

Vance Louis Joseph

Joan Thursday: A Novel



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I

She stood on the southeast corner of Broadway at Twenty-second Street, waiting for a northbound car with a vacant seat. She had been on her feet all day and was very tired, so tired that the prospect of being obliged to stand all the way uptown seemed quite intolerable. And so, though quick with impatience to get home and "have it over with," she chose to wait.

Up out of the south, from lower Broadway and the sweatshop purlieus of Union Square, defiled an unending procession of surface cars, without exception dark with massed humanity. Pausing momentarily before the corner where the girl was waiting (as if mockingly submitting themselves to the appraisal of her alert eyes) one after another received the signal of the switchman beyond the northern crossing and ground sluggishly on. Not one but was crowded to the guards, affording the girl no excuse for leaving her position.

She waited on, her growing impatience as imperceptible as her fatigue: neither of them discernible to those many transient stares which she received with a semblance of blank indifference that was, in reality, not devoid of consciousness. Youth will not be overlooked; reinforced by an abounding vitality, such as hers, it becomes imperious. This girl was as pretty as she was poor, and as young.

Judged by her appearance, she might have been anywhere between sixteen and twenty years of age. She was, in fact, something over eighteen, and at heart more nearly a child than this age might be taken to imply – more a child than any who knew her suspected. She herself suspected it least of all.

She looked what she liked to believe herself, a young woman of considerable experience with life. Simple, and even cheap, her garments still owned a certain distinction which she would without hesitation have termed "stylish": a quality of smartness which somehow contrived not incongruously to associate with inferior materials. Her shirtwaist was of opaque linen, pleated, and while not laundry-fresh was still presentable; her skirt fitted her hips snugly, and fell in graceful lines to a point something short of her low tan shoes, showing stockings of a texture at once coarse and sheer; to her hat, an ordinary straw simply trimmed with a band and *chou* of ribbon, she had lent some little factitious character by deftly twisting it a trifle out of the prevailing shape. Over one arm she carried a coat of the same material as her skirt, and in her hand a well-worn handbag of imitation leather, rather too large, and decorated with a monogram of two initials in German silver. The initials were J-T: her name was Joan Thursby.

Uniform with a thousand sisters of the shop-counters, she was yet mysteriously different. Men looked twice in passing; after passing some turned to look again.

Her face, tinted by the glow of the western sky, was by no means poor in native colour: a shade thin, its regular features held a promise, vague, fugitive, and provoking. Her hair was a brown which hardly escaped being ruddy, and her skin matched it, lacking alike the dusky warmth of the brune and the purity of the blonde. She was neither tall nor short, but seemed misleadingly smaller than she was in fact, thanks to the slightness of a body more stupidly nourished than under-nourished or immature. Her eyes were brown and large, and they were very beautiful indeed when divorced from the vacancy of weary thinking.

It was only in this look of the unthinking toiler that unconsciously she confessed her immense fatigue. Her features were relaxed into lines and contours of apathy. She seemed neither to think nor even to be capable of much sustained thought. Yet she was thinking, and that very intensely if unconsciously. Her mind was not only active but was one of considerable latent capacity: something

which she did not in the least suspect; indeed, it had never occurred to Joan to debate her mental limitations. Her thoughts were as a rule more emotional than psychical: as now, when she was intensely preoccupied with pondering how she was to explain at home the loss of her position, and what would be said to her, and how she would feel when all had been said ... and what she would then do...

Daylight was slowly fading. Though it was only half-after six of an evening in June, the sun was already invisible, smudged out by a portentous bank of purplish cloud whose profile was edged with fire-of-gold against a sky of tarnished blue – a sky that seemed dimmed with the sweat of day-long heat and toil. The city air was close and moveless, and the cloud-bank was lifting very slowly from behind the Jersey hills; it might be several hours before the promised storm would break and bring relief to a parched and weary people.

At length despairing of her desire, the girl moved out to the middle of the street and boarded the next open car of the Lexington Avenue line.

She was able to find standing-room only between two seats toward the rear, where smoking was permitted. She stood just inside the running-board, grasping the back of the forward seat. Her hand rested between the shoulders of two men. She was the only woman in that section. Behind her were ten masculine knees in a row, before her five masculine heads: ten men crowding the two transverse benches, some smoking, all stolidly absorbed in newspapers and indifferent to the intrusion of a woman. None dreamed of offering the girl a seat; nor did she find this anything remarkable, in whom use had bred the habit of accepting without question such everyday phenomena. If she was weary, so were the men; if she desired the consideration due her sex, then must she enfranchise herself from the sexless struggle for a living wage...

The car, swerving into Twenty-third Street, plunged on to and turned north on Lexington Avenue. Thereafter its progress consisted of a series of frantic leaps from street-corner to street-corner. When it was in motion, there was a grateful rush of air; when at pause, the heat was stifling and the fumes of cigarettes, pipes, and cheap cigars blended to manufacture a mephitic reek. A slight sweat dewed the face of the girl, and her colour faded to pallor. Her feet and legs were aching, her back ached with much lifting of boxes to and from shelves, her head ached – chiefly because of the inevitable malnutrition of a shop-girl's lunch.

From time to time more passengers were taken on; a lesser number alighted: Joan found herself obliged to edge farther in between the rank of knees and the rigid back of the forward seat. By the time the car crossed Forty-second Street, she was at the inside guard-rail: ten persons, half of them standing, were occupying a space meant for five.

It was then, or only a trifle later, that she became conscious of the knee which the man behind her was purposely pressing against her. Then for a minute or two she was let alone. But she was sick with apprehension...

She stood it as long as she could. Then abruptly she twisted round and faced her persecutor.

Before her eyes, half blinded by rage and disgust, his face swam like the mask of an incubus – a blur of red flesh fixed in an insolent smirk.

She was dimly aware of curious glances lifting to the sound of her tremulous voice:

"Must I leave this car? Or will you let me alone?"

There was the pause of an instant; then she had her answer in a tone of truculent contempt:

"Ah, wha's the matter with you, anyhow?"

She choked, stammering, and looked round in despair. But the man at her elbow was grinning with open amusement, and another, seated beside her tormentor, was pretending to notice nothing, his nose buried in a newspaper.

"If y'u don't like the goin', sister, why doncha get off 'n' walk?"

This from him who had compelled that frantic protest.

With a lurch, the car stopped; and as it did so the girl turned impulsively, grasped the guard-rail, swung her lithe body between it and the floor of the car, and dropped to the cobbles between

the tracks. She staggered a foot or two away, followed by an indistinguishable taunt amid derisive laughter. Fortunately there was no car bearing down on the southbound track to endanger her; while that which she had left flung away as, recovering, she ran to the sidewalk.

She began to trudge northward. The first street lamp she encountered told her she had alighted at Forty-seventh Street, and had another mile and a half to walk. But with all her weariness, she no longer thought of riding; it was impossible ... she could never escape annoyance ... men just wouldn't let her alone...

Men!..

Shuddering imperceptibly, her eyes hot with tears of shame and indignation, she walked rapidly, anxious to gain the refuge of her home, to be secure, for a time at least, from Man...

They called themselves *Men!* She despised them all —*all!* Beasts!.. What had she ever done?.. It wasn't as if this was the first time: they were always plaguing her: hardly a day passed... Well, anyway, never a week... It wasn't her fault if she was pretty: she never even so much as looked at them: but they kept on staring ... nudging... She didn't believe there was a decent fellow living ... except, of course, That One...

He was different; at least, he had been, somehow: like a perfect gentleman. He had come between her and a gang of tormentors, had knocked one down and thrown the rest into confusion with a lively play of fists, and then, whisking Joan into a convenient taxicab, had taken her to the corner nearest her home – never so much as asking her name, or if he might call... She had expected him to – like in a book; but he didn't, nor had he (likewise contrary to her expectations) at any time thereafter been known to haunt her neighbourhood. To her the affair was like a dream of chivalry: she remembered him as very handsome (probably far more handsome than he really was) and *different*, with grand clothes and manners (the man had helped her out of the cab and lifted his hat in parting): all in all, vastly unlike any of the fellows whose rude attentions she somewhat loftily permitted in the streets after supper or at the home of some other girl.

That One remained her dream-lord of romance. And in her heart of hearts she was sure that some day their paths would cross again. But it had all happened so long ago that she had grown a little faint with waiting.

So, smothering her indignation with roseate fancies, she plodded her weary way to Seventy-sixth Street; where, turning eastward, she presently ascended a squat brown-stone stoop, entered the dingy vestibule of a dingier tenement, pressed the button below a mail-box labelled "Thursby," waited till the latch clicked its spasmodic welcome, and then began her weary climb to the topmost floor.

II

The five flights of steps were long and steep and covered with a compound of fabric, grease, and dirt which, today resembling a thin layer of decayed rubber, had once been bright linoleum. There was no light other than a dejected dusk filtering down the wall from a grimy sky-light in the roof, a twilight lacking little of the gloom of night.

On each landing five doors opened – three toward the back, two toward the front of the building: most of them ajar, for purposes of ventilation and publicity. It was a question which was the louder, the clatter of tongues or the conflict of odours from things cooking and things that would doubtless have been the better for purification by fire.

At the top conditions were a little more endurable: and when Joan had shut behind her the door giving access to her home, the clatter and squalling came from below, a familiar and not unpleasant blend of dissonances. And within the smells were individual: chiefly of boiled cabbage and fried pork, with a feebly contending flavour of cheap tobacco-smoke.

She was in the dining-room of the Thursby flat. Behind it lay the kitchen; forward, three small cubicles successively denominated on the architect's plans as "bedchamber," "alcove," and "parlour." They were all, however, sleeping-rooms. The nearest was occupied by Joan's brother; the next, the alcove, contained a double-bed dedicated to Joan and her young sister; while the parlour held a curiosity called a folding-bed, which had long since ceased to fold, and on which slept Anthony Thursby and his wife.

Mrs. Thursby was now in the kitchen, preparing dinner with the assistance of her fifteen-year-old daughter, Edna. "Butch," the son of the house, was not at home.

Anthony Thursby sat at the dining-table, head bent over a ragged note-book and a well-thumbed collection of white and pink newspaper clippings.

It was the sight of him that checked Joan in her explicit intention. She had meant to enter dramatically to her mother, blurt out the news, with the cause, of her misfortune, and abandon herself to the luxury of self-pity soothed by sympathy. But she had also meant to have it understood that nobody was to tell "the Old Man" – at least not until she should have established herself in a new job. In short, she had not thought to find Thursby at home.

Hesitating beside the table, she removed the long pins from her hat while she stared with narrowed eyes at her father. She was wondering whether she hadn't better confess and have it out with him first as last. The only thing, indeed, that made her pause was the knowledge that there would be no living with him until she was once more "earning good money" behind a counter. And she was firmly determined not again to seek employment in a department store.

Regarding fixedly the round but unpolished bald head with its neglected fringe of grey hair, she asked herself if the bitterness in her heart for her father were in truth hatred or mere premonitory resentment of the opposition he would unquestionably set against her plans for the future...

He was a man of nearly fifty, who looked more, in spite of a tendency to genial corpulence. At thirty he had been a fair and handsome man; today his round red face was mottled, disfigured by a ragged grey moustache, discoloured by several days' growth of scrubby beard, and lined and seamed with the imprint of that consuming passion whose sign was also set in his grey, passionate, haunted eyes. Shabbily dressed in a soiled madras shirt and shoddy trousers, he wore neither tie nor collar: his unkempt chin hung in folds upon his chest. Fat and grimy forearms protruded from his rolled-up sleeves; fat and mottled hands trembled slightly but perceptibly as they rustled the pink and white clippings and with a stubby pencil scrawled mysterious hieroglyphics in the battered note-book.

Thursby was intent upon what he, and indeed all his family, knew as his "dope": checking and re-checking selections for tomorrow's races. This pursuit, with its concomitants, its attendant tides of hope and disappointment, was his infatuation, at once the solace and the terror of his declining years.

Now and again he muttered unintelligibly.

There rose a sound of voices in the kitchen. Annoyed by the interruption, he started, looked up, and discovered Joan.

She offered to his irritated gaze a face of calm, with unsmiling features.

"Hello!" he growled. "How the h – how long've you been in?"

"Only a few minutes, pa," the girl returned quietly.

"Well – what're you standing there – staring! – for, anyhow?"

"I didn't mean anything: I was just taking off my hat."

"Well" – his face was now purple with senseless anger – "cut along! Don't bother me. I'm busy."

"I see."

There was a damnable superciliousness in the tone of the girl as she turned away. Thursby meditated an explosion, but refrained at discretion: Joan had taught him that, unlike her browbeaten mother and timid sister and her sleek, loaferish brother, she could give as good as he could send. He bent again, grumbling, over his dope. Instantly it gripped him, obliterating all else in his cosmos. He frowned, moistened the pencil at his mouth, and scrawled another note in the greasy little book.

Joan slipped quietly away to her bedroom. She found it stifling; ventilated solely from the parlour and the open door to Butch's kennel, it reeked with the smell of human flesh and cheap perfume. She noted resentfully the fact that her sister had neglected to make up the bed: its rumpled sheets and pillows, still retaining the impression of over-night, lent the cubicle the final effect of sordid poverty.

Hanging up her hat and coat, she sat for a time on the edge of the bed, thinking profoundly.

Such an existence, she felt, passed human endurance. And a gate of escape stood ajar to her, with a mundane paradise beyond, if only she had the courage to adventure...

In any event, conditions as they were now with the Thursbys could not obtain much longer. If the Old Man continued to follow the races through the poolrooms, he would soon be forced out of his small business and his family dispossessed of their mean lodgings; and there was no longer any excuse for hope that he would ever shake off the bondage of his infatuation. As it was, he gave little enough toward the support of his family, and grudged that little; almost all his meagre profits went to the poolrooms; it was only when he won (or seldom otherwise) that he would spare his wife a few dollars. Furthermore, his business was heavily involved in an intricate meshing of debt.

Thursby, at least, persisted in calling it a business; though Joan's lips shaped scornfully at mention of that mean and insignificant newspaper shop, crowded in between a saloon and a delicatessen shop, in the shadow of the Third Avenue Elevated Railway. In her understanding it was chiefly remarkable as the one place where one could be certain of not finding Thursby during the afternoon or Butch at night. They were seldom there together: it was as if father and son could not breathe the same atmosphere for long at a time.

Nominally, Butch was his father's assistant; actually, he alone kept the business alive; had it not been for his supervision of the morning and evening paper deliveries, it would long since have wasted inconspicuously away. By way of compensation, Butch, shrewdly alive to signs of a winning day, would now and again wheedle a dollar or two out of the Old Man. Wages he neither received nor expected, being well content with a nominal employment which served to cover many an hour of unlicensed liberty; and he seemed to have access to some mysterious if occasionally scanty fund, for he was never without some little money in pocket. After dinner, if Butch elected to eat the evening meal at home, he invariably disappeared; and his return was a matter of his personal convenience. He had been known not to sleep at home at all; his favourite bedtime was between one and two in the morning – after the saloons had closed. Yet no one had ever seen him drunk.

He was younger than Joan by a year. Born to the name of Edgar, he had been dubbed Butch in the public schools, and the name had stuck; even his mother and father employed it. And yet it could not be said to suit him; rather, the boy suggested a jocky. He was short, slender, and wiry;

with a strong, emaciated nose flanked by small eyes sunk deep in sallow cheeks – his mouth set in a perpetually sardonic curve. He dressed neatly, whatever the straits and necessities of the family (to the mitigation of which he contributed nothing whatever) and had a failing for narrow red neckties and flashy waistcoats. His hard, thin lips were generally tight upon a cigarette; they were forever tight upon his personal affairs: if he opened them at home it was to "kid" the girls, which he did with a slangy, mordant wit, or to drop some casually affectionate word to his mother. His conversation with his father, whom he seemed always to be watching with a narrow, grim suspicion, was ordinarily confined to monosyllables of affirmation or negation.

He went his secret ways, self-sufficient, wary, reserved; a perpetual subject of covert speculation to the women of his family.

Joan had heard it whispered that he was a member of the "Car-barn Gang." But she never dared question Butch, though she trembled every time she came upon newspaper headlines advertising some fresh hooliganism on the part of the gang – a policeman "beaten up," a sober citizen "held up and frisked" in the small hours, or a member of some rival organization found stabbed and weltering on the sawdust floor of a grisly dive.

