditions, superimposed one upon another.

"He's a palimpsest," she said to herself, "and a poor palimpsest at that."

She sat with her shapely hands quiet in her lap while her grandmother's shining needles twinkled in the dark wool, and her mother's slim crochet hook ran along the widening spaces of some thin, white, fuzzy thing. The rich powers of her young womanhood longed for occupation, but she could never hypnotize herself with "fancywork." Her work must be worth while. She felt the crushing cramp and loneliness of a young mind, really stronger than those about her, yet held in dumb subjection. She could not solace herself by loving them; her father would have none of it, and her mother had small use for what she called "sentiment." All her life Vivian had longed for more loving, both to give and take; but no one ever imagined it of her, she was so quiet and repressed in manner. The local opinion was that if a woman had a head, she could not have a heart; and as to having a body – it was indelicate to consider such a thing.

"I mean to have six children," Vivian had planned when she was younger. "And they shall never be hungry for more loving." She meant to make up to her vaguely imagined future family for all that her own youth missed.

Even Grandma, though far more sympathetic in temperament, was not given to demonstration, and Vivian solaced her big, tender heart by cuddling all the babies she could reach, and petting cats and dogs when no children were to be found.

Presently she arose and bade a courteous goodnight to the still prolix parson.

"I'm going over to Sue's," she said, and went out.

There was a moon again – a low, large moon, hazily brilliant. The air was sweet with the odors of scarce-gone Summer, of coming Autumn.

The girl stood still, half-way down the path, and looked steadily into that silver radiance. Moonlight always filled her heart with a vague excitement, a feeling that something ought to happen – soon.

This flat, narrow life, so long, so endlessly long – would nothing ever end it? Nine years since Morton went away! Nine years since the strange, invading thrill of her first kiss! Back of that was only childhood; these years really constituted Life; and Life, in the girl's eyes, was a dreary treadmill.

She was externally quiet, and by conscience dutiful; so dutiful, so quiet, so without powers of expression, that the ache of an unsatisfied heart, the stir of young ambitions, were wholly unsuspected by those about her. A studious, earnest, thoughtful girl – but study alone does not supply life's needs, nor does such friendship as her life afforded.

Susie was "a dear" – Susie was Morton's sister, and she was very fond of her. But that bright-haired child did not understand – could not understand – all that she needed.

Then came Mrs. St. Cloud into her life, stirring the depths of romance, of the buried past, and of the unborn future. From her she learned to face a life of utter renunciation, to be true, true to her ideals, true to her principles, true to the past, to be patient; and to wait.

So strengthened, she had turned a deaf ear to such possible voice of admiration as might have come from the scant membership of the Young Men's Bible Class, leaving them the more devoted to Scripture study. There was no thin ring to turn upon her finger; but, for lack of better token, she had saved the rose she wore upon her breast that night, keeping it hidden among her precious things.

And then, into the gray, flat current of her daily life, sharply across the trend of Mrs. St. Cloud's soft influence, had come a new force – Dr. Bellair.

Vivian liked her, yet felt afraid, a slight, shivering hesitancy as before a too cold bath, a subtle sense that this breezy woman, strong, cheerful, full of new ideas, if not ideals, and radiating actual power, power used and enjoyed, might in some way change the movement of her life.

Change she desired, she longed for, but dreaded the unknown.

Slowly she followed the long garden path, paused lingeringly by that rough garden seat, went through and closed the gate.

CHAPTER III
THE OUTBREAK

There comes a time
After white months of ice —
Slow months of ice – long months of ice —
There comes a time when the still floods below
Rise, lift, and overflow —
Fast, far they go.

Miss Orella sat in her low armless rocker, lifting perplexed, patient eyes to look up at Dr. Bellair.

Dr. Bellair stood squarely before her, stood easily, on broad-soled, low-heeled shoes, and looked down at Miss Orella; her eyes were earnest, compelling, full of hope and cheer.

"You are as pretty as a girl, Orella," she observed irrelevantly.

Miss Orella blushed. She was not used to compliments, even from a woman, and did not know how to take them.

"How you talk!" she murmured shyly.

"I mean to talk," continued the doctor, "until you listen to reason."

Reason in this case, to Dr. Bellair's mind, lay in her advice to Miss Elder to come West with her – to live.

"I don't see how I can. It's – it's such a Complete Change."

Miss Orella spoke as if Change were equivalent to Sin, or at least to Danger.

"Do you good. As a physician, I can prescribe nothing better. You need a complete change if anybody ever did."

"Why, Jane! I am quite well."

"I didn't say you were sick. But you are in an advanced stage of *arthritis deformans* of the soul. The whole town's got it!"

