

Vance Louis Joseph

Nobody



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«Public Domain»

Vance L.

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CHAPTER I

ANARCHY

"What you gonna have?"

To this inquiry the patron made no response; head bent, nose between the pages of the magazine, she pored sedulously over a legend attached to one of the illustrations.

After a decent pause in waiting the waitress renewed her demand with a sharper accent:

"Say, lis'en; what you want?"

"White satin, veiled with *point d' Angleterre*," Miss Manvers replied distinctly, if without looking up, aware simply of something imperative in the starched but humid presence at her elbow.

Pardonably startled, the waitress demanded with the rising inflection: "*Wha-a-at?*"

"The court train," Miss Manvers pursued in abstraction, "is lined with lace and dotted with bouquets of orange-blossoms-"

She checked herself suddenly, looked up shyly, and essayed a pale, apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry; I didn't realise-"

But now the waitress had caught a glimpse of the illustration and was bending over the patron's shoulder for a better look.

"Gee!" she commented sincerely. "Ain't that a dream?"

"Yes," Miss Manvers admitted wistfully, "it's a dream, right enough!"

"That's so, too." Deftly, with a large, moist, red hand, the waitress arranged knife, fork, spoon, and paper serviette on the unclothed brown board before Miss Manvers. "That's the worst of them fashion mag'zines," she complained; "they get your goat. Sometimes after readin' some of that dope I can't hardly remember orders right, just for wishin' somebody'd come along and hang some of them joyful rags onto me!"

Then, catching the eye of the manager, she straightway resumed her professional habit of slightly wilted hauteur-compounded in equal parts of discontent, tired feet, heat-fag and that profound disdain for food-consuming animals which inevitably informs the mind of every quick-lunch waitress.

"What you gonna have?" she demanded dispassionately.

"Ham-and, please."

"Plate of ham-and. Cawfy?"

"Yes, iced coffee and" – Miss Manvers hesitated briefly-"and a napoleon."

Reciting the amended order, the waitress withdrew.

For the next few moments the customer neglected the fashion magazine which she had found-apparently a souvenir of some other absent-minded patron-on the seat of the chair next that one of her own casual choice.

She stared blankly at the smudged and spotted bill of fare propped up, in its wooden frame, against an armour-plate-china sugar-bowl. She was deeply intrigued by the mystery of human frailty as exemplified by her reckless extravagance in ordering that superfluous bit of pastry. Miss Manvers's purse contained a single coin of silver, the quarter of a dollar; being precisely the sum of her entire fortune. Her ham and beans would cost fifteen cents, the coffee and the napoleon five cents each. In other words, she would be penniless when she had paid her score-and Heaven only knew for how long afterward.

Her lips moved without sound in her worn and pallid face. "What's the difference?" she bully-ragged her conscience. "I might as well be broke as the way I am!"

The argument was painfully reasonable; that inmate of New York who has but five cents has nothing.

On the other hand, there was nothing whatever to be advanced in extenuation of her folly in thus inviting indigestion—a passion for pastry is its own punishment no less than any other infatuation to which mortal flesh is prone. Sally was morally certain she would suffer, and that severely, before nightfall.

"Well, what of it?" she grumbled sullenly. "If I die for it, it's cheap at the price! And, no matter what happens, it can't be any hotter afterward than it is now."

Somehow soothed by this cynical reflection, she sat up, mopped her flushed forehead with a handkerchief of which she was not proud, and drank thirstily of her tumbler of ice-water.

The grateful draft reminded her that she had actually been athirst ever since noon. It was now almost three o'clock—thanks to which fact she might eat in the comparative comfort of a lunchroom which boasted no patron other than herself. But she was little appreciative of this boon; she comprehended her surroundings with just a little languid resentment of their smug cleanliness and their atmosphere impregnated with effluvia of cheap edibles. But if these seemed offensive she would have been willing to overlook them on certain conditions—as she proved when the waitress reappeared with her order.

"I don't suppose—" Miss Manvers began, but hesitated.

"What say?"

"I don't suppose you need any more girls here?"

"Lookin' for a job?" the waitress inquired brilliantly. "I dunno—I'll ask the manager, if you want."

Miss Manvers nodded a barely audible "Please!" She munched drearily for a few minutes, staring out through the front windows wherein, from dawn till dark, a white-clad chef industriously browned the wheats and cast sinkers; beyond their wide expanse of plate-glass, stenciled with the name of the establishment in reverse, a vista of sun-smitten street danced drunkenly through the reek from the sheet-iron griddles. Miss Manvers wondered dully if the sidewalks were really less hot than those same griddles.

"The manager says nothin' doin'," the waitress reported. "But you can leave your name and add-ress if you wanta."

"Thanks," said Miss Manvers; "but what's the use?"

"That's right, all right," the other sympathised. "Besides, take it from me, this ain't the kind of a job you could make good at. You gotta be a horse like me to stand it, 'specially days like this."

"Yes, I was thinking of that—"

"Believe me or not, nobody ain't got no idear what hot is without they've juggled hash in one of these joints on a summer day. The kitchen back there is honest' somethin' fierce. Three of our girls fainted dead away in the noon rush."

"Oh, I know," Miss Manvers sighed; "I've tried it before—and failed."

The entrance of another customer prevented further confidences, and Miss Manvers was left to resume her scanning of the fashion magazine.

If its distracting quality was unquestionable, it hardly contributed comfort to her mood.

"In selecting her personal apparel," she read, "the bride-to-be must, of necessity, be guided by individual requirements and the social position which she is to assume. Although much has been said about the advisability of purchasing only what is really needed and can be worn before the styles change, it is a common fault of brides to buy too much... It is assumed that the June bride will have already on hand a suit or two, a one-piece frock of serge or similar material, a top-coat, an afternoon coat or one of the new capes, evening gowns, and an evening wrap, one or two afternoon and luncheon frocks, and hats, shoes, and similar accessories.."

Here Miss Manvers withdrew from the printed page long enough mentally to inventory her own wardrobe.

"That lets me out," she said, and turned a page.

The caption, "A Feudal Aristocracy," caught her attention. "Long Island," she learned, "is a poem itself to-day, even if it is suffering from cheap developments, the encroachment of tenantry, and the swarming of the commuters. It is too bad that this garden spot must be overrun, and indeed there has been a movement to stay the tide of immigration from the city. In one section our best people are buying up vast stretches of property to add to their private estates.."

Fascinated, Miss Manvers thrust aside a garnished plate, took a gulp of the decoction called coffee, and attacked her napoleon.

"I am so glad," she continued to read, "to see that we are adding to our estates and fast forming an aristocracy of the countryside; we really live at our country places now for over half the year. Even the large weddings are no longer town affairs. If one has an estate it is so much smarter now to marry off one's daughters from the country place. Yet there is always one difficulty about this method of procedure: can such weddings be afforded the prominence necessary? Weddings, of course, must be given a certain amount of advertisement, through the proper channels, because each of us stands for a representative house, which must not drop into oblivion.."

At this point Miss Manvers wrinkled her nose indignantly. "Just for that," she informed the unknown author of this artless screed, "just for that now, I've a great mind not to go to Long Island at all this summer-not even once to Coney!"

She turned impatiently back to the advertising pages and reviewed the "classified wants" listlessly, forewarned by experience that they would offer no invitation to one of her singularly modest accomplishments; none of these advertisers desired the services of a saleswoman, a typist, or even a lady's-maid. Not that Miss Manvers imagined she would score a success in the role of lady's-maid, though it was almost the only means open to her of earning a livelihood which, thus far, she had not essayed.

Such work was hardly calculated to suit a girl with a mind of independent cast and what is known as a temper of her own: prohibitive barriers between her and such bread as may be earned in the sweat of domestic servitude.

Little disappointed, then, she turned attention to "Chat of the Social World," gossip which exercised potent fascination upon the girl's intelligence. She devoured with more avidity than she had her food those pretentiously phrased chronicles of the snobocracy-trite announcements of post-season luncheons, dinners, dances, and bridge parties; of departures for Europe and for American country homes, of engagements and of weddings-distilling therefrom an acid envy that robbed her napoleon of all its savour.

Such was the life for which she yearned with every famished aspiration of her being. And why not? Who were these whose half-tone portraits smirked complacence or scowled disdain to her inspection-who were these that they should enjoy every good thing in life while she must go hungering all her days for a little pleasure? Scarce one betrayed by feature or expression either breeding or intelligence superior to that of Sally Manvers, late of the hardware notions in Huckster's Bargain Basement!

Regarding the full-page reproduction of a photograph showing a jibber-jawed June bride in full regalia, Miss Manvers was moved enviously to paraphrase an epigram of moot origin: "There, but for the grace of God, stands Sally Manvers!"

There was enough truth in that to excuse a little gulp of emotion; which, however, was craftily dissembled.

In due course, rising, Miss Manvers stood and delivered at the desk of the blond cashier, then, penniless, wandered forth into the brutal sunshine.

Her homeward way took her up Sixth Avenue, through Thirty-Fourth Street, and northward on Park Avenue.

She went slowly, wearily, as suited a drudge to whom respite from drudgery brought no earnest of ease or pleasure. The burning air beat up into her downcast face from sun-baked stones that scorched through the soles of her shoddy shoes, and she gulped down acrid mouthfuls of it rather than breathed.