Between this girl and her brother there existed a strange harmony of understanding, quite tacit and almost unrecognized by either. Joan's nearest approach to acknowledgment of it resided in infrequent admissions to friends that she could "get on with Butch," whereas "the rest of the bunch made her weary."

Almost all the vigour and vitality of the mother seemed to have been surrendered to Butch and Joan; there had been little left for Edna. The girl was frail, anæmic, flat-chested, pretty in an appealing way: fit only for one of two things, tuberculosis or reconstruction in the country. As it was, in the busy seasons she found underpaid employment in the workrooms of Sixth Avenue dressmaking establishments; between whiles she drudged at housework to the limits of her small strength.

As for Mrs. Thursby... It was singularly difficult for Joan to realize her mother. There was about the woman something formless and intangible. She seemed to fail to make a definite impression even upon the retina of the physical eye. She had the faculty of effacing herself, seemed more a woman that had been than a woman who was. The four boundary walls of the flat comprehended her existence; she seldom left the house; she never changed her dress save for bed. It might have been thought that she would thus dominate her world: to the contrary, she haunted it, more a wraith than a body, a creature of functions rather than of faculties. She had a way of being in a room without attracting a glance, of passing through and from it without leaving an impression of her transit.

When Joan made herself look directly at her mother, she was able to detect traces of ravaged beauty. A living shell in which its tenant lay dormant, her subjective will to live alone kept this woman going her sempiternal rounds of monotony. Capacity for affection she apparently had none; she regarded her children with as little interest as her husband. Nor had she the power to excite or sustain affection.

Joan believed she loved her mother. She did not: she accepted her as a convention in which affection inhered through tradition alone...

Seated on the edge of the bed, her face flushed with the heat of the smouldering evening, sombre eyes staring steadfastly at the threadbare carpet, the girl shook her head silently, in dreary wonder.

She stood at crossroads. She could, of course, go on as she had gone – bartering youth and strength for a few dollars a week. But every fibre of her being, every instinct of her forlorn soul, was in vital mutiny against such servitude. In fact, doubt no longer existed in Joan's mind as to which way she would turn: dread of the inevitable rupture alone deterred her from the first steps.

From the rear of the flat Edna called her fretfully: "Joan! Jo-an! Ain't you coming to eat?"

Joan rose. She answered affirmatively in a strong voice. Her mind was now made up: she would tell them after supper – after the Old Man had gone back to the shop.

She posed before a mirror, touching her hair with deft fingers while she stared curiously at the face falsified in the depths of the uneven sheet of glass.

Then placing her hands on her hips, at the belt-line, thumbs to the back, she lifted her shoulders, at one and the same time smoothing out the wrinkles in her waist and settling her belt into place.

"Oh," she said, as casually as if there had been any one to hear, "I guess I'll *do*, all right, all right!"

III

With a careless nod to her mother and sister, Joan slipped into her chair and helped herself mechanically but liberally to the remains of pork and cabbage. Her mother tilted a granite-ware pot over a cup and filled the latter with the decoction which, in the Thursby menu, masqueraded as coffee.

Joan acknowledged the service with an outspoken "Thanks."

At this Edna plucked up courage to say, with some animation: "Joan – "

The mother interrupted with a sibilant warning, "*Hush!*"

Thursby lifted his head and raked the three faces with an angry glance. "In God's name!" he cried – "can't you women hold your tongues?"

The girls made their resentment variously visible: Joan with a scowl and a toss of her head, Edna with a timid pout. The mother's face betrayed no emotion whatsoever. Thereafter, as far as they were concerned, the meal progressed in silence.

Thursby bent low over his plate, in the intervals devoted to mastication intently studying the file of dope at his elbow. Now and again he would drop knife and fork to take up his pencil and check the name of a horse or jot additional memoranda in his note-book. Infrequently he spoke or, rather, grunted, to indicate a desire for some dish beyond his reach. Curiously enough (Joan remarked for the thousandth time) he was punctilious to say "please" and "thank you." The idiosyncrasy was all a piece (she thought) with the ease with which he employed knife, fork, and spoon: a careless grace which the girl considered "elegant" and did him the honour to imitate.

Furtively throughout the meal she studied her father. These little peculiarities of his, these refinements which sat so strangely on his gross, neglected person and were so exotic to his circumstances, exerted a compelling fascination upon the nimble curiosity of the girl. She both feared and despised him, but none the less cherished a sneaking admiration for the man. Beyond the fact that their estate had not always been so sorry, she knew nothing of the history of her parents; but she liked to think of her father, that he had once been, in some unknown way, superior: that he was a man ruined by a marriage beneath his station. To think this flattered her own secret dreams of rising out of her environment: girls, she had heard, took after their fathers – and *vice-versa*: perhaps she had inherited some of Anthony Thursby's keener intelligence, adaptability, and sensitiveness – those qualities with which she chose to endow the man who had been Thursby before he became her father. Other circumstances lent colour to this theory: Butch, for instance, had unquestionably inherited his mother's physique and her reticence, while Joan had her father's vigorous constitution and a body like his for sturdiness and good proportion...

Suddenly thrusting back his chair, Thursby rose, buttoned a soiled collar round his neck, shrugged a shabby coat upon his shoulders and, pocketing his dope, departed with neither word nor glance for his womenfolk.

His heavy footsteps were pounding the second flight of steps before a voice broke the hush in the stuffy little room, a voice faint and toneless, dim and passionless. It was Mrs. Thursby's.

"He's had a bad day, I guess..."

Edna placed a tender hand over the scalded, listless one that rested on the oilcloth. Joan, abandoning her determination to air her personal grievances at the first available instant, said suddenly:

"Never mind, ma. It ain't like he was a drinking man."

The vacant eyes in the faded face of the mother were fathoming distances remote from the four walls of the slatternly room. Her thin and colourless lips trembled slightly; little more than a whisper escaped them:

"Sometimes I wish he was – wish he had been. It'd 've been easier to stand – all this." A faltering gesture indicated vaguely the misery of their environment.

Edna continued to pet the unresponsive hand.

"Don't, mother!" she pleaded.

The woman stirred, withdrew her hand, and slowly got up.

"Come on, Edna. Let's get done with them dishes."

With eyes hard and calculating, Joan watched the two drift into the kitchen. Their wretched state touched her less than the fact that she must continue forever to share it, or else try to better it in open defiance of her father's prejudices.

"Something's got to be done for this family," she grumbled – "and I don't see anybody even thinking of doing anything but me!"

She rose and strode angrily back to the cubicle she shared with Edna. In a fit of unreasoning rage, snatching her hat from its hook, she impaled it upon her hair with hatpins that stabbed viciously. It had grown too dark to see more than a vague white shape moving on the surface of the mirror. But she did not stop to light the gas to make sure she was armoured against the public eye. In another moment, bag in hand, coat over her arm, she was letting herself out into the hallway.

Time enough tomorrow morning to fret her mother and sister with news of her misfortune: tonight she was in the humour to make a bold move toward freedom...

But on the door-stoop she checked, a trifle dashed by apprehension of the impending storm, which she had quite forgotten. She drew back into the vestibule: she could hardly afford to subject her only decent waist and skirt to danger of a drenching.

An atmosphere if anything more dense than that of the day blanketed heavily the city. Even the gutter-children seemed to feel its influence, and instead of making the evening hideous with screams and rioting, moved with an uncommon lethargy, or stood or squatted apart in little groups, their voices hushed and querulous. The roar of the trains on the nearby Elevated seemed muted, the clangour of the Third Avenue surface cars blunted, and Joan fancied that the street lamps burned with an added lustre. Wayfarers moved slowly if near home, otherwise briskly, with a spirit as unwilling as unwonted: one and all with frequent glances skyward.

Overhead, a low-hung bosom of dusky vapour borrowed a dull blush from the fires of life that blazed beneath. In the west, beyond the silhouetted structure of the Elevated and the less distinct profile of buildings on the far side of Central Park, the clouds blazed luridly with their own dread fires – a fitful, sheeted play athwart gigantic curtains, to an accompaniment of dull and intermittent grumbles.

A soft, warm breath sighed down the breathless street, and sighing, died. Another, more cool and brusque, swept sharp upon the heels of the first, played with the littered rubbish of the pavements, caressed with a grateful touch flesh still stinging with the heat of day, and drove on, preceded by a cloud of acrid dust. A few drops of lukewarm water maculated the sidewalks with spots as big as dollars. There followed a sharper play of fire, and one more near. Children ran shrieking to shelter, and men and women dodged into convenient doorways or scudded off clumsily. The wind freshened, grew more chill... Then, so suddenly that there might as well have been no warning, on the wings of the howling blast, laced continually with empyrean fire, timed by the rolling detonations of heavy artillery now near, now far, a shining deluge sluiced the streets and made its gutters brawling rivulets.

A lonely, huddled figure, standing back in the entry, well out of the spray from the spattering drops, Joan waited the passing of the storm with neither fascination nor fear. Self-absorbed, her mood almost altogether introspective, she weighed her reckless plans. The crisis bellowed overhead in a series of tremendous, shattering explosions, bathing the empty street in wave after wave of blinding violet light, without seriously disturbing the slow, steady processes of the girl's mentality.

Then she became aware of a young man who had emerged from the darksome backwards of the tenement, so quietly that Joan had no notion how long he might have been standing there, regarding her with interest and amusement in his grey eyes and on his broad, good-humoured countenance. He had a long, strong body poised solidly on sturdy legs, short arms with large and efficient hands; and

bore himself with a careless confidence that did much to dissemble the negligence of his mode of dress – the ill-fitting coat and trousers, the common striped "outing shirt," the rusty derby set aslant on his round, close-cropped head. Joan knew him as Ben Austin, one of the few admirers whose attentions she was wont to suffer: by occupation a stage-hand at the Hippodrome; a steady young man, who lived with his mother in one of the rear flats.

He greeted her with a broadening grin and a "Hello, Joan!"

She said with indifference: "Hello, Ben."

"Waitin' for the rain to let up?"

"No, foolish; I'm posing for a statue of Patience by a sculptor who's going to be born tomorrow."

This answer was brilliantly in accord with the humour of the day. Austin chuckled appreciatively.

"I thought maybe you was waitin' for Jeems to bring around your limousine, Miss Thursby."

"I was, but he won't be here till day before yesterday."

The strain of such repartee proved too much for Austin; he felt himself outclassed and, shuffling to cover his discomfiture, sought another subject.

"Whacha doing tonight, Joan? Anythin' special?"

"I've got an engagement to pass remarks on the weather with the Dook de Bonehead," the girl returned with asperity. "He ain't late, either."

"I guess that was one off the griddle, all right," said Austin pensively. "Excuse me for livin'."

There fell a pause, Joan contemptuously staring away through the glimmering rain-drops, Austin desperately casting about for a conversational opening less calculated than its predecessors to educe rebuffs.

"Say, Joan, lis'en – "

"Move on," the girl interrupted: "you're blocking the traffic."

"Nah – serious': howja like to go to a show tonight?"

She turned incredulous eyes to him. "What show?" she drawled.

"I gotta pass for Ziegfield's Follies – N'Yawk Roof. Wanta go?"

"Quit your kidding," she replied after a brief pause devoted to analysis of his sincerity. "Y' know you've got to work."

"Nothin' like that!" he insisted. "The Hip closed last Sat'dy and I got a coupla weeks lay-off while they're gettin' ready to rehearse the new show. On the level, now: will you go with me?"

"Will I!" The girl drew a long, ecstatic breath. Then her face darkened as she glanced again at the street: "But we'll get all wet!"

"No, we won't: I'll get an umbrella. Besides, it's lettin' up."

With this Austin vanished, to return in a few minutes with a fairly presentable umbrella. The shower was, in fact, fast passing on over Long Island, leaving in its wake a slackening drizzle amid deep-throated growls at constantly lengthening intervals.

Half-clothed children were seeping in swelling streams from the tenements as the two – Austin holding the umbrella, Joan with a hand on her escort's arm, her skirts gathered high about her trim ankles – splashed through lukewarm puddles toward Third Avenue. A faint and odorous vapour steamed up from wet and darkly lustrous asphalt.

They hurried on in silence: Austin dumbly content with his conquest of the aloof tolerance which the girl had theretofore shown him, and planning bolder and more masterful steps; Joan all ecstatic with the prospect of seeing for the first time a "Broadway show"...

A few minutes before nine they left the cross-town car at Broadway and Forty-second Street.

Though she had lived all her young years within the boundaries of New York, never before had Joan experienced the sensation of being a unit of that roaring flood of life which nightly scours Longacre Square, with scarce a perceptible change in volume, winter or summer. Yet she accepted it

with apparently implacable calm. She felt as if she had been born to this, as if she were coming tardily into her birthright – something of which each least detail would in time become most intimate to her.

They were already late, and Austin hurried her. A brief, hasty walk brought them to the theatre, where Austin left her in a corner of the lobby with the promise that he would return in a very few minutes: he had to see a friend "round back," he explained in an undertone. But Joan remained a target for boldly enquiring glances for full ten minutes before he reappeared. Even then, with a nod to her to wait, Austin went to the box-office window. She was not deceived as to the general tenor of his fortunes there – saw him place a card on the ledge and confer inaudibly with the ticket-seller, and then reluctantly remove the card and substitute for it two one-dollar bills, for which he received two slips of pasteboard.

"House 'most sold out," he muttered uncomfortably in her ear as an elevator carried them to the roof. "Best I could get was table seats."

"They're just as good as any," she whispered, with a look of gratitude that temporarily turned his head.

The elevator discharged them into a vast hall with walls and a roof of glass. Artificial wistaria festooned its beams and pillars of steel, palms and potted plants lined the walls. A myriad electric bulbs glimmered dimly throughout the auditorium, brilliantly upon the small stage. Deep banks of chairs radiated back from the footlights, to each its tenant staring greedily in one common direction.

An usher waved the newcomers to the left. Ultimately they found seats at a small table in a far corner of the enclosure.

Austin was disappointed, and made his disappointment known in a public grumble: the table was too far away; they couldn't see nothin' – might's well not've come. Joan smiled his ill-humour away, insisting that the seats were fine. Mollified, he summoned a waiter and ordered beer for himself, for Joan a glass of lemonade – a weirdly decorated and insipid concoction which, nevertheless, Joan absorbed with the keenest relish.

In point of fact, the distance from their seats to the stage offered little obstacle to her complete enjoyment: her senses were all youthful and unimpaired; she saw and heard what many another missed of those in their neighbourhood. Furthermore, Joan brought to an entertainment of this character a point of view fresh, virginal, and innocent of the very meaning of ennui. She sat forward on the extreme edge of her chair, imperceptibly a-quiver with excitement, avid of every sight and sound. All that was tawdry, vulgar, and contemptible escaped her: she was sensitive only to the illusion of splendour and magnificence, and lived enraptured by dream-like music, exquisite wit, and the poetic beauty of femininity but half-clothed, or less, and viewed through a kaleidoscopic play of coloured light.

During the intermission she bent an elbow on the sloppy table-top and chattered at Austin with a vivacity new in his knowledge of her, and for which he had no match...

At one time during the second part of the performance, the auditorium was suddenly darkened, while attention was held to the stage by the antics of a pair of German comedians. But in the shadows that now surrounded them (quite unconscious that Austin had seized this opportunity to capture her warm young hand) Joan became aware of a number of figures issuing from a side-door to the stage. She saw them marshalled in ranks of two – a long double file, vaguely glimmering through the obscurity. And then the comedians darted into the wings, the lights blazed out at full strength all over the enclosure, and a roll of drums crescendo roused the audience to a tremendous and exhilarating novelty: a procession of chorus girls in hip-tights and hussar tunics who, each with a snare-drum at waist, had stolen down the aisle, into the heart of the auditorium.

For a long moment they marked time, drumming skilfully, their leader with her polished baton standing beside Joan. Then the orchestra blared out an accompaniment, and they strode away, turning left and marching up the centre aisle to the stage... Joan marked, with pulses that seemed to beat in tune to the drumming, the wistful beauty of many of the painted faces with their aloof eyes and

fixed smiles of conscious self-possession, the richness of their uniforms, their bare powdered arms, the pretty legs in their silken casings. Oblivious to the libidinous glances of the goggling men they passed, she envied them one and all – the meanest and homeliest of them even as the most proud and beautiful – this chance of theirs *to act*, to be admired, to win the homage of the herd...