The doctor tramped up and down the little room, freeing her mind.

"I never saw such bed-ridden intellects in my life! I suppose it was so when I was a child – and I was too young to notice it. But surely it's worse now. The world goes faster and faster every day, the people who keep still get farther behind! I'm fond of you, Rella. You've got an intellect, and a conscience, and a will – a will like iron. But you spend most of your strength in keeping yourself down. Now, do wake up and use it to break loose! You don't have to stay here. Come out to Colorado with me – and Grow."

Miss Elder moved uneasily in her chair. She laid her small embroidery hoop on the table, and straightened out the loose threads of silk, the doctor watching her impatiently.

"I'm too old," she said at length.

Jane Bellair laughed aloud, shortly.

"Old!" she cried. "You're five years younger than I am. You're only thirty-six! Old! Why, child, your life's before you – to make."

"You don't realize, Jane. You struck out for yourself so young – and you've grown up out there – it seems to be so different – there."

"It is. People aren't afraid to move. What have you got here you so hate to leave, Rella?"

"Why, it's – Home."

"Yes. It's home – now. Are you happy in it?"

"I'm – contented."

"Don't you deceive yourself, Rella. You are not contented – not by a long chalk. You are doing your duty as you see it; and you've kept yourself down so long you've almost lost the power of motion. I'm trying to galvanize you awake – and I mean to do it."

"You might as well sit down while you're doing it, anyway," Miss Elder suggested meekly.

Dr. Bellair sat down, selecting a formidable fiddle-backed chair, the unflinching determination of its widely-placed feet being repeated by her own square toes. She placed herself in front of her friend and leaned forward, elbows on knees, her strong, intelligent hands clasped loosely.

"What have you got to look forward to, Rella?"

"I want to see Susie happily married – "

"I said *you*– not Susie."

"Oh – me? Why, I hope some day Morton will come back – "

"I said *you*– not Morton."

"Why I – you know I have friends, Jane – and neighbors. And some day, perhaps – I mean to go abroad."

"Are you scolding Aunt Rella again, Dr. Bellair. I won't stand it." Pretty Susie stood in the door smiling.

"Come and help me then," the doctor said, "and it won't sound so much like scolding."

"I want Mort's letter – to show to Viva," the girl answered, and slipped out with it.

She sat with Vivian on the stiff little sofa in the back room; the arms of the two girls were around one another, and they read the letter together. More than six months had passed since his last one.

It was not much of a letter. Vivian took it in her own hands and went through it again, carefully. The "Remember me to Viva – unless she's married," at the end did not seem at all satisfying. Still it might mean more than appeared – far more. Men were reticent and proud, she had read. It was perfectly possible that he might be concealing deep emotion under the open friendliness. He was in no condition to speak freely, to come back and claim her. He did not wish her to feel bound to him. She had discussed it with Mrs. St. Cloud, shrinkingly, tenderly, led on by tactful, delicate, questions, by the longing of her longing heart for expression and sympathy.

"A man who cannot marry must speak of marriage – it is not honorable," her friend had told her.

"Couldn't he – write to me – as a friend?"

And the low-voiced lady had explained with a little sigh that men thought little of friendship with women. "I have tried, all my life, to be a true and helpful friend to men, to such men as seemed worthy, and they so often – misunderstood."

The girl, sympathetic and admiring, thought hotly of how other people misunderstood this noble, lovely soul; how they even hinted that she "tried to attract men," a deadly charge in Bainville.

"No," Mrs. St. Cloud had told her, "he might love you better than all the world – yet not write to you – till he was ready to say 'come.' And, of course, he wouldn't say anything in his letters to his aunt."

So Vivian sat there, silent, weaving frail dreams out of "remember me to Viva – unless she's married." That last clause might mean much.

Dr. Bellair's voice sounded clear and insistent in the next room.

"She's trying to persuade Aunt Rella to go West!" said Susie. "Wouldn't it be funny if she did!"

In Susie's eyes her Aunt's age was as the age of mountains, and also her fixity. Since she could remember, Aunt Rella, always palely pretty and neat, like the delicate, faintly-colored Spring flowers of New England, had presided over the small white house, the small green garden and the large black and white school-room. In her vacation she sewed, keeping that quiet wardrobe of hers in exquisite order – and also making Susie's pretty dresses. To think of Aunt Orella actually "breaking up housekeeping," giving up her school, leaving Bainville, was like a vision of trees walking.

To Dr. Jane Bellair, forty-one, vigorous, successful, full of new plans and purposes, Miss Elder's life appeared as an arrested girlhood, stagnating unnecessarily in this quiet town, while all the world was open to her.