June was still young, but already summer, like some burly ruffian shouldering spring aside with her work half done, held the city in the hollow of a hot and humid hand.

In the mid-afternoon glow, lower Park Avenue owned its personal atmosphere of somnolent isolation, in strong contrast with the bustle of proletarian Fourth Avenue at its one extreme and the roar at the other of traffic-galled Forty-Second Street. Of the residences a few, whose awninged windows resembled heavy-lidded eyes, overlooked wayfaring folk with drowsy arrogance; the greater number, with boarded doors and blinded windows, like mouths and eyes tight shut in seasonable slumber, ignored the world entirely.

Though she had passed that way twice a day for years on end-always in consciousness of that aloof spirit informing the inanimate, and in such resentment thereof as properly rewarded a studied insolence-never before to-day had Sarah Manvers found the genius of the neighbourhood so unmitigatedly intolerable. It was with downright relief that presently she turned from the avenue eastward and accomplished in the span of one short cross-town block a transit of the most violent contrasts, from the dull dignity of the socially eligible, if somewhat *passé*, through a stratum of shabby gentility, to a region of late years dedicated to the uses of adversity undisguised.

A few doors short of Lexington Avenue she paused, sighed, turned, climbed weather-bitten steps to a brownstone entrance, and addressed herself to three long flights of naked stairs.

She left behind, at the entrance, the dingy parlours of "Mme. Levin, Modes et Toilettes," on the first landing the wailing-rooms of a hag-ridden teacher of vocal culture, on the next several dusty chambers perennially unrented, and gained at the top an open door whose panels sported a simple rectangle of cardboard advertising the tenancy of (in engraved script) *Miss Lucy Spode*, (in ink) *M. A. Warden*, and (in pencil, a scrawl) *Manvers*.

Through this the girl walked into a back room of generous size, which boasted a top-light together with the generic name of studio, and was furnished with an ill-assorted company of lame and dismal pieces. The several vocations of its tenants were indicated by a typewriting-machine beneath a rubber hood thick with dust, a folding metal music-stand and a violin-case, and a large studio easel supplemented by a number of scrubby canvases. A door in the partition wall communicated with a small bedchamber of the kind commonly termed "hall room." And in one corner a stationary wash-stand and a gas-stove for morbid cookery lurked behind a Japanese screen of dilapidated panels.

Near the windows, on the end of a box-couch, a young woman was perched, thin shoulders rounded over the ink-stained drawing-board resting on her knees. She had a large, self-willed mouth and dark Bohemian hair, and wore a dreary cotton kimono over a silk petticoat whose past had been lurid. One hand clutched gingerly a bottle of India ink, the other wielded a scratchy steel drafting-pen.

Interrupted, she looked up with a start that all but spilled the ink and cried in a voice heavily coloured with the enervating brogue of the Southern born:

"My land, Sally! *What* time is it?"

In the act of unpinning her hat (a straw that even a drowning woman would have hesitated to grasp at) Miss Manvers paused to consult an invalid alarm-clock which was suffering palpitations on an adjacent shelf.

"Twenty past three," she reported, sententious.

The artist cocked her head, squinted malevolently at her drawing, dipped, and busily scratched once more.

"Scared me," she explained: "coming home so early!"

Sally removed her collar with a wrench and a grunt: "Got a date?"

"Sure; with Sammy-four o'clock."

"Salamander stuff, eh?"

"What do you want-a day like this? I'm half-cooked already, and I guess I can go through a little fire for the sake of a sixty-cent *table d' hôte* and a trip to Coney. But you needn't worry; it'll be hotter than this before Sammy warms up enough to singe anything. His intentions are so praiseworthy they pain him; he blushes every time he has to recognise the sex question long enough to discuss the delights of monogamy in a two-family house within commuting distance of Prospect Park South."

"You don't mean to say you've got that far along-already!"

"That's the reward of a year's steady angling, honey."

"Heavens, but how you must carry on with Sammy!"

"Believe me, it's something scandalous," sighed Lucy Spode.

"But why-" Sally began in a tone of expostulation.

The other quickened with a flash of temper. "Don't ask me! I came No'th to study art and mingle with the world of intellect and fashion, and after three years I'm drawing heads for fashion magazines at a dollar per, and I know a minor poet who's acquainted with the assistant editor of *The Scrap-Book*, and the one man I know who owns a dress-suit gets fifty cents an hour for posing in it. If that isn't enough to make me welcome even the prospect of married life with Sammy Myerick and a woman to do the washing, I don't know-"

"Well, if you aren't crazy about Sammy, why not chuck him? Marriage isn't the last resource for a girl like you. You've got just as many wits to live on as the next one. This town's full of young women no better-looking than either of us, and with even less intelligence, who manage pretty comfortably, thank you, on the living the world owes them."

"Sally Manvers!" cried the Southern girl, scandalised, "what a way to talk!"

"Oh, *all* right," said the other indifferently. "Where's Mary Warden?"

"Lyric Hall-rehearsing."

"Lucky Mary!"

Lucy Spode looked up in astonishment. "Lucky!" she protested; "dancing till she's ready to drop, in this awful heat, and no pay for rehearsals!"

"All the same," Sally contended, "she's got some chance, some right to hope for better things. She's an understudy, and her principal might fall ill-or something. That's better than marrying a man you don't care for-or clerking at Huckster's for seven dollars a week."

"Cat," said Miss Spode dispassionately. "Who's been mussing your fur?"

"Life."

The steel pen was poised again while Lucy Spode surveyed Sally Manvers suspiciously.

"What do you mean-life?" she demanded.

"This sort of thing." Sally waved a comprehensive hand. "Living here, in this hole, and most of the time not even able to pay my share of the rent; slaving for a dollar a day, and losing part of that in unjust fines; walking to and from the store to save car fare; eating the sort of food we do eat; never having pretty clothes or pleasures of any sort. I don't call this a life!"

"You've got indigestion," Miss Spode diagnosed shrewdly. "I'll bet two bits you've been eating napoleons again."

"I have got indigestion, but it's thanks only to being fed up with existence-the kind we lead, at least. I want something better."

"The vote, perhaps?"

"For two cents I'd throw something at you."

The artist uncoiled her legs, stuck the pen in her hair, set the ink-bottle down on the floor, sighed, and, lifting the drawing-board, held it at arm's length, studying her work through narrowed eyelids.

"Then it must be a man," she concluded absently. "When a woman of twenty-seven wants something and doesn't know what it is, it's either the vote or a man."

"Oh, shut up."

"With man an odds-on favourite in the betting." Miss Spode laid the board aside with a "Thank goodness, that's finished!" and, rising, stretched her cramped limbs. "What I'd like to know," she persisted, "is whether it's man abstract or a man concrete."

Sally laughed bitterly. "Take a good look at me, dear-as an exhibit, not as a friend-and tell me honestly whether any man worth having would glance twice at me."

"You can be pretty enough," Miss Spade returned seriously, "when you want to take the trouble-"

"But I don't-ever."

"The more fool you."

"What's the use-on seven a week? What's the good of being pretty in rags like these? It only gets a girl in wrong. I don't care how fetching I might make myself seem-"

"But you ought to."

"Look here; do you know how a reporter would describe me?"

"Of course; 'respectable working girl.'"

"Well, then, men worth while don't run after 'respectable working girls'; they leave that to things who wear 'Modish Men's Clothing'-with braided cuffs and pockets slashed on the bias! – and stand smirking on corners we have to pass going home. Do you think I'd do my hair becomingly, and-and all that-to attract such creatures?"

"So it's abstract man. Thought so!"

"It's starvation, that's what it is. I'm sick for want of what other girls get without asking-pretty clothes and-and all that sort of thing."

"Meaning," the artist interpreted gravely, "love."

"Well," Sally demanded, defiant, "why not?"

"Why not indeed?" Lucy returned obliquely, wandering round the studio and collecting various articles of wearing-apparel toward her appearance in public.

"I'm twenty-seven," Miss Manvers declared mutinously. "I'll never be younger-I want to be loved before I'm old!"

She paused, viewed with reassuring amusement Lucy's countenance of perplexity, and laughed again.

"I've had ten years of independence; and what has it brought me? The reward of virtue: that swaybacked couch for my bed, Uneeda biscuit for my bread, and for salt-tears of envy!"

"Virtue is its own reward," Lucy enunciated severely.

"Virtue is its only reward, you mean!"

"You don't talk fit to eat."

"You know what I mean. Only mental bankrupts go to the devil because they're hungry. I'm less bothered about keeping body and soul together – Huckster's seven a week does that after a fashion-than about keeping soul and mind together."

"It sounds reasonable."

"I'm desperate, I tell you! And there's more than one resort of desperation for a girl of intelligence."

"As, for instance-"

"Well-you've named one."

"Man?"

"That's the animal's first name."

"But you've just pointed out, a successful campaign demands a wardrobe."

"Even that can be had if one's unscrupulous enough."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"To seek happiness where I can find it. I'm game for anything. I'm 'north of fifty-three'!"

"You're *what*?"