She awoke as from idyllic dreams to find herself again in a Third Avenue car, homeward bound. But still her brain was drowsy with memories of the splendour and the glory; fragments of haunting melody ran through her thoughts; and visions haunted her, of herself commanding a similar meed of adoration...

Austin's arm lay along the top of the seat behind her; his fingers rested lightly against the sleeve of her shirtwaist. She did not notice them. To his clumsily playful advances she returned indefinite, monosyllabic answers, accompanied by her charming smile of a grateful child...

On the third landing of their tenement they paused to say good night, visible to one another only in a faint light reflected up from the gas-jet burning low in the hall below. The smell of humanity and its food hung in the clammy air they breathed. A hum of voices from the many cells of the hive buzzed in their ears. But Joan forgot them all.

She hesitated, embarrassed with the difficulty of finding words adequate to express her thanks.

Austin tried awkwardly to help her out: "Well, I guess it's good night, kid."

She said, exclamatory: "O Ben! I've had *such* a good time!"

"Dja? Glad to hear it. Will you go again – next week? I guess I can work som'other show, all right."

Compunction smote as memory reminded her. "But – Ben – didn't you have to pay for those tickets?"

"Oh, that's all right. I couldn't find the fella I was lookin' for, round back."

"I'm so sorry –"

"Gwan! It wasn't nothin'. Cheap at the price, if you liked it, little girl."

"I liked it *awfully*! But I won't go again, unless you show me the pass first."

"Wel-l, we'll see about that." He edged a pace nearer.

Suddenly self-conscious, Joan drew back and offered her hand. "Good night and – thank you so much, Ben."

He took the hand, but retained it. "Ah, say! is this all I get? I thought you kinda liked me..."

"I do, Ben, but –"

"Well, a kiss won't cost you nothin'. It's your turn now."

"But, Ben – but, Ben –"

"Oh, well, if that's the way you feel about it –"

He made as if to relinquish her hand. But to be thought lacking in generosity had stung her beyond endurance. Without stopping to think – blindly and quickly, so that she might not think – she gave herself to his arms.

"Well," she breathed in a soft voice, "just one..."

"Just one, eh?" He pressed his lips to hers. "Oh, I don't know about that!"

He tightened his embrace. Her heart was hammering madly. His mouth hurt her lips, his beard rasped her tender skin. She wanted frantically to get away, to regain possession of herself; and wanted it the more because, dimly through the tumult of thought and emotion, she was conscious of the fact that she rather liked it.

"Joan..." Austin murmured in a tone that, soft with the note of wooing, was yet vibrant with the elation of the conqueror, "Joan..."

One arm shifted up from her waist and his big hand rested heavily over her heart.

For a breath she seemed numb and helpless, suffocating with the tempest of her senses. Then like lightning there pierced her confusion the memory of the knee that had driven her from the car,

only that afternoon: symbolic of the bedrock beastliness of man. With a quick twist and wrench she freed herself and reeled a pace or two away.

"Ben!" she cried, in a voice hoarse with anger. "You – you brute – !"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"What right had you to – to touch me like that?" she panted, retreating as he advanced.

He paused, realizing that he had made a false move which bade fair to lose him his prey entirely. Only by elaborate diplomacy would he ever be able to reestablish a footing of friendship; weeks must elapse now before he would gain the advantage of another kiss from her lips. He swore beneath his breath.

"I didn't mean nothin'," he said in a surly voice. "I don't see as you got any call to make such a fuss."

"Oh, don't you?.. *Don't* you!" She felt as if she must choke if she continued to parley with him. "Well, I do!" she flashed; and turning, ran up the fourth flight of steps.

He swung on his heel, muttering; and she heard him slam the door to his flat.

She continued more slowly, panting and struggling to subdue the signs of her emotion. But she was poisoned to the deeps of her being with her reawakened loathing of Man. On the top landing she paused, blinking back her tears, digging her nails into her palms while she fought down a tendency to sob, then drew herself up, took a deep breath, and advancing to the dining-room, turned the knob with stealth, to avoid disturbing her family.

To her surprise and dismay, as the first crack widened between the door and jamb, she saw that the room was lighted.

Wondering, she walked boldly in.

Her father was seated at the dining-table, a cheap pipe gripped between his teeth. Contrary to his custom, when he sat up late, he was not thumbing his dope. His fat, hairy arms were folded upon the oilcloth, his face turned squarely to the door. Instinctively Joan understood that he had waited up for her, that inexplicably a crisis was about to occur in her relations with her family.

In a chair tilted back against the wall, near the window opening upon the air-shaft, Butch sat, his feet drawn up on the lower rung, purple lisle-thread socks luridly displayed, hands in his trouser-pockets, a cigarette drooping from his cynical mouth, a straw hat with brilliant ribbon tilted forward over his eyes.

Closing the door, Joan put her back to it, eyes questioning her parent. Butch did not move. Thursby sagged his chin lower on his chest.

"Where have you been?" he demanded in deep accents, with the incisive and precise enunciation which she had learned to associate only with his phases of bad temper.

"Where've I been?" she repeated, stammering. "Where... Why – out walking – "

"Street-walking?" he suggested with an ugly snarl.

She sank, a limp, frightened figure, into a chair near the door.

"Why, pa – what do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going to find out the why and wherefore of the way you're behaving yourself. You're my daughter, and not of age yet, and I have a right to know what you do and where you go. Keep still!" he snapped, as she started to interrupt. "Speak when you're spoken to... I'm going to have a serious talk with you, young woman... What's all this I hear about your losing your job and going on the stage?"

IV

For a brief moment Joan sat agape, meeting incredulously the keen, contemptuous gaze of her father. Then she pulled herself together with determination to be neither browbeaten nor overborne.

"Where'd you hear that about me?" she demanded ominously.

Thursby shook his ponderous head: "It makes no difference – "

"It makes a lot of difference to me!" she cut in, sharply contentious. "You might's well tell me, because I won't talk to you if you don't."

Butch brushed the brim of his hat an inch above his eyes and threw her a glance of approbation. Thursby hesitated, his large, mottled face sullen and dark in the bluish illumination provided by the single gas-jet wheezing above the table. Then reluctantly he gave in.

"Old Inness was in the store this evening. He said – "

"Never mind what *he* said! I guess I know. Gussie's been shooting off her face about me at home. And of course old Inness hadn't nothing better to do than to run off and tell you everything he knew!"

"Then you don't deny it?" Thursby insisted.

"I don't have to. It's true. No, I don't deny it," she returned, aping his manner to exasperation.

"How'd you come to lose your job?"

"Mr. Winter insulted me – one of the floor-walkers – if you've got to know."

Thursby's head wagged heavily while he weighed this information, and he regarded his daughter with a baleful, morose glare, his fat hands trembling.

"What did you say to this man, Winter?" he asked presently.

"Told him I'd slap his face if he tried anything like that on me again. So he reported me up to the management – lied about me – and I got fired."

There was a long silence, through which Thursby pondered the matter, his thick lips moving inaudibly, while Joan sat upright, maintaining her attitude of independence and defiance, and Butch, grinning lazily, as if at some private jest, manufactured ring after ring of smoke in the still, close air.

Before her father spoke again, Joan became cognizant of Edna and her mother, like twin ghosts in their night-dresses, stealing silently, barefooted, to listen just within the door of the adjoining bedroom.

"And what do you propose to do now?" asked Thursby at length, lifting his weary, haunted gaze to his daughter's face. "What's this about your going on the stage?"

Joan set her jaw firmly. "That's what I'm going to do."

Thursby shook his head with decision. "I won't have it," he said.

"Oh, you won't? Well, I'd like to know how you're going to stop me. I'm tired slaving behind a counter for a dog's wages – and that eaten up by fines because I won't go out with the floor-walkers. I'm going to do the best I can for myself. I'm going to be an actress, so's I can make a decent living for Edna and ma and myself."

"A decent living!" Thursby mocked without mirth. "You're old enough to know better than that."

"I'm old enough to know which side my bread's buttered on," the girl flashed back angrily. "I'm through living in this dirty flat and giving up every dollar I make to keep us all from starving. God knows what we'd do if it wasn't for me with a steady job, and Edna working during the season. You don't do anything to help us out: all *you* get goes on the ponies. I don't see any reason why I got to consult you if I choose to better myself."

She rose the better to end her tirade with a stamp of her foot. Thursby likewise got up, if more sluggishly, and moved round the table to confront her.

"You don't go on the stage – no!" he said. "That's settled. Understand?"

"Oh, I get you," she replied, with a flirt of her head, "but I don't agree with you. I'm going down town first thing tomorrow to try for a job with – with," she hesitated, "Ziegfield's Follies!"

"You will do nothing of the sort," he insisted fiercely, congested veins starting out upon his forehead. "You're my daughter, and those are my orders to you, and you'll obey 'em or I'll know the reason why. You..." He faltered as if choking. Then he flung out an arm, with a violent gesture indicating the shrinking woman in the doorway. "You – your mother was an actress when I married her and took her off the stage. She – she –"

"Don't you dare say a word against my mother!" Joan screamed passionately into his lowering face. "Don't you dare! You hear me: don't you dare!"

Her infuriated accents were echoed by a smothered gasp and a spasm of sobbing from the other room.

Momentarily abashed by the sheer force of this defiance, the father fell back a pace. An expression of almost ludicrous disconcertion shadowed his discoloured features. Then slowly, as if thoughtfully, he lifted one hand and deliberately tore his collar from its fastening and cast it from him.

At this, hastily jerking his cigarette into the air-shaft, Butch got up, removed his hat and carefully placed it on the mantel, out of harm's way.

"You," said Thursby with apparent difficulty, breathing heavily between his words – "you shan't use that tone to me, young woman, and live in this house. More than that, you'll leave it this very night – now! – unless you promise to give up this fool's notion of the stage."

"Tonight!"

Joan paled; her lips tightened; but the glint in her eyes wasn't one of fright.

"Tonight!" her father reiterated with malicious pleasure in what he thought to be evidences of consternation. "And what's more, you're going to apologize to me now."

"Apologize to you!" Joan caught her breath sharply, and her next words came without premeditation; she was barely conscious, in her rage, that she employed them: "I'll be damned if I do!"

With an inarticulate cry, maddened beyond reason, Thursby lifted a heavy hand and stepped toward her.

Simultaneously Butch sprang forward, seized the menacing fist and dragged it down and back, with a movement so swift and deft that its purpose was accomplished and the hand pinned to the small of Thursby's back actually before he appreciated what was happening.

Even Joan was slow to comprehend the fact of this amazing intervention...

Nodding emphatically, "Beat it, kid," Butch counselled in a pleasant, unstrained tone – "beat it while the going's good... Easy, now, guvner!"

Speechless, Joan slipped out into the hall and slammed the door. Stumbling blindly in the murk, she was none the less quick to find the head of the stairway.

On the ground floor, panting and sobbing, she paused to listen. There came from above no sound of pursuit to speed her on; yet on she went, out of the house, to scurry away through the midnight hush of the squalid street like a hunted thing.

There was no sort of coherence in her thoughts, nothing but shreds and tatters of rage, fear, and despair, all clouded with a faint and vain regret. She gave no heed to the way she went: impulse controlled and blind instinct guided her. But at the corner of Park Avenue she was obliged to pause for breath, and took advantage of that pause to review her plight and plan her future.

Her first concern must be to find a lodging for the night. Tomorrow could take care of itself...

Uttering a low cry of dismay, the girl clutched at the handbag swinging by its strap from her wrist: its latch was broken, its wide jaws yawned. In a breath she had grasped the empty substance of her most dire apprehensions: the slender fold of bills, handed her when she left the store for the last time that evening, was gone. Whether some sneak-thief had robbed her on a surface-car or in the Broadway rabble, or whether the lock had been broken, releasing its poor treasure, during her struggle with Austin on the stairs – or afterwards or before – she could not guess. But she was swift to

recognize in its bitter fulness the heart-rending futility of retracing her steps to search for the vanished money – even though it was all that had stood between her and the world, between a common room with food for a week or two and starvation and – the streets.

It was a fact, established and irrefutable in her understanding, that she could never go back...

Diligently exploring the bag, she brought to light a scanty store of small change: three quarters, a nickel, seven coppers – eighty-seven cents wherewith to face the world!

Further rummaging educed a handful of odds and ends, from which, by the light of a corner lamp, she presently succeeded in sorting out a folded scrap of paper bearing a pencilled memorandum, faint almost to illegibility, so that only with some difficulty could Joan decipher its legend: "*Maizie Dean (Lizzie Fogarty) 289 W. 45 St.*"

Slowly conning the address with mute, moving lips, until she had it by heart, the girl trudged on to Madison Avenue and there signalled and boarded a southbound surface-car. It carried few passengers. She had a long seat all to herself, and about fifteen minutes wherein to debate ways and means...

She reckoned it several years since Lizzie Fogarty (predecessor of faithless Gussie Inness, both at the stocking counter and in Joan's confidence) suddenly, and with no warning or explanation, had left the department store and for fully eight months thereafter had kept her whereabouts a mystery to her erstwhile associates – though rumours were not lacking in support of a shrewd suspicion that she had "gone on the stage." The truth only transpired when, one day, she drifted languidly up to the counter behind which she had once served, haughtily inspected and selected from goods offered her by a stupefied and indignant Gussie, and promptly broke down, confessing the truth amid giggles not guiltless of a suspicion of tears. Lizzie was in "vodeveal," partner in a "sister-act" – witness her card – "*The Dancing Deans, Maizie & May.*"

Beyond shadow of doubt she had prospered. Not only was she amazingly and awfully arrayed, but there was in evidence an accomplishment believed to be singular to people of great wealth, an "English accent" – or what Joan and Gussie ingenuously accepted as such. As practised by Miss Maizie Dean this embellishment consisted merely in broadening every A in the language (when she didn't forget) and speaking rapidly in a high, strained voice. Its effect upon her former associates was to render the wake she ploughed through their ranks phosphorescent with envy.

Departing in good time to spare the girls the censure of the floor-walker, she had left with Joan the pencilled address and this counsel: "If ever you *dream* of goin' into the business, my deah, don't do anythin' before you see *me*. That ad-dress will always make me, no mattah wheah 'm woikin': and I'd do *anythin'* in the woild for you. I know you'd make good *anywheres*– with that *shape* and them *eyes!*..."

Of such stuff as this had Joan fashioned her dreams. Confident in the generosity of Lizzie Fogarty, she relied implicitly upon the willingness of Miss Maizie Dean to help her into the magic circle of "the profession." She had no more doubt that Maizie would make it her business, even at cost of personal inconvenience, to secure her an engagement, than she had that tomorrow's sun would rise upon a world tenanted by one Joan Thursby. Or if such doubt entered her mind by stealth, she fought it down and cast it forth with all the power of her will. For in Miss Dean, née Fogarty, now resided her sole immediate hope of friendly aid and advice...

Alighting at Forty-fifth Street, Joan hastened westward, past Fifth Avenue and Sixth to Longacre Square. Here on the corner, she paused to don her coat; for the low-swinging draperies of the painted skies had begun to distil upon the city a gentle drizzle, soft and warm.

Only two hours ago a vortex of vivid animation, the Square now presented a singular aspect of sleepy emptiness. With its high glittering walls of steel and glass, its polished black paving like moiré silk, its blushing canopy of cloud, its air filled with an infinity of globular atoms of moisture, swirling and weltering in a shimmer of incandescence: it was like a pool of limpid light, deep and

still. Few moving things were visible: now and again a taxicab, infrequently a surface-car, here and there, singly, a few prowling women, a scattering of predacious men.

Of these latter, one who had been skulking beneath the shelter of the New York Theatre fire-escapes strolled idly out toward Joan and addressed her in a whisper of loathly intimacy. Fortunately she did not hear what he said. Even as he spoke she slipped away from the curb and like a haunted shadow darted across the open space and into the kindly obscurity of the side-street.

Number 289 reared its five-storey brown-stone front on the northern side of the street, hard upon Eighth Avenue. Joan inspected it doubtfully. Its three lower tiers of windows were all dark and lightless, but on the fourth floor a single oblong shone with gas-light, while on the fifth as many as three were dully aglow. The outer doors, at the top of the high, old-style stoop, were closed, and even the most hopeful vision could detect no definite illumination through the fan-light.

Into the heart of Joan a wretched apprehension stole and there abode, cold and crawling. From something in the sedate aspect of the house she garnered grim and terrible forebodings.