"I couldn't think of leaving Susie!" protested Miss Orella.

"Bring her along," said the doctor. "Best thing in the world for her!"

She rose and came to the door. The two girls make a pretty picture. Vivian's oval face, with its smooth Madonna curves under the encircling wreath of soft, dark plaits, and the long grace of her figure, delicately built, yet strong, beside the pink, plump little Susie, roguish and pretty, with the look that made everyone want to take care of her.

"Come in here, girls," said the doctor. "I want you to help me. You're young enough to be movable, I hope."

They cheerfully joined the controversy, but Miss Orella found small support in them.

"Why don't you do it, Auntie!" Susie thought it an excellent joke. "I suppose you could teach school in Denver as well as here. And you could Vote! Oh, Auntie – to think of your Voting!"

Miss Elder, too modestly feminine, too inherently conservative even to be an outspoken "Anti," fairly blushed at the idea.

"She's hesitating on your account," Dr. Bellair explained to the girl. "Wants to see you safely married! I tell her you'll have a thousandfold better opportunities in Colorado than you ever will here."

Vivian was grieved. She had heard enough of this getting married, and had expected Dr. Bellair to hold a different position.

"Surely, that's not the only thing to do," she protested.

"No, but it's a very important thing to do – and to do right. It's a woman's duty."

Vivian groaned in spirit. That again!

The doctor watched her understandingly.

"If women only did their duty in that line there wouldn't be so much unhappiness in the world," she said. "All you New England girls sit here and cut one another's throats. You can't possible marry, your boys go West, you overcrowd the labor market, lower wages, steadily drive the weakest sisters down till they – drop."

They heard the back door latch lift and close again, a quick, decided step – and Mrs. Pettigrew joined them.

Miss Elder greeted her cordially, and the old lady seated herself in the halo of the big lamp, as one well accustomed to the chair.

"Go right on," she said – and knitted briskly.

"Do take my side, Mrs. Pettigrew," Miss Orella implored her. "Jane Bellair is trying to pull me up by the roots and transplant me to Colorado."

"And she says I shall have a better chance to marry out there – and ought to do it!" said Susie, very solemnly. "And Vivian objects to being shown the path of duty."

Vivian smiled. Her quiet, rather sad face lit with sudden sparkling beauty when she smiled.

"Grandma knows I hate that – point of view," she said. "I think men and women ought to be friends, and not always be thinking about – that."

"I have some real good friends – boys, I mean," Susie agreed, looking so serious in her platonic boast that even Vivian was a little amused, and Dr. Bellair laughed outright.

"You won't have a 'friend' in that sense till you're fifty, Miss Susan – if you ever do. There can be, there are, real friendships between men and women, but most of that talk is – talk, sometimes worse.

"I knew a woman once, ever so long ago," the doctor continued musingly, clasping her hands behind her head, "a long way from here – in a college town – who talked about 'friends.' She was married. She was a 'good' woman – perfectly 'good' woman. Her husband was not a very good man, I've heard, and strangely impatient of her virtues. She had a string of boys – college boys – always

at her heels. Quite too young and too charming she was for this friendship game. She said that such a friendship was 'an ennobling influence' for the boys. She called them her 'acolytes.' Lots of them were fairly mad about her – one young chap was so desperate over it that he shot himself."

There was a pained silence.

"I don't see what this has to do with going to Colorado," said Mrs. Pettigrew, looking from one to the other with a keen, observing eye. "What's your plan, Dr. Bellair?"

"Why, I'm trying to persuade my old friend here to leave this place, change her occupation, come out to Colorado with me, and grow up. She's a case of arrested development."

"She wants me to keep boarders!" Miss Elder plaintively protested to Mrs. Pettigrew.

That lady was not impressed.

"It's quite a different matter out there, Mrs. Pettigrew," the doctor explained. "'Keeping boarders' in this country goes to the tune of 'Come Ye Disconsolate!' It's a doubtful refuge for women who are widows or would be better off if they were. Where I live it's a sure thing if well managed – it's a good business."

Mrs. Pettigrew wore an unconvinced aspect.

"What do you call 'a good business?'" she asked.

"The house I have in mind cleared a thousand a year when it was in right hands. That's not bad, over and above one's board and lodging. That house is in the market now. I've just had a letter from a friend about it. Orella could go out with me, and step right into Mrs. Annerly's shoes – she's just giving up."

"What'd she give up for?" Mrs. Pettigrew inquired suspiciously.

"Oh – she got married; they all do. There are three men to one woman in that town, you see."

"I didn't know there was such a place in the world – unless it was a man-of-war," remarked Susie, looking much interested.

Dr. Bellair went on more quietly.