"Have you forgotten the 'Rhyme of the Three Sealers'? 'There's never a law of God or man runs north of fifty-three'! Well, the age of twenty-seven is a woman's fifty-three, north latitude-at least, it is if she's unmarried-time to jettison scruples, morals, regard for the conventions, and hoist the black flag of social piracy!"

"In plain language, you think the hour has struck to doll yourself up like a man-trap. What?"

"Yes-and hang the expense!"

"By all means, hang it. But where? It's a case of cash or credit; the first you haven't got, and I don't see your visible means of supporting a charge-account at Altman's."

"There are ways," Sally insisted darkly.

"You can't mean you'd do anything dishonest-"

"I'd do *anything*. Look at all the people in high places who began as nothing more nor less than adventurers. Nobody's fussing about how they got their money. It's a sin to be poor nowadays, but the sin of sins is to stay poor!"

A moment of silence followed this pronouncement; then Miss Spode observed pensively:

"Something's happened to you to-day, Sally. What is it? You haven't been-"

"Fired again'? Not exactly. Just laid off indefinitely-that's all. With good luck I may get my job back next September."

"Oh, but honey!" Lucy exclaimed, crossing to drop a hand on Sally's shoulder: "I am sorry!"

"Of course you are," Sally returned stonily. "But you needn't be. I'm not going to let this make things any harder for you and Mary Warden."

"How perfectly mean! You know I wasn't thinking anything like that!"

"Yes, dear, I do know it." In sudden contrition, Sally caught the other girl's hand and laid her cheek transiently against it. "What I meant to make clear was" – she faltered momentarily- "I've made up my mind I'm a Jonah, and the only decent thing for me to do is to quit you both, Lucy, my dear!"

She ended on a round note of determination rather than of defiance, and endured calmly, if with a slightly self-conscious smile, the distressed look of her companion.

"Don't be silly!" this last retorted, pulling herself together. "You know you're welcome-"

"Of course I do. All the same, I'm not taking any more, thanks."

"But it's only a question of time. If you can't wait for Huckster's to take you on again, Mary and I can easily keep things going until you find another job."

"But that wouldn't be fair!"

"What wouldn't be fair?"

"To sponge on you two under false pretences." "False pretences!" Lucy iterated blankly.

"I was laid off last Saturday. I didn't say anything, but I've been looking for something else ever since-and this is Wednesday, and I'm through. I'm sick and tired. I've got just as much right as anybody to live on society, and that's what I'm going to do from now on!"

Miss Spode lowered a cloth skirt over her head and blouse before pursuing. "But what I can't understand is how-assuming you're in earnest-"

"Deadly earnest!" Sally declared.

" – and mean to go through with this-how you think you'll get a start without doing something downright wrong."

"It wouldn't be fair to tempt me the way I feel to-day."

"There's only one thing," Miss Spode announced, adjusting her hat, "that prevents me from speaking to a cop about you: I know you're a fraud. You couldn't do anything dishonourable to save you."

"Oh, couldn't I!" Sally returned ominously. "You wait and see!"

"Well, well," said the other indulgently, "have it your own way. Hooray for crime! But if I stop here listening to you preach anarchy I'll be late for Sammy. So I'm off." Pausing in the doorway, she looked back with just a trace of doubt colouring her regard. "Do try to brace up and be sensible, honey. I'm worried about leaving you alone with all these blue devils."

"You needn't be. I can take care of myself-"

"Well, promise to do nothing rash before I come home."

"Promises made for keeps are specifically prohibited by article nine of the Social Pirate's Letters of Marque. But I don't mind telling you the chances are you'll find me on the roof when you get back, unless this heat lets up. I'm going up now; this place is simply suffocating!"

But her smile grew dim as she resigned herself to an evening whose loneliness promised to be unbroken; that faint flush faded which had crept into her cheeks in the course of her half-whimsical, half-serious harangue; she looked once more what life had made her-a work-worn shop-girl, of lack-lustre charm, on the verge of prematurely middle-aged, hopeless spinsterhood.

Another six months of this life would break her, body and spirit, beyond repair.

Her eyes, that ranged the confines of those mean quarters, darkened quickly with their expression of jaded discontent.

Another six months? She felt as if she could not suffer another six hours..

After a time she rose and moved languidly out into the hall, from which an iron ladder led up through a scuttle to the roof, the refuge and retreat of the studio's tenants on those breathless, interminable summer nights when their quarters were unendurably stuffy. Here they were free to lounge at ease, *en déshabillé*; neither the dressmaker nor the teacher of voice-production ever troubled their privacy, and seldom did other figures appear on any of the roofs which ran to the Park Avenue corner on an exact plane broken only by low dividing walls and chimney-stacks.

Three chairs of the steamer type, all maimed, comprised the furniture of this roof-garden, with (by way of local colour) on one of the copings a row of four red clay flower-pots filled with sun-baked dust from which gnarled and rusty stalks thrust themselves up like withered elfin limbs.

Selecting the soundest chair, Sally dragged it into the shadow cast by the hood of the studio top-light, and settling down with her feet on the adjacent coping, closed her eyes and sought to relax from her temper of high, almost hysterical nervous tension.

Thoughts bred of her talk with Lucy for a time distracted her, blending into incoherent essays at imaginative adventures staged in the homes and parks of the wealthy, as pictured by the sycophantic fashion magazine and cast with the people of its gallery of photographs-sublimely smart women in frocks of marvellous inspiration, and polo-playing, motor-driving, clothes-mad men of an insouciance appalling.

On the edge of unconsciousness she said aloud, but without knowing that she spoke, three words.

These were: "Charmeuse.. Paquin.. Bride."

And then she slept; her pallid face upturned to that high-arched sky of brass, from which light and heat beat down in brutal waves, she slept the sleep of exhaustion, deep and heavy; dark and stupefying sleep possessed her utterly, as overpowering and obliterating as though induced by drugs.

CHAPTER II

BURGLARY

She wakened in sharp panic, bewildered by the grotesquerie of some half-remembered dream in contrast with the harshness of inclement fact, drowsily realising that since she had fallen asleep it had come on to rain smartly out of a shrouded sky.

Without the least warning a blinding violet glare cut the gloom, the atmosphere quaked with a terrific shock of thunder, and the downpour became heavier.

Appalled, the girl sprang from her chair and groped her way to the scuttle through a crepuscle resembling late twilight.

It was closed.

Somebody, presumably the janitor, had shut it against the impending storm without troubling to make sure there was no one on the roof, for her chair had been invisible behind the shoulder of the top-light.

With a cry of dismay the girl knelt and, digging fingers beneath the cover, tugged with all her might. But it was securely hooked beneath and held fast.

Then, driven half frantic less by the lashing rain than by a dread of lightning which she had never outgrown, she stumbled back to the glass face of the top-light and pounded it with her fists, screaming to Mary Warden to come and let her in. But no lights showed in the studio, and no one answered; reluctantly she was persuaded that Mary was not yet home from rehearsals.

The long rolling, grinding broadsides of thunder made almost continuous accompaniment-broken only by the briefest intermissions-to the fiery sword-play that slashed incessantly through and through that grim tilt of swollen black cloud.

Half-stunned and wholly terrified, dazzled and deafened as well, the girl dashed the rain from her eyes and strove to recollect her wits and grapple sanely with her plight.

Already she was wet to her skin-water could no more harm her-but the mad elemental tumult confounded all her senses; her sole conscious impulse was to gain shelter of some sort from the sound and fury of the tempest.

It was a bare chance that a scuttle on some one of the adjacent roofs might be, at least, not fastened down.

Fighting the buffeting wind, the scourging rain, and her panic fright, she gained the scuttle of the roof to the west, but found it immovable.

She tried the next roof, with no better fortune.

Panting, even sobbing a little in her terror, she scrambled on through a sort of nightmarish progress to the next roof, and on and on to the next and the next.

She kept on reckoning, and couldn't have said how many roofs she had crossed, when at length she discovered a scuttle that was actually ajar, propped wide to the pounding flood; and without pause to wonder at this circumstance, or what might be her reception and how to account for herself, she swung down into that hospitable black hole, found footing on the ladder, let herself farther down-and by mischance dislodged the iron arm supporting the cover.

It fell with a bang and a click, and Sally barely escaped crushed fingers by releasing the rim and tumbling incontinently to the floor.

Happily she hadn't far to fall, wasn't hurt, and hastily picking herself up, stood half-dazed, listening for sounds of alarm within the house.

Coincidentally the storm sounded a crisis in a series of tremendous, shattering crashes, so heavy and so prolonged that all the world seemed to rock and vibrate, echoing the uproar like a gigantic sounding-board.

This passed; but from the body of the house Sally heard nothing-only the crepitation of rain on the roof and the sibilant splatter of drops trickling from her saturated skirts into the puddle that had formed beneath the scuttle.

She stood in what at first seemed unrelieved darkness-but for glimpses revealed by the incessant slash and flare of lightning-at one end of a short hallway, by the rail of a staircase well. Three or four doors opened upon this hall; but she detected no sign of any movement in the shadows, and still heard no sound.

Wondering-and now, as she began to appreciate her position, almost as unhappy in her refuge as she had been in the storm-Sally crept to the rail and peered down. But her straining senses detected nothing below more than shadows, solitude, and silence; which, however, failed to convey reassurance; the fact of the open scuttle would seem to indicate that she hadn't stumbled into an uninhabited house.