Nevertheless she dared not lose grasp on hope. Mounting the stoop, she sought the bell-pull, and found it just below a small strip of paper glued to the stone; frayed and weatherbeaten, it published in letters in faded ink scrawled by an infirm hand the information: "*Rooms to let furnished.*"

For some reason which she did not stop to analyze, this announcement spelled encouragement to Joan. She wrought lustily at the bell.

It evoked no sound that she could hear. Trembling with expectancy, she waited several minutes, then pulled again, and once more waited while the cold of dread spread from her heart to chill and benumb her hands and feet. She heard never a sound. It was no use – she knew it – yet she rang again and again, frantically, with determination, in despair. And once she vainly tried the door.

The drizzle had developed into a fine, driving rain that swept aslant upon the wings of a new-sprung breeze.

A great weight seemed to be crushing her: a vast, invisible hand relentlessly bearing her down to the earth. Only vaguely did she recognize in this the symptoms of immense physical fatigue added to those of intense emotional strain: she only knew that she was all a-weary for her bed.

Of a sudden, hope and courage both deserted her. Tears filled her eyes: she was so lonely and forlorn, so helpless and so friendless. Huddled in the shallow recess of the doorway, she fought her emotions silently for a time, then broke down altogether and sobbed without restraint into her handkerchief. Moments passed uncounted, despair possessing her utterly.

The street was all but empty. For some time none remarked the disconsolate girl. Then a man, with a handbag but without an umbrella, appeared from the direction of Longacre Square, walking with a deliberation which suggested that he was either indifferent to or unconscious of the rain. Turning up the steps of Number 289, he jingled absently a bunch of keys. Not until he had reached the platform of the stoop did he notice the woman in the doorway.

Promptly he halted, lifting his brows and pursing his lips in a noiseless whistle – his head cocked critically to one side.

Then through the waning tempest of her grief, Joan heard his voice:

"I say! What's the matter?"

Gulping down a sob and dabbing hastily at her eyes with a sodden wad of handkerchief, she caught through a veil of tears a blurred impression of her interrogator. A man... She ceased instantly to cry and shrank hastily out of his way, into the full swing of wind and rain. She said nothing, but eyed him with furtive distrust. He made no offer to move.

"See here!" he expostulated. "You're in trouble. Anything I can do?"

Joan felt that she was regaining control of herself. She dared to linger and hope rather than to yield to her primitive instinct toward flight.

"Nothing," she said with a catch in her voice – "only I – I wanted to see Miss Dean; but nobody answered the bell."

"Oh!" he said thoughtfully – "you wanted to see Miss Dean – yes!" – as though he considered this a thoroughly satisfactory explanation. "But Madame Duprat never does answer the door after twelve o'clock, you know. She says people have no right to call on us after midnight. There's a lot in that, too, you know." He wagged his head earnestly. "Really!" he concluded with animation.

His voice was pleasant, his manner sympathetic if something original. Joan found courage to enquire:

"Do you think – perhaps – she might be in?"

"Oh, she never leaves the house. At least, I've never seen her leave it. I fancy she thinks one of us might move it away if she got out of sight for a minute or so."

Puzzled, Joan persisted: "You really think Miss Dean is in?"

"Miss Dean? Oh, beg pardon! I was thinking of Madame Duprat. Ah ... Miss Dean ... now ... I infer you have urgent business with her – what?"

"Yes, very!" the girl insisted eagerly. "If I could only see her ... I must see her!"

"I'm sure she's in, then!" the man declared in accents of profound conviction. "Possibly asleep. But at home. O positively!" He inserted a key in the lock and pushed the door open. "If you don't mind coming in – out of the weather – I'll see."

Joan eyed him doubtfully. The light was indifferent, a mere glimmer from the corner lamp at Eighth Avenue; but it enabled her to see that he was passably tall and quite slender. He wore a Panama hat with dark clothing. His attitude was more explicitly impersonal than that of any man with whom she had as yet come into contact: she could detect in it no least trace either of condescension or of an ingratiating spirit. He seemed at once quite self-possessed and indefinitely preoccupied, disinterested, and quite agreeable to be made use of. In short, he engaged her tremendously.

But what more specifically prepossessed her in his favour, and what in the end influenced her to repose some slight confidence in the man, was a quality with which the girl herself endowed him: she chose to be reminded in some intangible, elusive fashion, of that flower of latter-day chivalry who had once whisked her out of persecution into his taxicab and to her home. In point of fact, the two were vastly different, and Joan knew it; but, at least, she argued, they were alike in this: both were *gentlemen*– rare visitants in her cosmos.

It was mostly through fatigue and helpless bewilderment, however, that she at length yielded and consented to precede him into the vestibule. Here he opened the inner doors, ushering Joan into a hallway typical of an old order of dwelling, now happily obsolescent. The floor was of tiles, alternately black and white: a hideous checker-board arrangement. A huge hat-rack, black walnut framing a morbid mirror, towered on the one hand; on the other rose a high arched doorway, closed. And there was a vast and gloomy stairway with an upper landing lost in shadows impenetrable to the feeble illumination of the single small tongue of gas flickering in an old-fashioned bronze chandelier.

Listening, Joan failed to detect in all the house any sounds other than those made by the young man and herself.

"If you'll be good enough to follow me – "

He led the way to the rear of the hall, where, in the shadow of the staircase, he unlocked a door and disappeared. The girl waited on the threshold of a cool and airy chamber, apparently occupying the entire rear half of the ground floor. At the back, long windows stood open to the night. The smell of rain was in the room.

"Half a minute: I'll make a light."

He moved through the darkness with the assurance of one on old, familiar ground. In the middle of the room a match spluttered and blazed: with a slight *plup!* a gas drop-light with a green shade leapt magically out of the obscurity, discovering the silhouette of a tall, spare figure bending low to adjust the flame; which presently grew strong and even, diffusing a warm and steady glow below the green penumbra of its shade.

The man turned back with his quaint air of deference. "Now, if you don't mind sitting down and waiting a minute, I'll ask Madame Duprat about Miss – ah – your friend – "

"Miss Dean – Maizie Dean."

"Thank you."

With this he left the girl, and presently she heard his footsteps on the staircase.

She found a deeply cushioned arm-chair, and subsided into it with a sigh. The intensity of her weariness was indeed a very serious matter with her. Her very wits shirked the labour of grappling with the problem of what she should do if Maizie Dean were not at home...

Wondering incoherently, she stared about her. The rich, subdued glow of the shaded lamp suggested more than it revealed, but she was impressed by the generous proportions of the room. The drop-light itself stood on a long, broad table littered with a few books and a great many papers, inkstands, pens, blotters, ash-trays, pipes: all in agreeable disorder. Beyond this table was one smaller, which supported a type-writing-machine. Against the nearer wall stood a luxurious, if worn, leather-covered couch. There were two immense black walnut bookcases. The windows at the back disclosed a section of iron-railed balcony.

Joan grew sensitive to an anodyne atmosphere of quiet and comfort...

Drowsily she heard a quiet knocking at some door upstairs; then a subdued murmur of voices, the closing of a door, footsteps returning down the long staircase. When these last sounded on the tiled flooring, the girl spurred her flagging senses and got up in a sudden flutter of doubt, anxiety, and embarrassment. The man entering the room found her so – poised in indecision.

"Please do sit down," he said quietly, with a smile that carried reassurance; and, taking her compliance for something granted, passed on to another arm-chair near the long table.

With a docility and total absence of distrust that later surprised her to remember, Joan sank back, eyes eloquent with the question unuttered by her parted lips.

Her host, lounging, turned to her a face of which one half was in dense shadow: a keen, strongly modelled face with deep-set eyes at once whimsical and thoughtful, and a mouth thin-lipped but generously wide. He rested an elbow on the table and his head on a spare, sinewy hand, thrusting slender fingers up into hair straight, not long, and rather light in colour.

"I'm sorry to have to report," he said gently, "that 'The Dancing Deans, Maizie and May,' are on the road. So I'm informed by Madame Duprat, at least. They're not expected back for several weeks... I hope you aren't greatly disappointed."

Her eyes, wide and dark with dismay, told him too plainly that she was. She made no effort to speak, but after an instant of dumb consternation, moved as if to rise.

He detained her with a gesture. "Please don't hurry: you needn't, you know. Of course, if you must, I won't detain you: the door is open, your way clear to the street. But what are you going to do about a place to sleep tonight?"

She stared in surprise and puzzled resentment. A warm wave of colour temporarily displaced her pallor.

"What makes you so sure I've got no place to sleep?" she asked ungraciously.

He lifted his shoulders slightly and dropped his hand to the table.

"Perhaps I was impertinent," he admitted. "I'm sorry... But you haven't – have you?"

"No, I haven't," she said sharply. "But what's that – "

"As you quite reasonably imply, it's nothing to me," he interrupted suavely. "But I'd be sorry to think of you out there – alone – in the rain – when there's no reason why you need be."

"No reason!" she echoed, wondering if she had misjudged him after all.

Without warning the man tilted the green lamp-shade until a broad, strong glow flooded her face. A spark of indignation kindled in the girl while she endured his brief, impersonal, silent examination. Sheer fatigue alone prevented her from rising and walking out of the room – that, and curiosity.

He replaced the shade, and got out of the chair with a swift movement that seemed not at all one of haste.

"I see no reason," he announced coolly. "I've got to run along now – I merely dropped in to get a manuscript. I think you'll be quite comfortable here – and there's a good bolt on the door. Of course, it's very unconventional, but I hope you'll be kind enough to overlook that, considering the circumstances. And tomorrow, after a good rest, you can make up your mind whether it would be wiser to stick to your first plan or – go home."

He smiled with a vague, disinterested geniality, and added a pleading "Now don't say no!" when he saw that the girl had likewise risen.

"How do you know I've left home?" she demanded hotly.

"Well" – his smile broadened – "deductive faculty – Sherlock Holmes – Dupin – that sort of tommyrot, you know. But it wasn't such a bad guess – now was it?"

"I don't see how you knew," she muttered sulkily.

He ran his long fingers once or twice through his hair in a manner of great perplexity.

"I can't quite tell, myself."

"It wasn't my fault," she protested with a flash of passion. "I lost my job today, and because I said I wanted to go on the stage, my father put me out of the house."

"Yes," he agreed amiably; "they always do – don't they? I fancied it was something like that. But there isn't really any reason why you shouldn't go home tomorrow and patch it up – or is there?"

She gulped convulsively: "You don't understand –"

"Probably I don't," he conceded. "Still, things may look very much otherwise in the morning. They generally do, I notice. One goes to bed with reluctance and wakes up with a headache. All that sort of thing... But if you'll listen to me a moment – why, then if you want to go, I shan't detain you... My name is John Matthias. My trade is writing things – plays, mostly: I know it sounds foolish, but then I hate exercise. I live – sleep, that is – ah – elsewhere – down the street. This is merely my work-room. So your stopping here won't inconvenience me in the least..."

He snatched up a mass of papers from the table, folded them hastily and thrust them into a coat pocket.

"That manuscript I was after. Good night. I do hope you'll be comfortable."

Before the amazed girl could collect herself, he had his hat and handbag and was already in the hallway.

She ran after him.

"But, Mr. Matthias –"

He glanced hastily over his shoulder while fumbling with the night-latch.

"I can't let you –"

"Oh, but you must – really, you know."

He had the door open.

"But why do you – how can you trust me with all your things?"

"Tut!" he said reprovingly from the vestibule – "nothing there but play 'scripts, and they're not worth anything. You can't get anybody to produce 'em. I know, because I've tried."

He closed the inner door and banged the outer behind him.

Joan, on the point of pursuing to the street, paused in the vestibule, and for a moment stood doubting. Then, with a bewildered look, she returned slowly to the back room, shut herself in, and shot the bolt...

On the platform of the stoop, Mr. Matthias delayed long enough to turn up his coat-collar for the better protection of his linen, and surveyed with a wry grin the slashing rush of rain through which he now must needs paddle unprotected.

"Queer thing for a fellow to do," he mused dispassionately...

"Daresay I am a bit of an ass... I might at least have borrowed my own umbrella... But that would hardly have been consistent with the egregious insanity of the performance..."

"I wonder why I do these awful things?.. If I only knew, perhaps I could reform..."

Running down the steps, he set out at a rapid pace for the Hotel Astor; which in due time received and harboured him for the night.

V

Awakening at a late hour in a small bedroom bright with sunlight, Mr. Matthias treated himself to a moment of incredulity. Such surroundings were strange to his drowsy perceptions, and his transitory emotions on finding himself so curiously embedded might be most aptly and tersely summed up in the exclamation of the old lady in the nursery rhyme: "Lack-a-mercy, can this be I?"

Being, however, susceptible to a conviction of singular strength that he was himself and none other; and by dint of sheer will-power overcoming a tremendous disinclination to do anything but lie still and feel perfectly healthy, sound, and at peace with the world: he induced himself to roll over and fish for his watch in the pocket of the coat hanging on a nearby chair.

The hour proved to be half-past ten.

He fancied that he must have been uncommonly tired to have slept so late.

Then he remembered.

"One doesn't need to get drunk to be daft," was the conclusion he enunciated to his loneliness.

"I hope to goodness she doesn't go poking through my papers!"

The perturbation to which this thought gave rise got him out of bed more promptly than would otherwise have been the case. None the less he forgot it entirely in another moment, and had bathed and dressed and was knotting his tie before a mirror when the memory of the girl again flitted darkly athwart the glass of his consciousness.

"Wonder what it was that made me turn myself out of house and home for the sake of that girl, anyway? Something about her..."

But try as he might he could recall no definite details of her personality. She remained a shadow – a hunted, tearful, desperate wraith of girlhood: more than that, nothing.

He wagged his head seriously.

"Something about her!.. *Must've* been good-looking ... or something..."

With which he drifted off into an inconsequent and irrelevant reverie which entertained him exclusively throughout breakfast and his brief homeward walk: in his magnificent, pantoscopic, protean imagination he was busily engaged in writing the first act of a splendid new play – something exquisitely odd, original, witty, and dramatic.

A vague smile touched the corners of his mouth; his eyes were hazily lustrous; his nose was in the air. He had forgotten his guest entirely. He ran up the steps of Number 289, let himself in, trotted down the hall and burst unceremoniously into his room – not in the least disconcerted to find it empty, not, indeed, mindful that it might have been otherwise.

His hat went one way, his handbag into a corner with a resounding bang. He sat himself down at his typewriter, quickly and deftly inserted a sheet of paper into the carriage and ... sat back at leisure, his gaze wandering dreamily out of the long, open windows, into the world of sunshine that shimmered over the back-yards.

A subconscious impulse moved him to stretch forth a long arm and drop his hand on the centre-table; after a few seconds his groping fingers closed round the bowl of an aged and well-beloved pipe.

He filled it, lighted it, smoked serenely.

Half an hour elapsed before he was disturbed. Then someone knocked imperatively on the door. He recognized the knock; it was Madame Duprat's. Swinging round in his chair he said pleasantly: "Come in."

Madame Duprat entered, filling the doorway. She shut the door and stood in front of it, subjecting it to an almost total eclipse. She was tall and portly, a grenadier of a woman, with a countenance the austerity of whose severely classic mould was somewhat moderated by a delicate, dark little moustache on her upper lip. Her mien was regal and portentous, sitting well upon the person

of the widow of a great if unrecognized French tragedian; but her eyes were kindly; and Matthias had long since decided that it needed a body as big as Madame Duprat's to contain her heart.

"Bon jour, monsieur."

"Bon jour, madame."

This form of salutation was invariable between them; but the French of Matthias rarely withstood much additional strain. He lapsed now into English, cocking an eye alight with whimsical intelligence at the face of the landlady. Madame possessed the gift (as it were an inheritance from the estate of her late husband) of creating an atmosphere at will, when and where she would. That which her demeanour now created within the four walls of the chamber of Monsieur Matthias was rather electrical.

"Something's happened to disturb madame?" he hazarded. "What's the row? Have we discharged our chef? Is it that the third-floor front is behindhand with his rent? Or has Achilles – that dachshund of Heaven! – turned suffragette – and proved it with pups?"

"The row, monsieur," madame checked him coldly, "has to do only with the conduct of monsieur himself?"

"Eh?" Matthias queried blankly.

"You ask me what?" The hands of madame were vivid with exasperation. "Is it that monsieur is not aware he entertained a young woman in this room last night?"