"It's not even a risk, Mrs. Pettigrew. Rella has a cousin who would gladly run this house for her. She's admitted that much. So there's no loss here, and she's got her home to come back to. I can write to Dick Hale to nail the proposition at once. She can go when I go, in about a fortnight, and I'll guarantee the first year definitely."

"I wouldn't think of letting you do that, Jane! And if it's as good as you say, there's no need. But a fortnight! To leave home – in a fortnight!"

"What are the difficulties?" the old lady inquired. "There are always some difficulties."

"You are right, there," agreed the doctor. "The difficulties in this place are servants. But just now there's a special chance in that line. Dick says the best cook in town is going begging. I'll read you his letter."

She produced it, promptly, from the breast pocket of her neat coat. Dr. Bellair wore rather short, tailored skirts of first-class material; natty, starched blouses – silk ones for "dress," and perfectly fitting light coats. Their color and texture might vary with the season, but their pockets, never.

"'My dear Jane' (This is my best friend out there – a doctor, too. We were in the same class, both college and medical school. We fight – he's a misogynist of the worst type – but we're good friends all the same.) 'Why don't you come back? My boys are lonesome without you, and I am overworked – you left so many mishandled invalids for me to struggle with. Your boarding house is going to the dogs. Mrs. Annerly got worse and worse, failed completely and has cleared out, with a species of husband, I believe. The owner has put in a sort of caretaker, and the roomers get board outside – it's better than what they were having. Moreover, the best cook in town is hunting a job. Wire me and I'll nail her. You know the place pays well. Now, why don't you give up your unnatural attempt to be a doctor and assume woman's proper sphere? Come back and keep house!'

"He's a great tease, but he tells the truth. The house is there, crying to be kept. The boarders are there – unfed. Now, Orella Elder, why don't you wake up and seize the opportunity?"

Miss Orella was thinking.

"Where's that last letter of Morton's?"

Susie looked for it. Vivian handed it to her, and Miss Elder read it once more.

"There's plenty of homeless boys out there besides yours, Orella," the doctor assured her. "Come on – and bring both these girls with you. It's a chance for any girl, Miss Lane."

But her friend did not hear her. She found what she was looking for in the letter and read it aloud. "I'm on the road again now, likely to be doing Colorado most of the year if things go right. It's a fine country."

Susie hopped up with a little cry.

"Just the thing, Aunt Rella! Let's go out and surprise Mort. He thinks we are just built into the ground here. Won't it be fun, Viva?"

Vivian had risen from her seat and stood at the window, gazing out with unseeing eyes at the shadowy little front yard. Morton might be there. She might see him. But – was it womanly to go there – for that? There were other reasons, surely. She had longed for freedom, for a chance to grow, to do something in life – something great and beautiful! Perhaps this was the opening of the gate, the opportunity of a lifetime.

"You folks are so strong on duty," the doctor was saying, "Why can't you see a real duty in this? I tell you, the place is full of men that need mothering, and sistering – good honest sweethearting and marrying, too. Come on, Rella. Do bigger work than you've ever done yet – and, as I said, bring both these nice girls with you. What do you say, Miss Lane?"

Vivian turned to her, her fine face flushed with hope, yet with a small Greek fret on the broad forehead.

"I'd like to, very much, Dr. Bellair – on some accounts. But – " She could not quite voice her dim objections, her obscure withdrawals; and so fell back on the excuse of childhood – "I'm sure Mother wouldn't let me."

Dr. Bellair smiled broadly.

"Aren't you over twenty-one?" she asked.

"I'm twenty-five," the girl replied, with proud acceptance of a life long done – as one who owned to ninety-seven.

"And self-supporting?" pursued the doctor.

Vivian flushed.

"No – not yet," she answered; "but I mean to be."

"Exactly! Now's your chance. Break away now, my dear, and come West. You can get work – start a kindergarten, or something. I know you love children."

The girl's heart rose within her in a great throb of hope.

"Oh – if I *could*!" she exclaimed, and even as she said it, rose half-conscious memories of the low, sweet tones of Mrs. St. Cloud. "It is a woman's place to wait – and to endure."

She heard a step on the walk outside – looked out.

"Why, here is Mrs. St. Cloud!" she cried.

"Guess I'll clear out," said the doctor, as Susie ran to the door. She was shy, socially.

"Nonsense, Jane," said her hostess, whispering. "Mrs. St. Cloud is no stranger. She's Mrs. Williams' sister – been here for years."

She came in at the word, her head and shoulders wreathed in a pearl gray shining veil, her soft long robe held up.