Stealthily she proceeded to investigate the several rooms of that topmost story-servants' quarters, comfortably furnished, but tenantless.

Then step by timid step she descended to the next floor, which she found devoted to three handsomely appointed bedchambers, also empty. And slowly, as her courage served, another flight took her down to a story given over wholly to two bedchambers with baths, dressing-rooms and boudoirs adjoining, all very luxurious to a hasty survey.

Below this again was an entrance hall, giving access to a drawing-room, a library, and, at the back of the house, a dining-room, each apartment in its way deepening the impression of a home toward whose making wealth and good taste had worked in rarely harmonious collaboration.

And finally the basement proved to be as deserted as any room above; this though the kitchen clock still ticked on stertorously, though the fire in the range had been banked rather than drawn, though one had but to touch the boiler to learn it still held water piping-hot.

It required, however, only a moment's sober thought, once satisfied she was alone, to suggest as one reasonable solution to the puzzle that the owners had fled town for the week-end, leaving the establishment in care of untrustworthy servants, who had promptly elected to seek their own pleasure elsewhere.

Content with this theory, Sally chose one of the windows of the servants' dining-room from which to spy out stealthily, between the shade and the sill, over a flooded area and street; first remarking a sensible modification of the gloom in spite of an unabated downpour, then that the house was near the Park Avenue corner, finally a policeman sheltered in the tradesman's entrance of the dwelling across the way.

At this last disquieting discovery Sally retreated expeditiously from the window, for the first time realising that her presence in that house, however adventitious and innocent, wouldn't be easy to explain to one of a policeman's incredulous idiosyncrasy; the legal definition of burglar, strictly applied, fitted Sarah Manvers with disconcerting neatness.

But nobody knew; it was only half past six by the clock in the kitchen; it was reasonably improbable that the faithless servants would come back much before midnight; and she need only wait for the storm to pass to return across the roofs, or, for that matter, to leave circumspectly by the front door. For it would certainly be dark by the time the storm uttered its last surly growl and trailed its bedraggled skirts off across Long Island.

For an instant finely thrilled with a delicious sense of the wild adventure of being alone in a strange house, free to range and pry at will, she found the full piquancy a bit difficult to relish with sodden clothing clinging clammy to her body and limbs.

None the less it was quite without definite design that Sally retraced her way to that suite of rooms in the second story which seemed to be the quarters of the mistress of the establishment; and it was no more than common-sense precaution (prompted, it's true, by sheer, idle curiosity) which moved her to darken windows already shuttered by drawing their draperies of heavy, rose-coloured silk before switching on the lights.

It may have been merely the reflection of rose-tinted walls that lent the face of the girl unwonted colour, but the glow that informed her eyes as she looked about was unquestionably kindled by envy as much as by excitement.

Nothing, indeed, lacked to excite envy in that hungry heart of hers. The bedchamber and its boudoir and bath were not only exquisitely appointed, but stood prepared for use at a moment's notice; the bed itself was beautifully dressed; the dressing-table was decked with all manner of scent-bottles, mirrors, and trays, together with every conceivable toilet implement in tortoise-shell with a silver-inlay monogram-apparently A-M-S; the rugs were silken, princely, priceless; elusive wraiths of seductive perfumes haunted the air like memories of lost caresses.

And when the girl pursued her investigations to the point of opening closed doors she found clothes-presses containing a wardrobe to cope with every imaginable emergency-frocks of silk, of lace, of satin, of linen; gowns for dinner, the theatre, the street, the opera; boudoir-ropes and negligees without end; wraps innumerable, hats, shoes, slippers, mules-and a treasure of lingerie to ravish any woman's heart.

And against all this sybaritic store the intruder had to set the figure mirrored by a great cheval-glass-the counterfeit of a jaded shop-girl in shabby, shapeless, sodden garments, her damp, dark hair framing stringily a pinched and haggard face with wistful, care-worn eyes.

Her heart ached with a reawakened sense of the cruel unfairness of life. Her flesh crept with the touch of her rain-soaked clothing. And in her thoughts temptation stirred like a whispering serpent.

Beyond dispute it was wrong, what she contemplated, utterly wrong, and wild to madness; but the girl was ripe for such temptation and frail with a weakness due to long years of deprivation. Full half of her heart's desire was here, free to her covetous fingers, a queen's trousseau of beautiful belongings.

"It's only for an hour. No one need ever know. I'll leave everything just as I found it. And I'm so uncomfortable!"

She hesitated a moment longer, but only a moment; of a sudden smouldering embers of jealousy and desire broke into devastating flame, consuming doubts and scruples in a trice. Swift action ensued; this was no more an affair of conscience, but of persuasion and resistless impulse. She flew about like one possessed-as, indeed, she was, no less.

Her first move was to turn on hot water in the shining porcelain tub. Then, instinctively closing and locking the hall door, she slipped from her despised garments and, hanging them up to dry in a tiled corner where their dampness could harm, nothing, slipped into the bath..

Half an hour later, deliciously caressed by garments of soft white silk beneath a feather-weight *robe-de-chambre*, she sat before the dressing-table, drying her hair in the warm draft of an electric fan and anointing face, hands, and arms with creams and delicately scented lotions.

A faint smile touched lips now guiltless of any hint of sullenness; she hummed softly to herself, whose heart had almost forgotten its birthright of song and laughter; never the least pang of conscience flawed the serene surface of her content.

Properly dressed, her hair was beautiful, soft, fine and plentiful, with a natural wave that lent an accent to its brownish lustre. When she finished arranging it to her complete satisfaction she hardly knew the face that smiled back at her from the mirror's depths. Miraculously it seemed to have gained new lines of charm; its very thinness was now attractive, its colour unquestionably intrinsic; and her eyes were as the eyes of a happy child, exulting in the attainment of long-coveted possessions.

It wasn't in human nature to contemplate this transformation and feel contrition for whatever steps had been necessary to bring it about.

And when she could do no more to beautify her person Sally turned again to the clothes-press, by now so far gone in self-indulgence, her moral sense so insidiously sapped by the sheer sensual delight she had of all this pilfered luxury, that she could contemplate without a qualm less venial experiments with the law of *meum et tuum*.

She entertained, in short, a project whose lawless daring enchanted her imagination, if one as yet of vague detail. But with command of the resources of this wonderful wardrobe, what was to prevent her from appropriating a suitable costume and stealing forth, when the storm had passed, to seek adventure, perhaps to taste for a night those joys she had read about and dreamed about, longed for and coveted, all her life long? Nothing could be more mad; there was no telling what might not happen; there was every warrant for believing that the outcome might be most unpleasant. But adventures are to the adventurous; and surely this one had started off propitiously enough!

"And what I need she'll never miss. Besides, I can send back everything in the morning, anonymously, by parcel-post. It's only borrowing."

Already she had passed from contemplation to purpose and stood committed to the enterprise, reckless of its consequence.

But she found it far from easy to make her selection; it wouldn't do to fare forth *en décolletée* without an escort—a consideration that sadly complicated the search for just the right thing, at once simple and extravagant, modish and becoming. Moreover, any number of captivating garments positively demanded to be tried on, then clung tenaciously to her pretty shoulders, refusing to be rejected.

She wasted many a sigh over her choice, which was ultimately something darkish, a frock (I think) of dark-blue *crépe-de-chine*, designed primarily for afternoon wear, but, supplemented by a light silk wrap, quite presentable for evening; and it fitted to admiration.

This question once settled, she experienced little trouble finding slippers and a hat to her taste.

The testimony of a small gilt clock startled her when at length she stood ready for the next step in her nefarious career: the hour-hand was passing ten. That seemed almost incredible.

Running into the unlighted boudoir, she caught back the window-draperies, raised the sash, and peered cautiously out through the slanted slats of the wooden blinds.

The sky that now shone down upon the city was a fair shield of stars unblurred by cloud; the storm had passed without her knowledge.

Closing the window, Sally delayed for one last, rapturous survey of herself in the cheval-glass, then put out the lights and went to the door.

She hardly knew why it was that she opened it so gently and waited so long upon the threshold, every nerve tensed to detect alien sound in the stillness of the empty house. But it was as if with darkness those vacant rooms and passages had become populous with strange, hostile spirits. She heard nothing whatever, yet it was with an effect of peril strong upon her senses that she stole forth through the hallway and up the stairs to the topmost floor, where, perched precariously upon the iron ladder, she tried her patience sorely with a stubborn scuttle-cover before recalling the click that had accompanied its closing—the click of a spring-latch.

And this last, when gropingly located, proved equally obdurate; she fumbled doggedly until back and limbs ached with the strain of her position; but her fingers lacked cunning to solve the secret; and in the end, when on the point of climbing down to fetch matches, she heard a sound that chilled her heart and checked her breath in a twinkling—an odd, scuffling noise on the roof.

At first remote and confused, it drew nearer and grew more clear—a sound of light footfalls on the sheet-tin.

Her self-confidence and satisfaction measurably dashed, she climbed down, so fearful of betraying herself to the person on the roof that she went to the absurd extreme of gathering her skirts up tightly to still their silken murmur.

Now she must leave by the street. And now she remembered the policeman who kept nightly vigil at the avenue crossing!