"Oh – that!" The cloud passed from monsieur's eyes. He smiled cheerfully. "But it was quite proper, indeed, madame. Believe me, I – "

"Proper! And what is propriety to me, if you please – at my age?" madame demanded indignantly. "Am I not aware that monsieur left my house almost immediately after entering it and spent the night elsewhere? Did I not from my window see him running up the street with his handbag through the rain? But am I to figure as the custodian of my lodgers' morals?" The thought perished, annihilated by an ample gesture. "My quarrel with monsieur is that he left the young woman here *alone!*"

Matthias found the vernacular the only adequate vehicle of expression: "I've got to hand it to you, Madame Duprat; your point of view is essentially Gallic."

"But what is the explanation of this conduct, monsieur? Am I to look forward to future escapades of the same nature? Do you intend to make of my house a refuge for all the stray unfortunates of New York? Am I, and my guests, to be left to the mercies of God-knows-who, simply because monsieur has a heart of pity?"

"Oh, here!" Matthias broke in with some impatience. "It wasn't as bad as that. It's not likely to happen again ... and besides, the girl was a perfectly good, nice, respectable girl. Madame should know that I wouldn't take any chances with people I didn't know all about."

"Monsieur knew the young woman, then?"

"Oh, yes; assuredly yes," Matthias lied nonchalantly.

By the happiest of accidents, his glance, searching the table for a box of matches wherewith to relight his pipe, encountered a sheet of typewriter paper on which a brief message had been scrawled in a formless, untrained hand:

"*Dear Sir,*" he read with relief, "*thank you – Your friend, Joan Thursby.*"

He found the matches and used one before looking up.

"Miss Thursby," he said coolly, "is the daughter of an eminently respectable family in reduced circumstances. Thinking to better her condition, she proposed to become an actress, but met with such violent opposition on the part of her father – a bigot of a man! – that she was obliged to leave her home in order to retain her self-respect. Quite naturally she thought first of her only friend in the profession, Miss Maizie Dean, and came here to find her. The rest you may imagine. Was I to turn her out to wander through the rain – at two o'clock in the morning? Madame discredits her heart by suggesting anything of the sort!"

Madame's expression of contrition seemed to endorse this reproof. She hesitated with a hand on the doorknob.

"Monsieur is prepared to vouch for the young woman?"

"Certainly," he assented, with an imperturbable countenance masking a creepy, crawly feeling that perhaps he might be letting himself in for more than he bargained.

"Very good. I go, with apologies." Madame opened the door. "Thursday, you said?"

He repeated without bothering to correct her: "Joan Thursday."

"Barbarous names of these mad Americans!"

The door, closing, totally eclipsed the grenadier.

With thoughtful deliberation Matthias (smiling guiltily) tore Joan's note into minute bits and, dropping them in a waste-basket, dismissed her message and herself entirely from his mind.

Five minutes later the typewriter was rattling cheerily.

But its staccato chattering continued without serious interruption only for the time required to cover two pages and part of a third. Then came a long interval of smoke-soothed meditation, which ended with the young man cheerfully placing fresh paper in the machine and starting all over again. This time he worked more slowly, weighing carefully the value of lines already written before recasting and committing them to paper; but the third sheet was covered without evident error, and a fourth, and then a fifth. Indeed the type-bars were drumming heartily on the last quarter of page 6, when suddenly the young man paused, scowled, thrust back his chair and groaned from his heart.

He sat for a space, teetering on the rear legs of his chair, his lips pursed, forehead deeply creased from temple to temple. Then in a sepulchral tone uttering the single word "*Snagged!*" he rose and began to pace slowly to and fro between the door and the windows.

At the end of an hour he was still patrolling this well-worn beat – his way of torment by day and by night, if the threadbare length of carpet were to be taken as a reliable witness. And there's no telling how long he might have continued the exercise had not Madame Duprat knocked once again at his door.

Roused by that sound, he came suddenly out of profound speculations. Stopping short and bidding Madame enter, he waited with hands thrust deep in his trouser-pockets and shoulders hunched high toward his ears, a cloud of annoyance darkening his countenance.

Madame Duprat came in with a "Pardon, monsieur," and a yellow envelope. Placing this last upon the table, she announced with simple dignity, "A telegram, if you please," and retired.

Matthias strode to the table and with an air of some surprise and excitement tore open the message. He found its import unusual in more than one respect: it was not a "day-letter," and it had been written with a fine, careless extravagance of emotion that recked naught whatever of the ten-word limit.

He conned its opening aloud: "*Beast animal coward ingrate poltroon traitor beast' –*"

At this point he broke off to glance at the signature and observe thoughtfully: "If Helena's going in for this sort of thing, I really must buy her a thesaurus: she's used '*beast*' twice in two lines..."

He continued: "*How dared you run away last night? You promised. I was counting on you. I am disgusted with you and never want to see your face again. Return at once. Perhaps you won't be too late after all. Imperative. I insist that you return.*"

The signature was simply: "*Helena.*"

He said with considerable animation: "But – damn it! – I don't *want* to get married yet! I don't see what I've done..."

Throwing back his shoulders and lifting a defiant chin, he announced with invincible determination: "I won't go. That's all there is about it. I will – not – go!..

"Besides," he argued plaintively, "I couldn't travel like this – clothes all out of shape from that drenching last night – no time to change – !"

Consultation of his watch gave flat contradiction to this assertion.

"And besides, I'm just getting this thing started nicely!" This with reference to the play.

With another groan even more soulful than the first he sat down at the table, seized the telephone in a savage grasp, and in prematurely embittered accents detailed a suburban number to the inoffensive central operator. In the inevitable three minutes' wait for the connection to be put through he found ample opportunity to lash himself to a frenzy of exasperation.

"Hello!" he roared suddenly. "Hel-lo, I say!.. Who is this?.. Oh, you, eh, Swinton? This is Mr. Matthias... No – I say, no! Don't call Mrs. Tankerville. Haven't time... Just tell her I'm coming down on the six-thirty... Yes... And send something to meet me at the station... Yes. Good-bye."

VI

Joan's was an awakening of another order; like the thoroughly healthy animal she was, the moment her eyes opened she was vividly and keenly alive, completely acquainted with her situation, in full command of every faculty.

With no means of determining the time save by instinct, she was none the less sure that the hour wasn't late: not late, at all events, for people who didn't have to be behind counters by half-past eight. So she lay still for many minutes, on the worn leather couch, listening intently. There was a great hush in the lodging-house: not a foot-fall, not a sound. Yet it was broad daylight – a clear and sunny morning.

Her quick eyes, reviewing the room in this new light, realized the substance of a dream come true. She liked it all: the high and dusty ceiling, the immense and gloomy bookcases, the disorderly writing-table, the three sombre and yellowing steel engravings on the walls, the bare, beaten path that crossed the carpet diagonally from door to window, the roomy and dilapidated chairs, even the faint, intangible, ineradicable smell of tobacco that haunted the air, even the generous cushion beneath her head.

Against this last she cuddled her cheek luxuriously, a shadowy smile softening her lips, her lashes low. She was enchanted by the novel atmosphere of this roomy chamber, an atmosphere of studiousness and clear thinking. And her thoughts focussed sharply upon her memories of the early morning hours, especially those involving the man who had put himself out to shelter her. She was consumed with curiosity about him and all that concerned him. In her inexperience she found it rather more than difficult to associate his courtesy, his solicitude and generosity with his aloofness, abstraction and detachment: the type was new and difficult to classify.

Was it true, then, that Man – flesh-and-blood Man as differentiated from the romantic abstractions that swaggered through the chapters of the ten-cent weekly libraries – could be disinterested with Woman, content to serve rather than be served, to give rather than take?

On the one side stood That One of the taxicab adventure, together with John Matthias: arrayed against these, a host composed of Ben Austins and Mr. Winters and men with knees – beasts of prey who stalked or lay in ambush along all the trails that webbed her social wilderness.

Were they truly different, Matthias and that other one? Or were they merely old enemies in new masks? How was one to know?..

A noise in the basement, the rattle of a kitchen range being shaken clear of ashes, startled the girl to her feet in a twinkling. However sharp her inquisitiveness and her desire to see and to know more of this man, she entertained no idea of lingering to be found there by him...

After bolting the door and before surrendering her tired body to the invitation of the couch, she had yielded to the temptation to make a brief tour of enquiry. The result had satisfied her that Matthias had lied in one particular, at least: unquestionably this was his work-room, but no less surely the man lived as well as worked in it, much if not all of the time. In its eastern wall Joan found a door opening into a small bedroom furnished with almost soldierly simplicity. And there were two large closets in the southern wall of the chamber; in one she found his wardrobe, a staggering array of garments, neatly arranged in sharp contrast to the confusion of his desk; the other was a bathroom completely equipped, a dazzling luxury in her eyes, with its white enamel, nickel-plate, glass and porcelain fittings.

She refreshed herself there after rising – not without a guilty sensation of trespass – returning to the larger room to complete her dressing; no great matter, since she had merely laid aside skirt, coat, and shirtwaist, and loosened her corsets before lying down. In a very little time then, she was ready for the street; but with her hands on the doorknob and bolt, she hesitated, looking back, reluctant to go a thankless guest.

Slowly she moved back to the centre-table, touching with diffident fingers its jumble of manuscripts, typewriter-paper, memoranda, and correspondence. There were letters in plenty, a rack stuffed with them, others scattered like leaves hither and yon, one and all superscribed with the name of *John Matthias, Esq.*, many in the handwriting of women, a few scented, but very faintly. Joan wondered about these women and his relations with them. Was he greatly loved and by many? It would not be strange, she thought, if he were...

Her temper curiously unsettled by these reflections, she stood for a long time, staring and thinking. Then a renewed disturbance in the lower regions of the house sent her packing – but not until she had left an inadequate scrawl of thanks, whose poverty and crudity she felt keenly. Why had she never learned to write a hand of delicately angular distinction to bear comparison with the hands that had addressed those impeccably "correct" notes?..

The hallway was deserted. She let herself hastily out, believing she had escaped detection.

Sunlight swept the street from side to side, a pitiless and withering blast. Already every trace of last night's shower had vanished, blotted up by an atmosphere all a-quiver with the impetuous passion of those early, slanting rays. As if every living thing had been driven to shelter, or dared not venture forth, the street was quiet and empty. In violent contrast, the tides of life ran brawling through Longacre Square on one hand and Eighth Avenue on the other.

Joan turned toward the latter, moving listlessly enough once she had gained the grateful shadow of its easterly sidewalks. A clock in the window of a delicatessen shop told her the hour was half-past seven, while the sight of the food unattractively displayed proved a sharper reminder of breakfast-time. She had no other concern in the world just then. It would be hours before she could accomplish anything toward establishing her independence; and what steps she was to take toward that consummation remained altogether nebulous in her understanding.

She had not gone far before a dairy lunch settled the question as to where she was to breakfast.

It was a small, shabby, dingy place, its walls plastered with white tiling and mirrors. Joan's order comprised a cup of brownish-yellow liquid, which was not coffee, and three weighty cakes known as "sinkers." These last might have been crude, childish models in putty of the popular American "hot biscuit," but were larger and slightly scorched on top and bottom, and when pried open revealed a composition resembling aerated clay. Joan anointed them generously with butter and consumed them with evident relish. Her powers of digestion were magnificent. The price of the meal was ten cents. She went away with a sense of repletion and seventy-two cents.

She turned northward again. An empty day of arid hours confronted her perturbed and questioning imagination. She was still without definite plans or notion which way to turn for shelter. She knew only that everything must be settled before nightfall: she dared not trust to find another John Matthias, she could not sleep in the streets or parks, and return to East Seventy-sixth Street she would not. She had her own exertions to rely upon – and seventy-two cents: the one as woefully inadequate as the other.

Near Columbus Circle she bought a copy of the *New York World* for the sake of its "Help Wanted" advertisements, and strolled on into Central Park.

Here she found some suggestion of nature rising refreshed from its over-night bath to bask in sunlight. The grass was nowhere scorched, and in shadowed spots still sparkled with rain-drops. The air was still, steamy, and heady with fragrance of vegetation. Upon this artificial, rectangular oasis a sky of robin's-egg blue smiled benignly. A sense of peace and friendly fortunes impregnated the girl's being. Somehow she felt serenely sure that nothing untoward could happen to her. The world was all too beautiful and kindly...

She discovered a remote bench and there unfolded her newspaper and ran hastily through its advertising columns, finding one reason or another for rejecting every opening that seemed to promise anything in the nature of such employment as she had theretofore known. There were no cards from theatrical firms in need of chorus-girls, and nothing else interested her. She was now obsessed by

two fixed ideas, as they might have been the poles of her world: she was going on the stage; she was not going back behind a counter.

Yet she must find a way to live until the stage should open its jealous doors to her...

The morning hours ebbed slowly, with increasing heat. From time to time Joan, for one reason or another, would drift idly on to another bench.

Once, as she sat dreaming with vacant eyes, she was roused by the quick beating of muffled hoofs, and looked up in time to see a woman on horseback pass swiftly along a bridle-path, closely pursued by a man, likewise mounted. The face of the horsewoman burned bright with pleasure and excitement and her eyes shone like stars as she glanced over-shoulder at her distanced escort. She rode well and looked very trim and well turned out in her habit of light-coloured linen. Joan thought her charming – and unspeakably blessed.

Later they returned; but now their horses walked sedately side by side; and the woman was smiling softly, with her eyes downcast, as she listened to her companion, who bent eagerly close to her and spoke in a low and intimate voice.

For hours afterwards Joan was haunted by the memory, and rent with envious longing. A hundred times she pictured herself in the place of the horsewoman; and the man at her side wore always the manner and the aspect of John Matthias...

About two o'clock in the afternoon she lunched meagrely on crackers-and-milk at another dairy establishment on Columbus Avenue – reducing her capital to sixty-one cents. Then, recrossing the park, she made her way back through the sweltering side-streets toward her late home. She arrived in time to see her father's burly figure lumbering heavily up the street. His gaze was to the sidewalk, his mind upon the poolrooms, his thick, pendulous lower lip quivered with incessant, inaudible repetition of race-track names and records. He would not have recognized Joan had he looked directly at her. And he didn't look.

She was safe, now, to make her final visit to the flat. Thursby could be counted on not to return before six o'clock. She hastened across the street and up the narrow, dark and noisome stairway...

Seated at the dining-table, over an array of dishes discoloured with the residue of the mid-day stew, her mother, seemingly more immaterial than ever, merely lifted shadowed and apathetic eyes to Joan's face as she entered. Edna, on the contrary, jumped up with a hushed cry of surprise not untouched by alarm.

"Joan!"

The girl assumed a confident swagger. It was borne in upon her, very suddenly, that she must prove a ready liar in answer to the storm of questions that was about to break.

"Hello, people!" she cried cheerfully. "How's everything?"

"Didn't the Old Man meet you on the stairs?" demanded Edna in a frightened breath.

"Nope: I waited till he'd turned the corner," Joan returned defiantly. "Anyway I ain't afraid of him. What'd he say, last night, after I was gone?"

Edna started to speak, stammered and fell still, turning a timid gaze to her mother.

"No more'n he said before you went out," said the latter listlessly. "He won't hear of your coming back –"

"A lot I care!" Joan retorted with a fling of her head. "All I'm after's my things. I've done enough for this family... Now I'm going to look out for Number One."

The mother made no response. She seemed no longer to see Joan, whose bosom swelled and palpitated with a suddenly-acquired sense of personal grievance.

"I've done enough!" she repeated mutinously.

Edna said in a tremulous voice: "I don't know what we'll do without you –"

"Do as I done!" Joan broke in hotly. "Go out and get a job and slave all day long so's your father won't have to support his family. Go on and try it: I'm sick and tired of it!"

She turned and strode angrily into the front rooms. Edna followed, awed but inquisitive.

Pulling their bed out from the wall, Joan disentangled from the accumulation of odds and ends beneath it a small suit-case of matting, in which she began to pack her scanty store of belongings: all in embittered silence, ignoring her sister.

"Where'd you stay last night?" Edna ventured, at length.

"With a friend of mine," Joan answered brusquely.

"Who?" the other persisted.

Joan hesitated not one instant; the lie was required to save her face.

"Maizie Dean, if you *got* to know."

"Who's Maizie Dean? I never heard you speak of her – "

"Lizzie Fogarty, then," said Joan roughly. "She used to work with me at the stocking counter. Then she went on the stage. Now she's making big money."

"Is she going to get you a job?"

"Of course – foolish!"

"Where's she live?"