"I saw your light, Miss Elder, and thought I'd stop in for a moment. Good evening, Mrs. Pettigrew – and Miss Susie. Ah! Vivian!"

"This is my friend, Dr. Bellair – Mrs. St. Cloud," Miss Elder was saying. But Dr. Bellair bowed a little stiffly, not coming forward.

"I've met Mrs. St. Cloud before, I think – when she was 'Mrs. James.'"

The lady's face grew sad.

"Ah, you knew my first husband! I lost him – many years ago – typhoid fever."

"I think I heard," said the doctor. And then, feeling that some expression of sympathy was called for, she added, "Too bad."

Not all Miss Elder's gentle hospitality, Mrs. Pettigrew's bright-eyed interest, Susie's efforts at polite attention, and Vivian's visible sympathy could compensate Mrs. St. Cloud for one inimical presence.

"You must have been a mere girl in those days," she said sweetly. "What a lovely little town it was – under the big trees."

"It certainly was," the doctor answered dryly.

"There is such a fine atmosphere in a college town, I think," pursued the lady. "Especially in a co-educational town – don't you think so?"

Vivian was a little surprised. She had had an idea that her admired friend did not approve of co-education. She must have been mistaken.

"Such a world of old memories as you call up, Dr. Bellair," their visitor pursued. "Those quiet, fruitful days! You remember Dr. Black's lectures? Of course you do, better than I. What a fine man he was! And the beautiful music club we had one Winter – and my little private dancing class – do you remember that? Such nice boys, Miss Elder! I used to call them my acolytes."

Susie gave a little gulp, and coughed to cover it.

"I guess you'll have to excuse me, ladies," said Dr. Bellair. "Good-night." And she walked upstairs.

Vivian's face flushed and paled and flushed again. A cold pain was trying to enter her heart, and she was trying to keep it out. Her grandmother glanced sharply from one face to the other.

"Glad to've met you, Mrs. St. Cloud," she said, bobbing up with decision. "Good-night, Rella – and Susie. Come on child. It's a wonder your mother hasn't sent after us."

For once Vivian was glad to go.

"That's a good scheme of Jane Bellair's, don't you think so?" asked the old lady as they shut the gate behind them.

"I – why yes – I don't see why not."

Vivian was still dizzy with the blow to her heart's idol. All the soft, still dream-world she had so labored to keep pure and beautiful seemed to shake and waver swimmingly. She could not return to it. The flat white face of her home loomed before her, square, hard, hideously unsympathetic —

"Grandma," said she, stopping that lady suddenly and laying a pleading hand on her arm, "Grandma, I believe I'll go."

Mrs. Pettigrew nodded decisively.

"I thought you would," she said.

"Do you blame me, Grandma?"

"Not a mite, child. Not a mite. But I'd sleep on it, if I were you."

And Vivian slept on it – so far as she slept at all.

CHAPTER IV
TRANSPLANTED

Sometimes a plant in its own habitat
Is overcrowded, starved, oppressed and daunted;
A palely feeble thing; yet rises quickly,
Growing in height and vigor, blooming thickly,
When far transplanted.

The days between Vivian's decision and her departure were harder than she had foreseen. It took some courage to make the choice. Had she been alone, independent, quite free to change, the move would have been difficult enough; but to make her plan and hold to it in the face of a disapproving town, and the definite opposition of her parents, was a heavy undertaking.

By habit she would have turned to Mrs. St. Cloud for advice; but between her and that lady now rose the vague image of a young boy, dead, – she could never feel the same to her again.

Dr. Bellair proved a tower of strength. "My dear girl," she would say to her, patiently, but with repressed intensity, "do remember that you are *not* a child! You are twenty-five years old. You are a grown woman, and have as much right to decide for yourself as a grown man. This isn't wicked – it is a wise move; a practical one. Do you want to grow up like the rest of the useless single women in this little social cemetery?"

Her mother took it very hard. "I don't see how you can think of leaving us. We're getting old now – and here's Grandma to take care of – "

"Huh!" said that lady, with such marked emphasis that Mrs. Lane hastily changed the phrase to "I mean to *be with*– you do like to have Vivian with you, you can't deny that, Mother."

"But Mama," said the girl, "you are not old; you are only forty-three. I am sorry to leave you – I am really; but it isn't forever! I can come back. And you don't really need me. Sarah runs the house exactly as you like; you don't depend on me for a thing, and never did. As to Grandma!" – and she looked affectionately at the old lady – "she don't need me nor anybody else. She's independent if ever anybody was. She won't miss me a mite – will you Grandma?" Mrs. Pettigrew looked at her for a moment, the corners of her mouth tucked in tightly. "No," she said, "I shan't miss you a mite!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.