She was beginning to be definitely frightened, vividly picturing to herself the punishment that must follow detection.

And as she crept down-stairs, guided only by the banister-rail, the sense of her loneliness and helplessness there in that strange, dark place worked upon the temper of the girl until her plight, however real, was exaggerated hideously and endued with terrors so frightful that she was ready to scream at the least alarm.

CHAPTER III

ACCESSARY AFTER THE FACT

At the foot of the stairs Sally paused in the entry-hall, thoughtfully considering the front door, the pale rectangle of whose plate-glass was stenciled black with the pattern of a lace panel. But she decided against risking that avenue of escape; it would be far less foolhardy to steal away *via* the basement, unostentatiously, that the always-possible passer-by might more readily take her for a servant.

Turning back, then, toward the basement staircase, she began to grope her way through blinding darkness, but had taken only a few uncertain steps when, of a sudden, she stopped short and for a little stood like a stricken thing, quite motionless save that she quaked to her very marrow in the grasp of a great and enervating fear.

If she could not have said what precisely it was that she feared, her fright was no less desperately real. She could see nothing; she had heard no sound; her hands had touched nothing more startling than the banister-rail, and yet.

It was as if sensitive filaments of perceptions even finer than sight, touch, and hearing had found and recoiled from something strange and terrible skulking there, masked by the encompassing murk.

Probably less than twenty seconds elapsed, but it seemed a long minute before her heart stirred anew, leaping into action with a quickened beat, and she was able to reassert command of her reason and- reassured, persuaded her fright lacked any real foundation-move on.

Five paces more brought her to the elbow of the rail; here, in the very act of turning to follow it down to the basement, she halted involuntarily, again transfixed with terror.

But this time her alarm had visible excuse; that there was something wrong in that strange house, so strangely deserted, was evident beyond dispute.

She stood facing the dining-room door, the door to the library on her left; if not in any way evident to her senses, she could fix its position only approximately by an effort of memory. But through the former opening her vision, ranging at random, instinctively seeking relief from the oppression of blank darkness, detected a slender beam of artificial light no thicker than a lead-pencil-a golden blade that lanced the obscurity, gleaming dull upon a rug, more bright on naked parquetry, vivid athwart the dust-cloth shrouding the dining-table.

For a moment or two the girl lingered, unstirring, fascinated by that slender, swerveless ray; then, slowly, holding her breath, urged against her will by importunate curiosity, she crossed the threshold of the dining-room, following the light back to its source-a narrow crack in the folding doors communicating with the library.

Now Sally remembered clearly that the folding doors had been wide open at the time of her first tour of investigation; as, indeed, had the door between the library and hall-now tight shut, else this light would have been perceptible in the hall as well.

It was undeniable, then, that since she had closeted herself up-stairs another person had entered the house-some one who had shut himself up there in the library for a purpose apparently as clandestine as her own. Or why such pains to mask the light, and why such care not to disturb the silence of the house?

To have gone on and made good an escape without trying to read this riddle would have been hardly human of the girl, for all her misgivings; she stole on to the folding doors with less noise than a mouse had made and put an eye to the crack, which, proving somewhat wider than she had imagined, afforded a fair view of the best part of the other room.

An electric chandelier was on full-blaze above the broad and heavy centre-table of mahogany, beyond which, against the farther wall, stood on the one hand a bookcase, on the other a desk of the

roll-top type-closed. Above each of these the wall was decorated with trophies of ancient armour; between them hung a huge canvas in a massive gilt frame-the portrait of a beautiful woman beautifully painted. And immediately beneath the portrait stood a young man, posed in profound abstraction, staring at the desk.

He rested lightly against the table, his back square to Sally's view, revealing a well-turned head thatched with dark hair, clipped snugly by well-formed ears, and the salient line of one lean, brown cheek. But even so, with his countenance hidden, something conveyed a strong impression to the girl of a perplexed and disconcerted humour.

She was frankly disappointed. For some reason she had thought to discover a burglar of one or another accepted type-either a dashing cracksman in full-blown evening dress, lithe, polished, pantherish, or a common yegg, a red-eyed, unshaven burly brute in the rags and tatters of a tramp. But this man wore unromantic blue serge upon a person neither fascinating nor repellent. She could hardly imagine him either stealing a diamond tiara or hopping a freight.

But that he was of a truly criminal disposition she was not permitted long to doubt; for in another moment he started from his pensive pose with the animation of one inspired, strode alertly to the wall, stepped up on the seat of a chair beside the desk, and straining on tiptoes (though tolerably tall) contrived to grasp the handle of a short-bladed Roman sword which formed part of one of the trophies.

With some difficulty and, in the end, a grunt of satisfaction, he worked the weapon loose and, jumping down, turned to the desk, thrust the point of the sword between the writing-pad and the edge of the roll-top, forced the blade well in, and bore all his weight upon the haft of this improvised jimmy. Promptly, with a sound of rending wood, the top flew half-way up.

At this the man released the sword, which fell with a thump to the rug at his feet, pushed the top as far back as it would go, and, bending over the desk, explored its rack of pigeonholes and drawers. One of the latter eventually yielded the object of his search; he took from it first a small automatic pistol, which he placed carelessly to one side, then a small leather-bound book whose pages he thumbed in nervous haste, evidently seeking some memorandum essential to his ends. This found, he paused, conned it attentively for an instant, then turned and took the book with him across the room beyond the bookcase, thus vanishing from the field of Sally's vision.

Now was her chance to slip down-stairs and, undetected, away. But, surprisingly enough, she proved of two minds about advantaging herself of the opportunity. To begin with, she was no more afraid-at least, not to any great extent. What, she argued scornfully, was one man, after all? – especially one who had no more lawful business than she upon those premises! She wasn't afraid of men; and even were this one to catch her watching him (something Sally meant to take good care he shouldn't) he could hardly denounce her to the police. Besides, what *was* he up to, anyhow, over there in that corner, out of sight? She simply had to know the meaning of those noises he was making.

They were difficult to diagnose-an odd whirring sound broken by repeated muffled clanks and by several others as baffling, notably a muted metallic knocking and rattling.

She experienced an exasperating effect of trying to see round a corner.

But in the end she identified those sounds beyond mistake: the man was fretting the combination of a safe, pausing now and again to try the handle. For what, indeed, had he forced that desk if not to find the combination?

In due course the noises ceased and the malefactor re-appeared, bringing with him a morocco-bound box of good size. She made no doubt whatever that this was a jewel-case, and took his smile for confirmation of her surmise, though it was really less a smile than satisfaction twitching the full lips beneath his dark little moustache (one of those modishly flat affairs so widely advertised by collarmakers).

For now the miscreant was facing Sally as he bent over the table and fumbled with the lock of the jewel-case, and she made good use of this chance to memorise a countenance of mildly sardonic

cast, not unhandsome-the face of a conventional modern voluptuary, self-conscious, self-satisfied, selfish-rather attractive withal in the eyes of an excited young woman.

But a moment later, finding the case to be fast-locked, the burglar gave utterance to an exclamation that very nearly cost him his appeal to her admiration. She couldn't hear distinctly, for the impatient monosyllable was breathed rather than spoken, but at that distance it sounded damnably like "*Pshaw!*"

And immediately the man turned back to the desk to renew his rummaging-in search of a key to fit the case, she guessed. But his business there was surprisingly abbreviated-interrupted in a fashion certainly as startling to him as to her who skulked and spied on the dark side of the folding doors.

Neither received the least intimation that the door from the library to the hall had been opened. Sally, for one, remained firmly persuaded that they two were alone in the silent house until the instant when she saw a second man hurl himself upon the back of the first-a swift-moving shape of darkness, something almost feline in his grim, violent fury that afforded the victim no time either to turn or to lift a hand in self-defence. In a twinkling the two went headlong to the floor and disappeared, screened by the broad top of the table.

There, presumably, Blue Serge recovered sufficiently from the shock of surprise to make some show of fighting back. Confused sounds of scuffling and hard breathing became audible, with a thump or two deadened by the rug; but more than that, nothing-never a word from either combatant. There was something uncanny in the silence of it all.

For an instant Sally remained where she was, rooted in fright and wonder; but the next, and without in the least understanding how she had come there, she found herself by the open door in the entry-hall, just beyond the threshold of the library, commanding an unobstructed view of the conflict.

Apparently this neared its culmination. Though he had gone down face forward, Blue Serge had contrived to turn over on his back, in which position he now lay, still struggling, but helpless, beneath the bulk of his assailant-a burly, blackavised scoundrel who straddled the chest of his prey, a knee pinning down either arm, both hands busy with efforts to make an unappetising bandana serve as a gag.

Pardonably rewarded for this inconsiderate treatment, the fat one suddenly snatched one hand away, conveyed a bitten finger to his mouth, instantly spat it out together with a gust of masterful profanity and, the other taking advantage of the opportunity to renew his struggles, shifted his grip to Blue Serge's throat and, bending forward, strove with purpose undoubtedly murderous to get possession of the short Roman sword.

It lay just an inch beyond his reach. He strained his utmost toward it, almost touched its haft with eager finger-tips.