"Down in Forty-fifth Street, near Eighth Avenue."

"What's the number of the house?"

"What do you want to know for?"

"Ain't you going back there?"

Joan shut down the lid of the suit-case and began to strap it. "Yes," she said with a trace of reluctance.

"I might wanta write to you," insisted Edna. "Anything might happen and you not know – "

"Oh, well, then," Joan admitted, with an air of extreme ennui, "the number's Two-eighty-nine. Catch that? Don't forget."

"I won't."

"Besides," Joan added, lifting her voice for the benefit of the listener in the dining-room, "you don't need to be so much in a rush to think I ain't ever coming back to see you. You got no right to think that of me, after the way I've turned in my pay week in and week out, right straight along. I don't know what makes you think I've turned mean. I'm going to come and see you and ma every week, and as soon's I begin to make money you'll get your share, all right, all right!"

"Joan – " the younger girl whispered, drawing nearer.

"What?"

"They had a nawful row last night – ma and pa – after you went."

"I bet he done all the rowing!"

"He" – Edna's thin, pale cheeks coloured faintly with indignation – "he said rotten things to her – said it was because you took after her made you want to go on the stage."

"That's like him, the brute!" Joan commented between her teeth. "What'd she say?"

"Nothing. Then he lit into Butch, but Butch stood up to him and told him to shut his face or he'd knock his block off."

"And he did shut his face, didn't he?"

Edna nodded vigorously. "Yeh – but he rowed with ma for hours after they'd went to bed. I could hear him fussing and swearing. She never answered one word."

Reminiscences of like experiences of her own, long white nights through which she had lain sleepless, listening to the endless, indistinguishable monologue of recrimination and abuse in the adjoining bedroom, softened Joan's mood.

She returned to the dining-room.

Her mother's head had fallen forward on arms folded amidst the odious disorder of unclean dishes. Through a long minute Joan regarded with sombre eyes that unlovely and pitiful head, with its scant covering of greyish hair stretched taut from nape to temple and brow and twisted into a ragged knot at the back, with its hollowed temples and sunken cheeks, its thin and stringy neck emerging

from the collar of a cheap and soiled Mother Hubbard. With new intentness, as if seeing them for the first time, she studied the dejected curve of those toil-bent shoulders, and the lean red forearms with their gnarled and scalded hands.

Dull emotions troubled the girl, pity and apprehension entering into her mood to war with selfishness and obstinacy.

This drudge that was her mother had once been a woman like herself, straight and strong and fashioned in clean, firm contours of wholesome flesh. To what was due this dreadful metamorphosis? To the stage? Or to Man? Or to both?.. Must she in the end become as her mother was, a battered derelict of womanhood, hopeless of salvage?

Slipping to her knees, she passed an arm across the thin, sharp shoulders of the woman.

"Ma ..." she said gently.

The response was a whisper barely audible, her name breathed in a sigh: "Joan..."

Beneath her warm, strong arm there was the faintest perceptible movement of the shoulders.

"Listen to me, ma: I ain't going to forget you and Edna. I am going to work hard and take care of you."

The mother moved her head slightly, turning her face away from her daughter. Otherwise she was wholly unresponsive. Joan might have been talking to the deaf.

She divined suddenly something of the tragedy and despair of this inarticulate creature whose body had borne her, who had once been as her daughter was now. Before her mental vision unfolded a vast and sordid tapestry – a patchwork-thing made up of hints, innuendoes and snatches of half-remembered conversations, heretofore meaningless, of a thousand-and-one insignificant circumstances, individually valueless, assembling into an almost intelligible whole: picturing in dim, distorted perspective the history of her mother, drab, pitiful, appalling...

Abruptly, bending forward, Joan touched her lips to the sallow cheek.

"Good-bye," she said stiffly; "I got to go."

She rose. Her mother did not move. Edna stared wonderingly, as though a bystander at a scene of whose meaning she was ignorant. Joan took up her suit-case and went to the door.

"S'long, kid," she saluted her sister lightly. "Take good care of ma while I'm away. See you before long."

She hesitated again in the open doorway, with her hand on the knob.

"And tell Butch I said thanks."

She was half-way down to the next landing before she became aware of Edna bending over the banisters.

"Joan – "

"What?"

The girl paused.

"I 'most forgot: Butch said if you was to come in to tell you to drop around to the store th'safternoon. Said he had something to tell you."

"What?" demanded Joan, incredulous.

"I dunno. He just said that this morning."

"All right. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Joan."

To eyes dazzled by ambition, the news-stand, shouldered on either side by a prosperous delicatessen shop and a more prosperous and ornate corner saloon, wore a look unusually hopeless and pitiful: it was so small, so narrow-chested, so shabby!

Its plate-glass show-window, dim with the accumulated grime of years, bore in block letters of white enamel – with several letters missing – the legend:

A THUR BY

Newsd ler & Stationer

igars & Con tionery

Before the door stood a wooden newspaper stand, painted red and black, advertising the one-cent evening sheet which furnished it gratis. A few dusty stacks of papers ornamented it. The door was wide open, disclosing an interior furnished with dirt-smeared show-cases which housed a stock of cheap cigars and tobacco, boxes of villainous candy to be retailed by the cent's-worth, writing-paper in gaudy, fly-specked packages, magazines, and a handful of brittle toys, perennially unsold. The floor was seldom swept and had never been scrubbed in all the nine years that Thursby had been a tenant of the place.

The establishment was, as Joan had anticipated, in sole charge of Butch, who occupied a tilted chair, his lean nose exploring the sporting pages of *The Evening Journal*. Inevitably, a half-consumed Sweet Caporal cigarette ornamented his cynic mouth. He greeted Joan with a flicker of amusement.

"Lo, kid!" he said: and threw aside the paper. "What's doing?"

"Edna said you wanted to see me."

"Yeh: that's right." Butch yawned liberally and thrust his hat to the back of his head.

"Well?" said the girl sharply. "What do you want?"

Butch delayed his answer until he had inserted a fresh cigarette between his lips, lighted it from the old, and inhaled deeply. Interim he looked her over openly, with the eyes of one from whom humanity has no secrets.

"Dja land that job?" he enquired at length, smoke trickling from his mouth and nostrils, a grim smile lurking about his lips.

"Haven't tried yet."

"But you're goin' to?"

"Of course."

"What line? Chorus girl or supe in the legit?"

"I'm going to try to do anything that turns up," Joan affirmed courageously.

"Try anythin' once, eh?" murmured the boy with profound irony. "Well, where you goin' to hang out till you land?"

The lie ran glibly off her tongue this time: "With Maizie Dean – Two-eighty-nine West Forty-fifth."

"That where you stayed last night?"

"Yes ..." she faltered, already beginning to repent and foresee unhappy complications in event Butch should try to find her at the address she had given.

The boy got up suddenly and stood close to her, searching her face with his prematurely knowing eyes.

"Look here, kid!" he said roughly. "Hand it to me straight now: on the level, there ain't no man mixed up in this?"

She was able to meet his gaze without a tremor: "On the dead level, Butch."

"That's all right then. Only..."

"Only what?"

"There'll be regular trouble for the guy, if I ever find out you've lied to me."

"What business – "

"Ah, cut that!" snarled Butch. "You're my sister – see? And you're a damn' little fool, and somebody's got to look out for you. And that means me. You go ahead and try this stage thing all you like – but duck the men, duck 'em every time!"

He eyed her momentarily from a vast and aloof coign of vantage. She was dumb with resentment, oppressed by amazement and a little in awe of the boy, her junior though he was.

"Now, lis'en: got any money?"

"No – yes – fifty cents," she stammered.

"That ain't goin' to carry you far over the bumps. Who's goin' to put up for you while you're lookin' for this job-thing? Your frien' Maizie?"

"I don't know – I guess so – yes: I'm going to stay with her."

"Well, you won't last long if you don't come through with some coin every little while."

Without warning Butch produced a small packet of bills from his trouser-pocket.

"Djever see them before?" he enquired, with his mocking smile.

Joan gasped: "My money – !"

"Uh-huh," Butch nodded. "Fell outa your bag when you side-stepped the Old Man and beat it, last night. He didn't see it, and I sneaked the bunch while he wasn't lookin'. G'wan – take it."

He thrust the money into her fingers that closed convulsively upon it. For a moment she choked and gulped, on the verge of tears, so overpowering was the sense of relief.

"O Butch – !"

"Ah, cut that out. It's your money, all right – ain't it?"

She began with trembling fingers to count the bills. Butch tilted his head to one side and regarded her with undisguised disgust.

"Say, you must have a swell opinion of me, kid, to think I'd hold out on you!"

She stared bewildered.

"There's twenty-two dollars here, Butch!"

Her hand moved out as if offering to return the money. With an angry movement he slapped it back and turned away.

"That's right," he muttered sourly. "I slipped an extra ten in. I guess I gotta right to, ain't I? You're my sister, and you'll need it before you get through, all right."

She lingered, stunned. "But, Butch ... I oughtn't to..."

"Ah, can that guff – and beat it. The Old Man's liable to be back any minute."

Seizing her suit-case, he urged her none too gently toward the door.

"It's awful' good of you, Butch – awful' good – "

"All right – all right. But can the gush-thing till next time."

Overwhelmed, Joan permitted herself to be thrust out of the door; and then, recovering to some extent, masked her excitement as best she could and trudged away across-town, back toward Central Park.

Blind instinct urged her to that refuge where she would have quiet and peace while she thought things out: a necessity which had not existed until within the last fifteen minutes.

Before her interview with Butch she had been penniless and planless. But now she found herself in circumstances of comparative affluence and independence. Twenty-two dollars strictly economized surely ought to keep her fed and sheltered in decent lodgings for at least three weeks; within which time she would quite as surely find employment of some sort.

It remained to decide how best to conserve her resources. On the face of the situation, she had nothing to do but seek the cheapest and meanest rooming-house in the city. But in her heart of hearts she had already determined to return to the establishment of Madame Duprat, beyond her means though it might be, ostensibly to await the return of the Dancing Deans, secretly that she might be under the same roof with John Matthias.

And in the end it was to Number 289 that she turned. At half-past four she stood again on the brown-stone stoop, waiting an answer to her ring.

And at the same moment, John Matthias, handsomely garbed in the best of his wardrobe but otherwise invested in a temper both indignant and rebellious, instituted a dash from room to train, handicapped by a time-limit ridiculously brief.

As the front door slammed at his back, he pulled up smartly to escape collision with the girl on the stoop. He looked at and through her, barely conscious of her pretty, pallid face and the light of recognition in her eyes. Then, with a murmured apology, he dodged neatly round her, swung down the steps, and frantically hailed a passing taxicab.

Joan, dashed and disappointed, saw the vehicle swing in to the curb and heard Matthias, as he clambered in, direct the driver to the Pennsylvania Station with all possible haste.

She stared after the dwindling cab disconsolately. He hadn't even known her!

In another minute she would have turned her back on the house and sought lodgings elsewhere, but the door abruptly opened a second time, revealing Madame Duprat, a forbidding but imperative figure, upon the threshold.

Timidly in her confusion the girl made some semi-articulate enquiry as to the address of Miss Maizie Dean.

To her astonishment and consternation, the landlady unbent and smiled.

"Ah!" she exclaimed with unction. "Mademoiselle is the friend of Monsieur Matthias, is it not? Very good. Will you not be pleased to enter? It is but this afternoon that the Sisters Dean have returned so altogether unexpectedly."

VII

Alone in the body of a touring-car, Helena Tankerville, a slender and fair woman in white, as cool and fresh to look upon as the day was hot and weary to endure, consulted her bracelet-watch, shrugged recklessly, and lifted her parasol an inch or so to enable her to level an imperious stare at the point where the straight, shining lines of railroad track debouched from the western woodland; as if expecting the very strength of her impatience to conjure into sight the overdue train.

She was very pretty and prettily dressed and sure of herself; there were evidences of temper and determination mixed with disquietude in her manner; and there was no one in her present neighbourhood (except possibly her chauffeur) of whose existence she considered it worth her while to be aware. None the less, she was conscious that she was visible..

A faint puff of vapour bellied above the distant screen of pines. Immediately a far, mellow, prolonged hoot turned all faces toward the west. A rakish, low-lying locomotive with a long tail of coaches emerged from the woodland and, breathing forth vast volumes of smoke, fled a pursuing cloud of dust, straight as an arrow to the station; where, panting with triumph and relief, as one having won a race, it drew in beside the platform.

Incontinently, upwards of two hundred people, the majority of them men in apparently comfortable circumstances, well dressed to the standards of summer negligence, swarmed out of the cars and ran hither and yon, heedlessly elbowing one another and gabbling vociferously as they sought accommodation in the long rank of station-wagons, 'buses, surreys, smartly appointed traps, and motor-cars.

Helena, bending forward, overlooked them all with imperceptible disdain. The face she sought was not among those that swam in review beneath her. And presently encountering an overbold glance, she drew back with a little frown of annoyance. Already the throng was thinning; conveyances laden to the guards were drawing out of the rank and rattling and rumbling off through stifling drifts of dust; no more passengers were issuing from the coaches; and already the parlour-car porters were picking up their stools and preparing to swing back aboard the train. The conductor waved his final signal. The bell tolled its warning. The locomotive belched black smoke and cinders and amid stentorian puffings began to move, the coaches following to their tune of clanking couplings. No sign of her refractory nephew. And still Helena hesitated to give the order to drive home; John had telephoned; it wasn't like him to be delinquent in his promises.

The end of the last car was passing her when she saw him. He appeared suddenly on the rearmost platform, with the startled expression and air of a Jack-in-the-box; dropped his suit-case over the rear rail; ran down the steps; delayed an instant to gauge distance and speed: and with nice calculation dropped lightly to the ground.

Pausing only to recover his luggage, he approached the motor-car with a sheepish smile for his handsome young aunt, who regarded him with an air of mingled bewilderment and despair.

"Wel-l!" she exclaimed, as soon as he was near enough to hear – "of *all* things – !"

"Right you are!" he affirmed gravely, tossing his handbag into the car and following it. "Kick along, Davy," he added, with a nod to the chauffeur; and gracefully sank back upon the seat beside Helena.

Purring, the car began to grope its way through the dust-fog. Matthias turned twinkling eyes to his aunt. She compressed her lips and shook her head helplessly.

"Words inadequate, aunty?"

"Quite!" she said. "*What* were you doing on that train, to come so near forgetting the station?"

"Thinking," he explained: "wrapped in profound and exhaustive meditation. I say, how stunning you look!"

She gave him up; or one inferred as much from her gesture.

"You're impossible," she said in a tragic voice. "Thinking!.. While *I* had to wait there and be ogled by all those odious men!"

"You must've been ready to sink through the ground."

She eyed him stonily. "You didn't care – !"

"Even if I hadn't been preoccupied, it would never have entered my head that you seriously objected to being admired."

She received this in injured silence. Matthias chuckled to himself and settled more comfortably into his seat. The motor-car turned off the main road from the station to the village of Port Madison, down which the greater number of its predecessors had clattered, and found unclouded air on a well-metalled lane bordered with aged oaks and maples. Through a funnel-like dip between hills, Matthias, looking past his aunt, caught a fleeting glimpse of the cluttered roofs of Port Madison, its shallow, land-locked harbour set with a little fleet of pleasure boats, and the ineffable, burning blue of the distant Sound...

"I presume," Helena returned to the charge, disarmingly aggrieved, "you think I ought to be grateful for your condescending to return at all!"

"Forgive me," he pleaded, not altogether insincerely; "I know it wasn't right of me to run away like that, but I couldn't help it."

"You couldn't help it!" she murmured despairingly.

"That's just the way of it. I got to thinking about a play I wanted to write, yesterday afternoon, and – well, along about ten o'clock it got too strong for me. I just had to get back to my typewriter. You know how that is."

"I? What do I know about your silly playwriting?"

Laughing, he bent nearer and patted the gloved hand on the cushions beside him. "You know perfectly well, Helena dear, what it is to want to do something so bad you simply can't help yourself. It's the Matthias blood in both of us. That's why you ran off and married Tankerville against everybody's advice. Of course, it did turn out beautifully; but you didn't stop to wonder whether it would or not when you took it into your head to marry him. The same with me: you decide that it's high time for your delightful sister-in-law to get married, and you look round and fix on your dutiful nephew for the bridegroom-elect – wholly because you want it to be that way."

"Don't you?" she demanded sharply.

He took a moment to think this over. "I suppose I do," he admitted almost reluctantly. "But –"

"You're in love with her!" Helena declared with spirit.

"Quite true, but –"

"Then why," she begged in tones of moderate exasperation – "why do you object – hang fire – run away like a silly, frightened schoolboy as soon as I get everything arranged for you?"

"But, you see, I'm not in a position to get married yet," he argued. "I haven't –"

"How's that – 'not in a position'?" she interrupted testily.

"You keep forgetting I'm the family pauper, the poor relation, whereas Venetia has all the money there is, more or less."

"There you are!" Helena turned her palms out expressively; folded them in resignation. "What more can you ask?"

"Something more nearly approaching an equal footing, at least."

"Jack!" – she turned to him with a fine air of innocence – "how much money *have* you got, anyway?"

"Thirty-six hundred per annum, as you know very well," he replied. "But, my dear, dear aunty (you're one of the most beautiful creatures alive and I'm awfully proud and fond of you) surely you must understand that no decent fellow wants to go to the girl he's in love with and make a proposition like this: 'I've got thirty-six hundred and you've got three hundred and sixty thousand; let's marry and divide.'"

"How long have you been writing plays?"

"Oh ... several years."

"And how many have you written?"

"Quite a few."

"And how much have you made at it?"

"Next to nothing, but – "

"Then why do you persist?"

"Because it's the thing I want to do."

"But you can't make any money at it – "

"I may make a lot before long. Meanwhile, I like it."

"But if you'd only listen to reason and let Tankerville – "

"With all the best intentions in the world, dear Helena, Tankerville couldn't make me a successful business man. It isn't in me. Permit me to muddle along in my own, 'special, wrong-headed way, and the chances are I'll make good in the end. But, once and for all, I refuse positively to give up my trade and try to make sense of Wall Street methods."

Helena moved her shoulders impatiently. For an instant she was silenced. Then: "But marriage needn't necessarily put an end to your playwriting. A good marriage – as with Venetia – ought even to help, I should think."

"But you persist in forgetting I'm not a fortune hunter."

"But," she countered smartly, "Marbridge is."

He said: "Oh – Marbridge!" as if dumbfounded.

She smiled quietly, a very wise and superior smile.

To this point the car had been steadily ascending; the noise of the motor, together with the frequent stutterings of the exhaust with the muffler cut-out, had been sufficient to disguise the substance of their communication from the ears of the operator. Now, however, they surmounted the highest point and began the more gradual descent to the Tankerville estate. And with less noise there was consequently very little talking on the part of the two on the rear seat. For which Matthias wasn't altogether sorry. He wanted time to think – to think about Venetia Tankerville in the new light cast upon her by his aunt's concluding remark: as affected by her friendship with Vincent Marbridge.

In the natural swing of events, it would never have occurred to him to consider Marbridge's attentions seriously. Nobody ever took Marbridge seriously, he believed, aside from a few exceptionally foolish women...

Noiselessly the car slipped down a mile-long avenue to the brow of a promontory. On either hand Tanglewood's long parked terraces fell away to the water: on the left the harbour of Port Madison, on the right, Long Island Sound.

Matthias was barely conscious of these things; his mood was haunted by an extraordinarily clear vision of Vincent Marbridge: not tall, but by no means short; a trifle stout, but none the less a well-knit figure of a man, and tremendously alive; dark, with a broad, blunt, good-humoured face and seal-brown eyes that were exceedingly handsome and expressive; keen-witted and accomplished, knowing almost everybody and every place and thing worth knowing; hedonist and egoist, selfish, unscrupulous, magnetic, fascinating.

Impressed, Matthias frowned. His aunt eyed him covertly, with a sly, semi-affectionate, semi-malicious smile shadowing her mouth.

Slackening its pace, the car took the wide semicircle of the drive and slid sedately to a dead stop by the carriage-block. Matthias pulled himself together, jumped out, and gave his hand to his aunt. They turned toward the house.

Tankerville's pretentious marble palace crowned the brow of the headland with an effect as exquisite as a dream of an ancient French château realized in snow. For this its owner had his wife to thank. Helena, unable to curb her husband's desire for the most expensive and ostentatious place

obtainable, had at least guided his choice of design. It was too magnificent, it was overpowering, but it was beautiful; and it was more than ever beautiful at this hour, with its walls in part bathed in a rose-pink light of sunset, in part shadowed as with a wash of violet, and with all its admirable proportions stark against the dusky sapphire of the Sound.

An unwonted stillness clung about the place. Matthias wondered.

"It might be the palace of the Sleeping Beauty," he said. "Why this deadly and benumbing silence? What – "

"Oh, simply that Tankerville decided this morning to take everybody down to Huntington for lunch. They got away quite early, in the Enchantress. Come out on the terrace; we'll look for them."

They passed through a wide, cool, panelled hallway.

"Why didn't you go?"

"You know I hate the water. Besides, I had a headache – at least, I had one until the Enchantress got under way; and furthermore I meant to stay at home and meet you and talk it out."

"Venetia went, of course?"

"Of course —*and* Marbridge – and everybody!"

He grunted thoughtfully. They descended to a terrace which jutted airily out over the edge of a cliff, with a sheer drop of a hundred and fifty feet to the beach.

Helena, dropping languidly into a wicker chair, motioned Matthias to the broad marble balustrade.

"Any sign of the Enchantress, O perturbed nephew?"

He lingered there for an instant, marvelling with an inexhaustible wonder at the magnificent sweep of the view, then remembering, raked the waters until he discovered Tankerville's power-cruiser standing in toward the dock from the bottle-neck mouth of Port Madison harbour.

Returning, he reported, seated himself near his aunt, lighted a cigarette.

"Why did you ask him here anyway?" he demanded abruptly.

"Who?" she parried mischievously.

"Marbridge, of course," he admitted, sulking in the face of her manifest amusement.

"Jealous, Jackie?"

"Oh – if you insist."

She laughed. "The most encouraging symptom you've yet betrayed!.. I didn't ask him. Tankerville did. He likes him. The man's amusing, after all."

"But you like him?"

"He amuses me."

"He's not precisely a tame cat..."

"Dear boy!" she laughed again, "I didn't fetch you out here to worry about me. I'm fire-proof. Venetia's quite another pair of shoes. Fret about her as much as you like."

"When does he go – Marbridge, I mean?"

"Monday, I think. At least, I believe Tankerville asked him for a week only."

"And that's why you asked me, this particular week?"

"I thought you'd be a good counter-irritant; and hoped you'd come to your senses and secure Venetia against all Marbridges for all time to come. You gave me to understand you would."

"Pardon," he corrected a trifle stiffly: "I admitted to you in strict confidence that I was in love with Venetia. I never promised to ask her to marry me."

"Well, that's what I understood you to mean. And anyway, you'd better. Neither Tankerville nor I can control the girl; she's her own mistress and headstrong enough to be a good match for any Matthias that ever lived. If Marbridge ever convinces her that she likes him..."

She concluded with an eloquent ellipsis.

"Probably," mused Matthias after prolonged deliberation, "I'd have lost my head before this if it hadn't been so full of that play."

Helena smiled indulgently. "It's not too late ... I hope."

Troubled, he rose, walked to the balustrade, jerked his cigarette into space, and returned.

"As between one fortune-hunter and another," he said gloomily, "I'm conceited enough to think myself the safer bet."

His aunt smiled more openly: "See what Venetia thinks."

"I will!" said Matthias with a fine air of inalterable determination.

VIII

Since it was her whim and the winds indulged, Helena had ordered that the rite of the late dinner be celebrated by candlelight alone. Ten shaded candles graced the places. In the centre of the table an ancient candelabrum of gold added the mellow illumination of its seven alabaster arms, whose small flames yearned upward ardently, with scarce a perceptible flicker, though every window was wide to the whispering night.

One of these that faced Matthias framed a shimmering sky of stars and the still black shield of the Sound, on which the fixed and undeviating glare of a remote light-house was reflected darkly, a long unwavering way of light; he thought of a tall wax candle burning amid the sanctified shadows of some vast and dark and still cathedral...

They were ten at table: from Helena's right, Pat Atherton (Tankerville's partner), a Mrs. Majendie, Marbridge, a Mrs. Cardrow, Tankerville at the head; on his right, Mrs. Pat Atherton, Matthias, Venetia Tankerville, Majendie. The latter and his wife were almost strangers to Matthias, having arrived only the previous afternoon: but he thought them as pleasant and handsome people as any of those with whom the Tankervilles liked to fill their house. The Athertons were old friends; he had known them well, long before Helena dreamed of marrying Tankerville. Marbridge was an indifferently familiar figure in the ways of his life; they frequented the same clubs, and of late he had begun to encounter the older man more and more frequently in his theatrical divagations. Remained Mrs. Cardrow, a widow, the acquaintance of a week's standing. Cardrow had been in some way connected with the enterprises of Messrs. Tankerville & Atherton; how, Matthias didn't remember; a man of whom rumour said little that was good until it began to say *De mortuis*... He had killed himself for no accountable reason. His widow seemed to have survived bereavement with amazing grace.

Matthias admired her greatly. Women, he knew – Helena in their number – mistrusted her for no cause perceptible to him. He liked her, thought her little less than absolutely charming. So, evidently, did Marbridge, whose attitude toward her this evening was a little more noticeably attentive than ever before. He seemed to exert himself to interest and divert. His black eyes snapped. As he talked his heavy body swayed slightly from the hips, lending an accent to his animation. His laugh was frequent and infectious.

She was a woman who smiled more than she laughed. She smiled now, inscrutably, her beautiful, insolent eyes half veiled with demure lashes, her face turned to Marbridge, her chin a trifle high, bringing out the clear strong lines of her throat and shoulders, which had the texture, the pallor, and the firmness of fine ivory. Her eyes, when she chose to discover them, were brown, her eyebrows almost black, her hair dull gold, the gold of the candelabrum – the gold of artifice, on the word of Helena.

Perhaps it was to this odd colouring – ivory and brown, black and gold – that Mrs. Cardrow owed most of her strange and provoking quality. But there was something else, something one could not define: at once stimulating and elusive; less charm than allure; nameless; that attracted and repelled...

These were thoughts set stirring by a dozen semi-curious glances at the woman, in pauses in his conversation with Venetia. Matthias was in fact indifferent to Mrs. Cardrow. But he was tremendously interested in Venetia. It could hardly be otherwise – since his talk with Helena. He was to marry Venetia. Amazing thought!

She was adorable. Of the other women, none compared with Mrs. Cardrow: even Helena's beauty paled in contrast. But Venetia was to Mrs. Cardrow as dawn to noon. One looked at Venetia and thought of a still sea at daybreak, mobile to the young and fitful airs, radiant with sunlight, breathless with apprehension of the long, golden hours to come. One looked at Mrs. Cardrow and thought – of Woman. Venetia was dark, and the other fair; Venetia was by no means a child, Mrs. Cardrow not

yet thirty. The gulf that set them apart was not so much of years as of caste: they lived and thought on different levels, mental if not social. Matthias liked to think Venetia of the higher order.

He was to marry her. Incredible!

And tonight her eyes were warm and kind for him, and all for him. He could not see that there was anything of self-interest in the infrequent glances she cast at those who sat opposite, playing their time-old game with such engaging candour. If she had thought much of Marbridge, surely she must have betrayed some little pique or chagrin. She was not blind; neither was she patient and prone to self-effacement. Matthias had known her long enough to have garnered vivid memories of her resentment of slights, whether real or fancied. She was unique and wonderful in many ways, but (he told himself in a catch-phrase of the hour) she was essentially human. He could not have cared for a woman without temper: he cared intensely for this girl-woman whose rare loveliness seemed almost exotic in its singular scheme, whose skin, fine of texture and colourless as milk-white satin, was splashed with lips of burning scarlet, whose eyes of deepest violet were luminous in the shadow of hair of the richness and lustre of burnished bronze ... luminous and kind to him: he dared to hope greatly of their sympathy.

Through dinner she had entertained him with a mirthful, inconsecutive narrative of the adventures of the day. Now, as ices were served, her interest swerved suddenly and found a new object in himself.

"Why did you run away last night?"

"You really noticed it?"

Light malice trembled on her lips: "Not till this morning."

"You were so busy" – an imperceptible nod indicated Marbridge – "I felt myself becoming ornamental. Whereas, utility's my proudest attribute. So I left you dancing, and skipped by the light of the moon."

"Not really?"

"I assure you – "

"Put out with me, I mean?"

He sought her eyes again and found them veiled and downcast. "Not the least in the world."

"Then, again, why – ?"

"I wanted to get back to work. Besides, I had a little business with a manager."

And so he had; but until this moment he had forgotten it.

"Play business?"

"I'm afraid I know no other."

"Is something new to be produced?"

Matthias nodded: "Goes into rehearsal in August. A melodrama I wrote some time ago – 'The Jade God.'"

"Who produces it?"

"Rideout."

"Who's he?"

"A foolish actor: played a sketch of mine in vaudeville for a couple of years and, because that got over, thinks this piece must."

"But it will, won't it?"

"I hope so; but I'm glad it's not my money."

"And where will you open?"

"Heaven and the Shuberts only know. Rideout books through the Shuberts, you understand."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"The Shuberts are the Independents – the opposition to the Syndicate headed by Klaw and Erlanger. You see, the theatres of this country are practically all controlled by one or the other combination. If you want booking for your show, you've got to take sides – serve God or Mammon."

"And which is which?"

"The difference is imperceptible to the innocent bystander."

"But you'll let us know – ?"

"If we open within motoring distance of Town – rather!"

Tankerville, edging his plump little body forward on his chair, manœuvred his round and sun-scorched face in vain attempts to catch his wife's eye past the intervening candelabrum. Helena, however, divined his desire.

"Coffee in the card-room, George?"

"Please!" Tankerville bleated plaintively.

There was a concerted movement from the table.

Venetia lingered with Matthias.

"It's auction, tonight. Shall you play?"

"'Fraid I'll have to. So will you. Helena – you know – "

"Of course. We must. Only" – she sighed, petulant – "I'd rather not. I'd rather talk to you."

"Heroic measures!" he laughed. "But – consolation note! – we're two over two full tables. Therefore we'll have to cut in and out. That'll give us some time to ourselves."

"Yes," she agreed: "but it'll be just our luck to be disengaged at different times."

He paused in amused incredulity. "Do you really want to talk to me as badly as all that?"

She nodded, curtaining her eyes.

"Very much," she said softly.

They entered the card-room and were summoned to different tables. Matthias cut and edged Mrs. Cardrow out by a single pip. How Venetia fared he did not learn, more than that she was to play while Marbridge was to stay out the first rubber.

He played even less intelligently than usual, with a mind distracted. Venetia's new attitude, pleasant as had been all their association, was a development of disconcerting suddenness; or else he had been witless and blind beyond relief. And yet – how could he say? He was so frequently misled by faculties befogged with dreaming, that overlooked when they did not flatly deny the obvious: it was possible that Helena had been more wise than he.

A sense of strain handicapped his judgment; whether atmospheric or bred of his own emotion, he could not tell. And yet, plumbing the deeps of his humour, he discovered nothing there more exacting than bewilderment, more exciting than hope. On the other hand, he could fix upon nothing in the bearing of these amiable people to lead him to believe that the feeling of tensity to which he was susceptible was not the creation of his own fancy. They played with a certain abandon of enjoyment, absorbed in their diversion...

Looking past Venetia, at the other table – Venetia slim and tall and worshipful in a wonderful black gown that rendered dazzling the whiteness of her flesh – he could see Mrs. Cardrow and Marbridge at the piano in the drawing-room. The woman sat all but motionless, white arms alone moving graciously in the half-light as her deft hands wandered over the key-board. Marbridge, his arms folded, lounged over the piano, his back to the card-room. The eloquent movements of his round, dark head, its emphatic nods and argumentative waggings, seemed to indicate that he was bearing the burden of their talk; but the music, hushed though it was, covered his accents. The woman was looking up into his face with an expression of quick, pleased interest, her lips, half-parted, smiling.

It did not occur to Matthias to wonder about the substance of their conversation. But for a sure clue to the intrigue of Venetia's heart – and his own – he would have given worlds.

Throwing down his cards, Tankerville announced with satisfaction: "Game – rubber. Jack, you go out – praise the Saints! You've cost Mrs. Pat close onto fifteen dollars, more shame to you!"

"Sorry!" Matthias smiled cheerfully, rising. "You would have me play."