At this a strange thing happened-strangest of all to Sally. For she, who never in her life had touched firearm or viewed scene of violence more desperate than a schoolboy squabble, discovered herself inside the library, standing beside the desk and levelling at the head of the heavy villain the automatic pistol that had rested there.

Simultaneously she was aware of the sound of her own voice, its accents perhaps a bit shaky, but none the less sharp, crying: "Stop! Don't you dare! Drop that sword and put up your hands! I say, put up your hands!"

The stout assassin started back and turned up to the amazing apparition of her a ludicrous mask of astonishment, eyes agoggle, mouth agape, pendulous beard-rusty chin aquiver like some unsavoury sort of jelly. Then slowly-thanks to something convincing in the manner of this young woman, aflame as she was with indignant championship of the under dog-he elevated two grimy hands to a point of conspicuous futility; and a husky whisper; like a stifled roar, rustled past his lips:

"Well, can yuh beat it?"

A thrill of self-confidence galvanised the person of Miss Manvers, steadying at once her hand and her voice.

"Get up!" she snapped. "No-keep your hands in sight. Get up somehow, and be quick about it!"

Without visible reluctance, if with some difficulty, like a clumsy automaton animated by unwilling springs, the fat scoundrel lurched awkwardly to his feet and paused.

"Very good." She was surprised at the cold, level menace of her tone. "Now stand back-to the wall! Quick!"

She was abruptly interrupted by a vast, discordant bellow: "Look out, lady! Look out! That gun might go off!"

And as if hoping by that sudden and deafening roar to startle her off guard, the man started toward her, but pulled up as quickly, dashed and sullen. For she did not flinch an inch.

"That's your lookout!" she retorted incisively. "If you're afraid of it-stand back and keep your hands up!"

With a flicker of a sheepish grin the rogue obeyed, falling back until his shoulders touched the wall and keeping his hands level with his ears.

Still holding the pistol ready, the girl shifted her glance to Blue Serge.

He had already picked himself up, and now stood surveying his ally with a regard which wavered between amaze and admiration, suspicion and surprise. Meanwhile he felt gingerly of his throat, as if it were still sore, and nervously endeavoured to readjust a collar which had broken from its moorings. Catching her inquiring eye, he bowed jerkily.

"Thanks!" he panted. "I-ah-good of you, I'm sure-"

She checked him coolly. "Take your time-plenty of it, you know-get your breath and pull yourself together."

He laughed uncertainly. "Ah-thanks again. Just a minute. I'm-ah-as dumfounded as grateful, you know."

She nodded with a curtness due to disillusionment; the man was palpably frightened; and, whatever his excuse, a timid Raffles was a sorry object in her esteem at that instant. She had anticipated of him-she hardly knew what-something brilliant, bold, and dashing, something as romantic as one has every right to expect of a hero of romantic fiction. But this one stood panting, trembling, "sparring for wind," for all the world like any commonplace person fresh from rough handling!

It was most disappointing, so much so that she conceded grudgingly the testimony of her senses to the rapidity with which he regained his normal poise and command of resource; for one evidence of which last she noted that he backed up to the centre-table with a casual air, as if needing its support, and with a deft, certain, swift gesture slipped the jewel-case into his coatpocket. And she noted, too, a flash of anxiety in his eyes, as if he were wondering whether she had noticed.

At this she lost patience. "Well?" she said briskly. "If you've had time to think-"

"To be sure," Blue Serge returned easily. "You mean, about this gentleman? If you ask me, I think he'd be far less potentially mischievous facing the wall."

"All right," Sally agreed, and added with a fine flourish of the pistol: "Face about, you!"

With flattering docility the fat rascal faced about. "And now," Blue Serge suggested, "by your leave-"

Drawing near the girl, he held out his hand for the pistol, and to her own surprise she surrendered it without demur, suddenly conscious that he was no more afraid, that he was rapidly assuming comprehensive command of the situation beyond her to gainsay, and that he knew, and knew that she knew he knew, that she had never entertained any real intention of pulling the trigger, however desperate the emergency.

And incontinently, as though he had taken away all her courage, together with that nickel-plated symbol, she started back, almost cringing in a panic of sadly jangled nerves.

Happily for her conceit, once he had disarmed her, Blue Serge transferred his interest exclusively to his late assailant.

Calmly showing the girl his back, he stepped over, poked the pistol's nose significantly into the folds of the ruffian's neck, and with a sharp word of warning slapped smartly his two hips; in consequence of which singular performance he thrust a hand beneath the tail of the fellow's coat and brought away a bull-dog revolver of heavy calibre.

And then he stepped back, smiling, with a sidelong glance of triumph for Sally's benefit—a glance that spent itself on emptiness.

For Sally was no more there; her uninstructed fingers were already fumbling with the fastenings of the front door when Blue Serge discovered her defection.

CHAPTER IV

BLACKMAIL

There was a breathless instant while the combination of knobs, bolts, and locks defied her importunity so obstinately that Sally was tempted to despair.

She dared not look behind her; but momentarily, as she groped, fumbled, and trembled at the front door, she was aware that a man had backed out of the library into the hall and paused there in the gush of light, staring after her.

And when the door suddenly yielded she heard-or fancied that she heard-his voice, its accent peremptory: "Stop!" Or perhaps it was: "Wait!"

She did neither; the door slammed behind her with a crash that threatened its glass; she was at the foot of the front steps before that sound had fairly registered on her consciousness; and her panic-winged heels had carried the young woman well round the corner and into Park Avenue before she appreciated how interesting her tempestuous flight from that rather thoroughly burglarised mansion would be apt to seem to a peg-post policeman. And then she pulled up short, as if reckoning to divert suspicion with a semblance of nonchalance-now that she had escaped.

But a covert glance aside brought prompt reassurance; after all, the gods were not unkind; the policeman was just then busy on the far side of the avenue, hectoring humility into the heart of an unhappy taxicab operator who had, presumably, violated some minor municipal ordinance.

Inconsistently enough-so strong is the habit of a law-abiding mind-the sight of that broad, belted, self-sufficient back, symbolic of the power and sanity of the law, affected Sally with a mad impulse to turn, hail the officer, and inform him of the conditions she had just quitted. And she actually swerved aside, as if to cross the avenue, before she realised how difficult it would be to invoke the law without implicating herself most damningly.

Recognition of that truth was like receiving a dash of ice-water in her face; she gasped, cringed, and scurried on up Park Avenue as if hoping to outdistance thought. A forlorn hope, that: refreshed from its long rest (for since the storm she had been little better than the puppet of emotions, appetites, and inarticulate impulses) her mind had resumed its normal functioning.

Inexorably it analysed her plight and proved that what she had conceived in an hour of discontent and executed on the spur of an envious instant could nevermore be undone. What had been planned to be mere temporary appropriation of an outfit of clothing-"to be returned in good order, reasonable wear and tear excepted" – was one thing; safe-breaking, with the theft of Heaven only knew what treasure, was quite another. As to that, had she not been guilty of active complicity in the greater crime? How could she be sure (come to think of it) that the stout man had not been the lawful caretaker rather than a rival housebreaker?

She had indeed commenced adventures with a vengeance!

The police were bound to learn of the affair all too soon; her part in it was as certain to become known; too late she was reminded that the name "Manvers" indelibly identified every garment abandoned in the bath-room. Before morning certainly, before midnight probably, Sarah Manvers would be the quarry of a clamorous hue-and-cry.

Appalled, she hurried on aimlessly, now and again breaking into desperate little jog-trots, with many a furtive glance over shoulder, with as many questing roundabout for refuge or resource.

But the city of that night wore a visage new and strange to her, and terrifying. The very quietness of those few residential blocks, marooned amid ever-rising tides of trade, had an ominous accent. All the houses seemed to have drawn together, cheek by jowl, in secret conference on her case, sloughing their disdainful daytime pose and following her fugitive, guilty figure with open amusement and contempt. Some (she thought) leered horribly at her, others scowled, others again assumed a scornful

cast; one and all pretended to a hideous intelligence, as though they knew and, if they would, could say what and why she fled.

It was as if the storm had been a supernatural visitation upon the city, robbing it of every intimate, homely aspect, leaving it inhumanly distorted in an obsession of abominable enchantment.

With the start of one suddenly delivered from dream-haunted sleep, she found herself arrived at Forty-Second Street, and safe; none pursued her, nothing in her manner proclaimed the new-fledged malefactor; she need only observe ordinary circumspection to escape notice altogether. And for several moments she remained at a complete standstill there on the corner, blocking the fairway of foot traffic and blindly surveying the splendid facade of Grand Central Station, spellbound in wonder at the amazing discovery that Providence did not always visit incontinent retribution upon the heads of sinners-since it appeared that she who had sinned was to escape scot-free.

With this she was conscious of a flooding spirit of exultant impenitence; the deadly monotony of her days was done with once and for all. It mattered little that-since it were suicidal to return to the studio, the first place the police would search for her-she was homeless, friendless, penniless; it mattered little that she was hungry (now that she remembered it) and had not even a change of clothing for the morrow; these things would somehow be arranged-whether by luck or by virtue of her wit-they *must!*

All that really mattered was that the commonplace was banished from her ways, that she was alive, foot-loose and fancy-free, finally and definitely committed to the career of an adventuress.