"Harkening and repentance!" retorted Tankerville. "Next time I marry, you can bet your sweet life I'm going to pick out a family of sure-'nough bridgers... Call Mrs. Cardrow, will you now, like a good fellow."

But Mrs. Cardrow had already left the piano. Matthias held a chair for her, and then, since the rubber at the other table was not yet decided, strolled to a window.

The night tempted him. Almost unconsciously he stepped out upon the terrace and wandered to the parapet.

Abstractedly he lighted a cigarette. When the tobacco was aglow he held the match from him at arm's-length over the abyss. Its flame burned as steadily as though protected, flickering out only when, released, it fell. No night ever more still than this: land and water alike spellbound in breathless calm; even on the brow of that high foreland where Tankerville had builded him his lordly pleasure home, no hint of movement in the air! And yet Matthias was conscious of nothing resembling oppression – exhilaration, rather. He smiled vaguely into the darkness.

From far below, echoing up from the placid waters of Port Madison as from a sounding-board, came the tinkle-tinkle of a banjo and the complaint of a harmonica. When these were silent the wailing of violins was clearly audible, bridging a distance of over a mile across the harbour, from the ball-room of the country club. Far out upon the Sound the night boat for Boston trudged along like a slow-winging firefly; and presently its wash swept inshore to rouse the beach below to sibilant and murmurous protest. In the east the vault of night was pallid, azure and silver, with the promise of the reluctant moon.

A hand fell gently upon his arm: Venetia's. He had not been aware of her approach, yet he was not startled. He turned his head slowly, smiling. She said softly: "Don't say anything – wait till it rises."

They waited in silence. Her hand lingered upon his arm; and that last, he knew, was trembling. The nearness of her person, the intimacy of her touch, weighed heavily upon his senses.

An edge of golden light appeared where the skies came down to the sea; hesitated; increased. That wan and spectral light, waxing, lent emphasis to the rare and delicious wonder of her loveliness, to the impregnable mystery of her womanhood. He regarded her with something near awe, with keen perception of his unworthiness: as a spirit from Heaven had stooped to commune with him. She lived; breathed; the hand upon his arm was warm and strong... Incredible!

The gibbous disk swung clear of the horizon and like some strange misshapen acrobat climbed a low-lying lattice-work of clouds. The girl turned away to a huge willow basket-chair. Matthias found its fellow and drew near to her. He struggled to speak; he fancied that she waited for him to speak; but his mind refused to frame, his tongue to utter, aught but the stalest of banalities.

"No dew tonight," he hazarded at length, shame-faced.

After an instant of silence she laughed clearly and gently. "O romantic man!" she said. "Now that you have, shattered the spell – if you please, a cigarette."

He supplied this need; held a match; delayed holding it when it had served its purpose, enraptured with the refulgent wonder of that cameo of sweet flesh and blood set against the melting shadows, silver and purple and blue.

With a second low, light laugh, she bent forward and daintily extinguished the flame with a single puff.

"I don't wish to be stared at..."

"Pardon," he said mechanically, startled. "But ... why?"

"Perhaps I'm afraid you may see too much..."

"Impossible!" he declared with conviction.

"Odd as it may sound," she said in a mocking voice, "I have my secrets."

Her back was to the moon, her face a pallid oval framed in ebony, illegible; but the moonlight was full upon his face, and she who would might read. His disadvantage was obvious. It wasn't fair...

Lounging, she crossed her knees, puffed thrice and cast the cigarette into the gulf. Abruptly she sat forward, studying him intently. He was disturbed with a singular uneasiness.

"Jack," said Venetia very quietly, "is it true that you love me?"

"Good lord!" he cried, sitting up.

"Is it true?"

He blinked. His head was whirling. He said nothing; sank back; quite automatically puffed with such fury that in a trice he had reduced the cigarette to an inch of glowing coal; scorched his fingers and threw it from him.

Then he gasped stupidly: "Venetia!"

"Is it true?"

She had not moved. The question had the force of stubborn purpose through its very monotony, a monotony of inflexion no less than of repetition. Her accents were both serious and sincere. She was in earnest; she meant to know.

"But, Venetia – "

"Or have you been just making believe, all this long time?"

"It – I – why – of course it's true!" he stammered lamely.

"Then why haven't you ever told me so?"

There sounded reproach, not unkindly, but real. He shook his wits together.

"How could I guess you'd care to know?"

"Do you know me so little as to think I'd resent it, if I happened not to care?"

"I – don't know – didn't think of it that way. In fact – you've knocked me silly!"

"But why? Because I've been straightforward? Dear boy!" – she lifted a hand to him: he took it in trembling – "you're twenty-seven, I'm twenty-three. We know one another pretty well: we know ourselves – at least slightly. Why can't we face things – facts – as man and woman, not as children? What's the good of make-believe? If this thing lies between us, let's be frank about it!"

He hesitated, doubting, searching her face. Her look was very sweet and kind. Of a sudden he cried "Venetia!" came to his knees beside her chair, snatched her hand and crushed it between his own, to his lips.

"I love you – I've always loved you!.."

He felt the velvet of her lips, her breath, upon his forehead; and made as if to clasp her to him. But she slipped back, straightening an arm to fend him off.

"No," she whispered – "not now – not here. Dear boy, get up! Think – this moonlight – anybody might see – "

"I love you!"

"I know and, dear, I'm glad – so glad! But – you made me ask you!"

"I couldn't help that, Venetia: I was – afraid; I hardly dared to dream – of this. You were – you are – above, beyond – "

Gently her hand sealed his mouth.

"Dear, silly boy! Get up. If you won't, I must."

Releasing her hand, he rose. His emotion shook him violently. At discretion, he dropped back into his chair. He looked about him a little wildly, his glance embracing all the weird fantasy of the night: the cold, inaccessible, glittering vault of stars, the malformed and sardonic moon, the silken bosom of the Sound, the lace and purple velvet draperies of the land. Down on the harbour the banjo and harmonica were ragging to tatters a sentimental ballad of the day. From the house came a burst of laughter – Tankerville exultant in some successful stratagem at cards.

His gaze returned to Venetia. She sat without moving, wrapped in the exquisite mystery of her enigmatic heart, bewitching, bewildering, steadfastly reading him with eyes veiled and inscrutable in liquid shadow.

Muttering – "Preposterous!" – he dropped his head between his hands. "I'm mad – mad!" he groaned.

Without stirring, she demanded: "Why?"

He shook his head free. "To have – owned up – let this come to pass. I love you: but that's all I dare say to you."

"Isn't it, maybe, enough for me?"

"I mean – I'm mad to marry you. But how can I ask you to have me? What have I to offer you? The position of wife to a poverty-stricken, half-grown playwright! It's out of reason..."

"But possibly – am I not the one to judge of that?"

"No: I won't have you marry a man unable to provide for you in the way to which you've been educated. It's a point of honour – "

"But I have – "

"You must understand: I've got to be able – able! – to humour your every whim. With things that way – what of your own you choose to spend on yourself won't count. The issue is my ability to give you everything."

"But that will come – "

"When? I can't promise – I hardly dare hope – "

"This new play isn't your only hope?"

"No – "

"Success or failure, you'll keep on?"

"Certainly..."

"Then it's only a question of time."

"But you – how can I ask you to wait?"

"There's no necessity – "

"But it must be." He rose, unable to remain still. "Give me six months: I've got another piece of work under way – and others only waiting their turn. In six months I can – "

"No!"

The monosyllable brought him up sharply. He stared. Her white arms, radiant in that clear, unearthly light, lifted toward him.

"If you want me, dear," she said in a voice tense with emotion – "it must be now – soon! To wait – six months – I – that's im – "

The beautiful modulations of Helena Tankerville's voice interrupted.

Standing in one of the windows to the card-room, she said simply: "An exquisite night."

Then, coming out upon the terrace and seeing Venetia and Matthias, she moved toward them.

"Oh, there you are, Jack. You're wanted indoors."

Matthias, unable quickly to regain his poise, said nothing. Venetia answered for him, calmly:

"He can't come."

"What, dear?"

"I say, he can't come, Helena. He's engaged."

"Engaged!"

Recovering, Helena bore down upon them with a little call of delight.

"Not really!.. O my dears! I'm so glad!"

She gathered Venetia into her arms.

IX

Unremarked by any of these, Marbridge stepped out upon the terrace. He was light of foot like most men of his type; his voice, unctuous with the Southern drawl which he affected together with quaint Southern twists of speech, was the first warning they had of his approach.

"This is surely one powerful' fine night. I don't wonder you-all like it better out here than – " He checked suddenly in both words and action: the women had started apart. "Why!" he added slowly, as though perplexed – "I hope I don't intrude..."

His quick dark eyes shifted rapidly from Helena to Venetia, to Matthias, and again back to the women, during a momentary lull of embarrassment. Then Helena said quietly:

"Not in the least. But this makes you the first to learn the news, Mr. Marbridge. Venetia and my nephew are engaged to be married."

"Engaged – !" The man's chin slacked: his eyes widened; a cigarette fell unheeded from his fingers. He smiled a trace stupidly.

"Why!" – he recollected himself almost instantaneously – "this certainly is some surprise, but I do congratulate you – both!"

With a stride he seized the hand Venetia could not refuse him, and pressed it warmly. "You're the luckiest man I ever knew!" he declared, turning to clasp hands with Matthias.

Instinctively the latter met his powerful grasp with one as forceful. "Thank you," he said, smiling gravely into the other's eyes. Under his firm but pleasant regard they wavered and fell, then steadied with a glint of temper. Their hands fell apart. Marbridge stepped back.

"Perhaps I don't know you well enough, Mr. Matthias, to congratulate Miss Tankerville as heartily as I do you; but I'm persuaded she's not liable to make any serious mistake."

Matthias nodded thoughtfully. "I understand: your intentions are excellent. I'm sure we both thank you. Venetia – ?"

"Mr. Marbridge is very amiable," said the girl, a hint of mirth modifying her composure. "But I'm afraid, Helena," she added quickly – "if you don't mind – I think I'll go to my room."

To Marbridge she gave a quaint little bow that was half an old-fashioned courtesy, robbed of formality by her spirited smile: to Matthias her hand and a gentle "Good night!" Taking the arm of her sister-in-law, she drew her toward the house.

Watching them until they disappeared, Marbridge chuckled quietly.

"Took my breath away!" he declared. "Why, I never suspected for an instant!.." He dropped heavily but with characteristic grace into a chair. "It takes you quiet boys to get away with the girls like Venetia – all fire and dash!"

"Yes," said Matthias reflectively: "it does – doesn't it? Have another cigarette?" He offered his case. "You dropped yours..."

"Thanks... She's a thoroughbred, all right. I reckon if I wasn't a mite too middle-aged, maybe I might've set you a pace that you'd've found lively going."

"Well, let's be thankful nothing of that sort happened, at all events."

Marbridge looked up over his match and lifted his brows; but if in reality a retort trembled on his lips, he thought better of it; and before either spoke again, Tankerville was on the terrace, brandishing pudgy arms.

"Hey, you!" he called fretfully. "Don't you know you're holding us all up? Come on in..."

But the game held less attraction for Matthias than ever, and after another and final failure to establish himself in Tankerville's good graces, he pocketed his losses, relinquished his place to Marbridge and – with even less inclination for bed than for cards – took himself again out into the open night. But now the terrace was all too small to contain his spirits. The need of action – movement, freedom, space – was strong upon him. Striding away down the drive that wound like a broad band

of whitewash through its dark bordering lawns and darker coppices, he found even the grounds of Tanglewood too constricted for the extravagant energy that animated him; and took to the broad highways, with all Long Island free to his tireless spirit.

For several hours or more he trudged valiantly hither and yon, with little or no notion of whither he went – with his head in the stars and his feet in the dust and kicking up a famous smother of it – and in that time was wittingly as near to happiness as he had ever been in all his days. The faculty of coherent thought had passed from him utterly, but it passed unmourned: Venetia was his! This thought alone sufficed him. He had neither time nor inclination to entertain those doubts, those questionings and apprehensions which had beset him in saner humour theretofore. It mattered nothing now that he was poor and she wealthy, nothing that all his efforts to make something of himself had thus far proved vain and fruitless. She loved him: it was enough...

He came to his senses, eventually, long enough to recognize anew the grounds of Tanglewood. Of a sudden his impetuosity had run out; remained the pleasant languor of a healthy body thoroughly exercised, the peace of a mind vexed by no insatiable desire. And still he was not sleepy. Purposefully he retarded his footsteps, approaching the house with stealth, eager to escape observation and gain his room, unhindered. Tomorrow would be soon enough to submit to the ordeal of congratulations...

It was with a shock of amazement that he saw the house all quiet and dark. He pulled out his watch and studied its face by moonlight, finding its evidence difficult to credit: twenty minutes past one in the morning!

Gingerly, keeping to the grass in order that the gravel of the drive might not, by its crunching underfoot, betray him or alarm some wakeful member of the house-hold, he approached the front door, wondering if he were locked out, and – not without amusement at his self-contrived predicament – what to do if he were. To his relief one-half of the double door stood a foot or two ajar – thanks, he had no doubt, to the thoughtfulness of Helena or Tankerville. Blessing both on general principles, he entered, shut the door and softly shot the bolt; turned in deep obscurity to grope his way to the foot of the stairs; but paused with a hand on the newel-post and his breath catching in his throat.

In the hallway above a night-light was burning dim and low but sufficiently diffused to show him the figure of a woman silently descending the stairway. When he first became aware of her she was indeed almost within arm's length: a shape of shadow scarce three shades lighter than the encompassing gloom... Venetia, possibly, having waited and watched for him from her windows overlooking the drive, stealing down to bid him that good night they had perforce foregone in the presence of Helena and Marbridge...

That wild and extravagant surmise had no more than entered his mind when he found the woman in his arms. She gave herself into them with a gesture of abandonment, with a little sigh that escaped in broken measure, murmurous and fond. An arm that, lifting, flashed naked to the shoulder as the sleeve of her negligee fell back, encircled his neck and drew down his head to hers. And her mouth fastened to his with clinging lips...

Half stunned by receipt of that mad caress, one thought shot like light through the turmoil of his senses: this was never Venetia!

With an effort he straightened his neck against the pressure of the woman's arm. She strove to overcome his resistance, wooing him in accents hushed, shaking with passion:

"Vincent ... sweetheart!.."

He interrupted hastily: "I beg pardon!" The inadequacy of that stilted form, disgusting him, he added: "I am John Matthias."

Immediately the woman released him and, with a gasp, sank back against the newel-post. Her breath came gustily, with a sound like smothered sobbing. Pitifully he divined her shame and terror; and though he knew her very well, beyond mistake, he said evenly: "Don't worry – there isn't any light."

In a stupefied voice she iterated: "No light – ?"

"It's so confounded' dark," he complained: "I couldn't tell you from Eve. So perhaps you'd better run back to your room now..."

He turned away deliberately. Behind him, after a pause of an instant, there rose a sound of soft rustling draperies, a swift and hushed patter of footsteps on the stairs. A moment or two later a latch clicked very gently in the corridor above.

Quietly Matthias switched on a single light, returned to the door, unbolted and quickly opened it.

He was not disappointed that this manoeuvre surprised a shadow skulking in the penumbra of rose bushes that bordered the steps, the shadow of a man who drew back swiftly when he recognized Matthias. This last stepped out, turned in the direction of the fugitive shadow, and pursuing at leisure, hailed in a quiet and natural tone: "I say – Marbridge! – that you?"

Immediately he came upon Marbridge at a standstill round the corner of the house, awaiting him in a curious posture of antagonism: his feet well apart, heavy body inclined a trifle forward, round dark head low between his shoulders, hands clenched, upon his face a cloud of anger.

Matthias greeted him suavely: "I was afraid I'd locked you out." Ignoring his attitude even as he seemed to ignore the fact that Marbridge had changed from evening dress to a suit of dark flannels, he added: "Coming in now? It's a bit late."

Marbridge pulled himself together. "Perhaps you're right," he assented surlily. But it was with patent effort that he mastered his resentment and accompanied Matthias back to the doors.

"A fine night, what?" Matthias filled in the awkward silence.

"Yes," agreed Marbridge brusquely. "Too fine," he amended – "too fine to waste in bed."

"Sleepless, eh?"

"Yes."

Following him in, Matthias refastened the door. "Several of us seem troubled with the same indisposition," he observed coolly, swinging to face Marbridge. "That's why I bothered to call you in, you know."

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