Paradoxically, she was appalled by contemplation of her amazing callousness; outlawed, *declassée*, she was indifferent to her degradation, and alive only to the joy of freedom from the bondage of any certain social status.

Now as she lingered on the corner, people were passing her continually on their way over to the terminal; and one of these presently caught her attention-a man who, carrying a small oxford hand-bag, came up hastily from behind, started to cross the street, drew back barely in time to escape annihilation at the wheels of a flying squadron of taxicabs, and so for a moment waited, in impatient preoccupation with his own concerns, only a foot or two in advance but wholly heedless of the girl.

Sally caught her breath sharply, and her wits seemed to knit together with a sort of mental click; the man was Blue Serge, identified unmistakably to her eyes by the poise of his blue-clad person-the same Blue Serge who owed his life to Sally Manvers!

In another instant the way cleared and the man moved smartly on again, with every indication of one spurred on by an urgent errand-but went no more alone. Now a pertinacious shadow dogged him to the farther sidewalk, into the yawning vestibule of the railway station, on (at a trot) through its stupendous lobbies, even to the platform gates that were rudely slammed in his face by implacable destiny in the guise and livery of a gateman.

At this, pausing a little to one side, Sally watched Blue Serge accost the guardian, argue, protest, exhibit tickets, and finally endeavour to bribe a way past the barrier. But the train was already pulling out; with a shake of his stubborn head the uniformed official moved on; and ruminating on a power of pent profanity, Blue Serge turned and strode back into the waiting-room, passing so near to Sally that their elbows almost touched without his rousing to the least recognition of her existence.

But that in itself was nothing to dismay or check the girl in her purpose, and when Blue Serge a minute later addressed himself to the Pullman bureau she was still his shadow-an all but open eavesdropper upon his communications with the authority of the brass-barred wicket.

"I've just missed the eleven ten for Boston," she heard him explain as he displayed tickets on the marble ledge, "and, of course, I'm out my berth reservation. Can you give me a lower on the midnight express?"

"No," Authority averred with becoming sententiousness.

"An upper, then?"

"Nothing left an the midnight."

"Not even a stateroom?"

"I told you nothing doing."

"Well, then, perhaps you can fix me up for the Owl train?"

"Wait a minute."

A pause ensued while Authority consulted his records; not a long pause, but one long enough to permit a wild, mad inspiration to flash like lightning athwart the clouded horizon of Sally's doubt and perplexity. Surely it were strangely inconsistent with her role of adventuress to permit this man to escape, now that destiny had delivered him into her unscrupulous hands!

"Owl train? De luxe room or ordinary stateroom-all I got left."

"Good enough. I'll take-"

If Blue Serge failed promptly to nominate his choice, it was only because Miss Manvers chose that juncture to furnish him-and incidentally herself, when she had time to think things over-with what was unquestionably for both of them the most staggering surprise of that most surprising night.

Peremptorily plucking a blue-serge sleeve with the brazenest impudence imaginable, she advised her victim:

"Take both, if you please!"

Had she schemed deliberately to strike him dumb in consternation, her success must have afforded Sally intense satisfaction. Since she hadn't, her personal consternation was momentarily so overpowering as to numb her sense of appreciation. So that for the period of a long minute neither of them moved nor spoke; but remained each with a blank countenance reflecting a witless mind, hypnotised by the stupefaction of the other.

Then, perhaps a shade the quicker to recover, Sally fancied that her victim's jaw had slackened a bit and his colour faded perceptibly; and with this encouragement she became herself again, collected, aggressive, confronting him undismayed before recognition dawned upon Blue Serge, and, with it, some amused appreciation of her effrontery. Even so, his first essay at response was nothing more formidable than a stammered "I beg your pardon?"

She explained with absolute composure: "I said, take both rooms, please. I'm going to Boston, too."

"Oh!" he replied stupidly.

She nodded with determination and glanced significantly aside, with a little toss of her head, toward the middle of the lobby.

"There's a Central Office man over there," she observed obliquely, dissembling considerable uncertainty as to what a Central Office man really was, and why.

"There is!"

"If you go to Boston, I go," she persisted stolidly. His countenance darkened transiently with distrust or temper. Then of a sudden the man was shaken by a spasm of some strange sort-the corners of his mouth twitched, his eyes twinkled, he lifted a quizzical eyebrow, his lips parted.

But whatever retort he may have contemplated was checked by the accents of Authority and the tapping of an imperative pencil on the window-ledge.

"Say, I'm busy. Which are you going to take now, de luxe room or-"

"Both!" With the dexterity of a stage conjurer Blue Serge whipped a bill from his pocket and thrust it beneath the wicket, not for an instant detaching his gaze from Sally. "And quick," said he; "I'm in a hurry!"

Grunting resentfully, Authority proceeded to issue the reservations, thus affording Sally, constrained to return without a tremor the steadfast regard of her burglar, time to appreciate the lengths to which bravado had committed her. And though she stood her ground without flinching, her cheeks had taken on a hue of bright crimson before Blue Serge, without troubling to verify them, seized tickets and change and turned squarely to her.

"Now that's settled," he inquired amiably, "what next?"

The better to cover her lack of a ready answer, she made believe to consult the mellow orb of the four-faced clock that crowns the bureau of information.

"The Owl train leaves when?" she asked with a finely speculative air.

"One o'clock."

"Then we've got over an hour and a half to wait!"

"How about a bite of supper? The station restaurant is just down-stairs-"

"Thank you," she agreed with a severe little nod.

Lugging his bag, he led the way with the air of one receiving rather than conferring a favour.

"Curious how things fall out," he observed cheerfully; "isn't it?"

"Yes-"

"I mean, your popping up like this just when I was thinking of you. Coincidence, you know."

"Coincidences," Sally informed him consciously, "are caviar only to book critics. There's nothing more common in real life."

He suffered this instruction with a mildly anguished smile.

"That's true, I presume, if one knows anything about real life. I don't go in for realistic novels you see, so can't say. But you're right one way: it isn't anything extraordinary, come to consider it, that you and I, both headed for Boston, should run into each other here. By the way," he added with a casual air, "speaking of coincidences, it sort of triple-plated this one to have your friend from Central Office hanging round so handy, didn't it? If he's in sight, why not be a sport and tip me off?"

"I don't see the necessity," Sally returned, biting her lip-"yet."

"Not from your point of view, perhaps-from mine, yes. Forewarned is fortunate, you know."

"I dare say."

"You won't put me wise?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, of course, one can guess why."

"Can one?"

"Why, forgive me for calling your bluff, it wouldn't be safe, would it? Of course, I'm a sure-enough bad man-and all that. But you must be a bird of my feather, or you wouldn't flock together so spontaneously."

Sally opened her eyes wide and adopted a wondering drawl known to have been of great service to Miss Lucy Spode: "Why, whatever do you mean?"

"Good!" Blue Serge applauded. "Now I *know* where I stand. That baby stare is the high sign of our fraternity-of blackbirds. Only the guilty ever succeed in looking as transparently innocent. Too bad you didn't think of that in time."

"I don't follow you," she said truthfully, beginning to feel that she wasn't figuring to great advantage in this passage of repartee.

"I mean, your give-away is calculated to cramp your style; now you can't very well cramp mine, threatening to squeal."

"Oh, can't I?"

"No. I know you won't go through with it; not, that is, unless you're willing to face Sing Sing yourself. For that matter, I don't see how you're going to make Boston at all to-night, after that break, unless you go on your own; I don't believe I'm scared enough to stand for being shaken down for your transportation."

He was gaining the whip-hand much too easily. She averted her face to mask a growing trepidation and muttered sullenly: "What makes you think I'm afraid-?"

"Oh, come!" he chuckled. "I know you hadn't any lawful business in that house, don't I?"

"How do you know it?"

"Because if you had, I would now be going peaceful, with the kind policeman instead of being a willing victim of a very pleasant form of blackmail."

Burning with indignation and shivering a bit with fear of the man, she stopped short, midway down the ramp to the "lower level," and momentarily contemplated throwing herself upon his mercy and crawling out of it all with whatever grace she might; but his ironic and skeptical smile provoked her beyond discretion.

"Oh, very well!" she said ominously, turning, "if that's the way you feel about it, we may as well have this thing out here and now."

And she made as if to go back the way she had come; but his hand fell upon her arm with a touch at once light and imperative.

"Steady!" he counselled quietly. "This is no place for either bickering or barefaced confidences. Besides, you mustn't take things so much to heart. I was only making fun, and you deserved as much for your cheek, you know. Otherwise, there's no harm done. If you hanker to go to Boston, go you shall, and no thanks to me. Even if I do pay the bill, I owe you a heap more than I'll ever be able to repay, chances are. So take it easy; and I say, do brace up and make a bluff, at least, of being on speaking terms. I'm not a bad sort, but I'm going to stick to you like grim death to a sick nigger's bedside until we know each other better. That's flat, and you may as well resign yourself to it. And here we are."

Unwillingly, almost unaware, she had permitted herself to be drawn through the labyrinth of ramps to the very threshold of the restaurant, where, before she could devise any effectual means of reasserting herself, a bland head waiter took them in tow and, at Blue Serge's direction, allotted them a table well over to one side of the room, out of earshot of their nearest neighbours.

Temporarily too fagged and flustered to react either to the danger or to the novelty of this experience, or even to think to any good purpose, Sally dropped mechanically into the chair held for her, wondering as much at herself for accepting the situation as at the masterful creature opposite, earnestly but amiably conferring with the head waiter over the bill of fare.

Surely a strange sort of criminal, she thought, with his humour and ready address, his sudden shifts from slang of the street to phrases chosen with a discriminating taste in English, his cool indifference to her threatening attitude, and his paradoxical pose of warm-it seemed-personal interest in and consideration for a complete and, to say the least, very questionable stranger.

She even went so far as to admit that she might find him very likable, if only it were not for that affected little moustache and that semi-occasional trick he practised of looking down his nose when he talked.

On the other hand, one assumed, all criminals must seem strange types to the amateur observer. Come to think of it, she had no standard to measure this man by, and knew no law that prescribed for his kind either dress clothing with an inverness and a mask of polished imperturbability, or else a pea-jacket, a pug-nose, a cauliflower ear, with bow legs and a rolling gait..

"There, I fancy that will do. But hurry it along, please."

"Very good, sir-immediately."

The head waiter ambled off, and Blue Serge faced Sally with an odd, illegible smile.

"At last!" he hissed in the approved manner of melodrama, "we are alone!"

She wasn't able to rise to his irresponsible humour. Thus far her audacity seemed to have earned her nothing but his derision. He was not in the least afraid of her-and *he* was a desperate criminal. Then what was she in his esteem?

Such thoughts drove home a fresh painful realisation of her ambiguous personal status. It began to seem that she had been perhaps a little hasty in assuming she was to be spared punishment for her sin, however venial that might in charity be reckoned. Chance had, indeed, offered what was apparently a broad and easy avenue of escape; but her own voluntary folly has chosen the wrong turning.

Her hands were twisted tight together in her lap as she demanded with tense directness:

"What have you done with them?"

He lifted the ironic eyebrow. " *Them?* "

"The jewels. I saw you steal them-watched you from the dining-room, through the folding doors-

"The deuce you did!"

"I saw you break open the desk-and everything."

"Well," he admitted fairly, "I'm jiggered!"

"What have you done with them?"

"Oh, the jewels?" he said with curious intonation. "Ah-yes, to be sure; the jewels, of course. You're anxious to know what I've done with them?"

"Oh, no," she countered irritably; "I only ask out of politeness."

"Thoughtful of you!" he laughed. "Why, they're outside, of course-in my bag."

"Outside?"

"Didn't you notice? I checked it with my hat, rather than have a row. I ought to be ashamed of myself, I know, but I'm a moral coward before a coat-room attendant. I remember keeping tabs one summer, and-will you believe me? – a common, ordinary, every-day three-dollar straw lid set me back twenty-two dollars and thirty cents in tips. But I hope I'm not boring you."

"Oh, how can you?" she protested, lips tremulous with indignation.

"Don't flatter; I bore even myself at times."

"I don't mean that, and you know I don't. How can you sit there joking when you-when you've just-

"Come off the job?" he caught her up as she faltered. "But why not? I feel anything but sad about it. It was a good job-wasn't it? – a clean haul, a clear getaway. Thanks, of course, to you."

She responded, not without some difficulty: "Please! I wouldn't have dared if he hadn't tried to get at that sword."

"Just like him, too!" Blue Serge observed with a flash of indignation: "his kind, I mean-less burglars than bunglers, with no professional pride, no decent instincts, no human consideration. *They* never stop to think it's tough enough for a householder to come home to a cracked crib without finding a total stranger to boot-a man he's never even *seen* before, like as not-ah-weltering on the premises-

"Oh, do be serious!"

"Must I? If you wish."

The man composed his features to a mask of whimsical attention.

"What-what did you do with him?" the girl stammered after a pause during which consciousness of her disadvantage became only more acute.

"Our active little friend, the yegg? Why, I didn't do anything with him."

"You didn't leave him there?"

"Oh, no; he went away, considerably enough-up-stairs and out through the scuttle-the way he broke in, you know. Surprisingly spry on his feet for a man of his weight and age-had all I could do to keep up. He did stop once, true, as if he'd forgotten something, but the sword ran into him-I happened thoughtlessly to be carrying it-only a quarter of an inch or so-and he changed his mind, and by the time I got my head through the scuttle he was gone-vanished utterly from human ken!"

"He had broken the scuttle open, you say?"

"Pried it up with a jimmy."

"And you left it so? He'll go back."

"No, he won't. I found hammer and nails and made all fast before I left."

"But," she demanded, wide-eyed with wonder, "why did you take that trouble?"

"My silly conceit, I presume. I couldn't bear the thought of having that roughneck return and muss up one of my neatest jobs."

"I don't understand you at all," she murmured, utterly confounded.

"Nor I you, if it matters. Still, I'm sure you won't keep me much longer in suspense, considering how open-faced I've been. But here's that animal of a waiter again."

She was willingly silent, though she exerted herself to seem at ease with indifferent success. The voice of her companion was like a distant, hollow echo in her hearing; her wits were all awl, her nerves as taut and vibrant as banjo-strings; before her vision the face of Blue Serge swam, a flesh-tinted moon now and again traversed by a flash of white when he smiled.

"Come!" the man rallied her sharply, if in an undertone, "this will never do. You're as white as a sheet, trembling and staring as if I were a leper-or a relation by marriage or-something repulsive!"

She sat forward mechanically and mustered an uncertain smile. "Forgive me. I'm a little overwrought-the heat and-everything."

"Not another word, then, till you've finished. I'll do the talking, if it's all the same to you. But you needn't answer-needn't listen, for that matter. I've no pride in my conversational powers, and you mustn't risk losing your appetite."

He seemed to find it easy enough to make talk; but Sally spared him little attention, being at first exclusively preoccupied with the demands of her hunger, and later-as the meal progressed, renewing her physical strength and turning the ebbing tide of her spirits-thoroughly engaged with the problem of how to extricate herself from this embarrassing association or, if extrication proved impossible, how to turn it to her own advantage. For if the affair went on this way-his way-she were a sorry adventuress indeed.

Small cups of black coffee stood before them, steaming, when a question roused her, and she shook herself together and faced her burglar across the cloth, once more full mistress of her faculties.

"You're feeling better'?"

"Very much," she smiled, "and thank you!"

"Don't make me uncomfortable; remember, this is all your fault.

"That I'm here, alive and whole, able to enjoy a most unique situation. *Who are you?*"

But she wasn't to be caught by any such simple stratagem as a question plumped suddenly at her with all the weight of a rightful demand; she smiled again and shook her head.

"Shan't tell."

"But if I insist?"

"Why don't you, then?"

"Meaning insistence won't get me anything?"

Sensitive to the hint of a hidden trump, she stiffened slightly.

"I haven't asked you to commit yourself. I've got a right to my own privacy."

There fell a small pause. Lounging, an elbow on the table, a cigarette fuming idly between his fingers, the man favoured her with a steady look of speculation whose challenge was modified only by the inextinguishable humour smouldering in his eyes-a look that Sally met squarely, dissembling her excitement. For with all her fears and perplexity she could never quite forget that, whatever its sequel, this was verily an adventure after her own heart, that she was looking her best in a wonderful frock and pitting her wits against those of an engaging rogue, that she who had twelve hours ago thought herself better dead was now living intensely an hour of vital emergency.

"But," the man said suddenly, and yet deliberately, "surely you won't dispute my right to know who makes free with my own home?"

Her bravado was extinguished as suddenly as a candle-flame in a gust of wind.

"*Your* home?" she parroted witlessly.

"Mine, yes. If you can forgive me." He fumbled for his card-case. "It has been amusing to play the part you assigned me of amateur cracksman, but really, I'm afraid, it can't be done without a better make-up."

He produced and placed before her on the cloth a small white card; and as soon as its neat black script ceased to writhe and run together beneath her gaze she comprehended the name of *Mr.*

Walter Arden Savage, with a residence address identical with that of the house wherein her great adventure had begun.

"You!" she breathed aghast, "you're not *really* Mr. Savage?"

He smiled indulgently. "I rather think I am."

"But-"

Sally's voice failed her entirely, and he laughed a tolerant little laugh as he bent forward to explain.

"I don't wonder you are surprised-or at your mistake. The fact is, the circumstances are peculiar. It's my sister's fault, really; she's such a flighty little thing-unpardonably careless. I must have warned her a hundred times, if once, never to leave valuables in that silly old tin safe. But she won't listen to reason-never would. And it's her house-her safe. I've got no right to install a better one. And that is why we're here."

He smiled thoughtfully down his nose. "It's really a chapter of accidents to which I'm indebted for this charming adventure," he pursued with a suavely personal nod, "beginning with the blow-out of the taxicab tire that made us five minutes late for this evening's boat. We were bound up the Sound, you understand, to spend a fortnight with a maternal aunt. And our luggage is well on its way there now. So when we missed the boat there was nothing for it but go by train. We taxied back here through that abominable storm, booked for Boston by the eleven ten, and ducked across the way to dine at the Biltmore. No good going home, of course, with the servants out-and everything. And just as we were finishing dinner this amiable sister of mine gave a whoop and let it out that she'd forgotten her jewels. Well, there was plenty of time. I put her aboard the train as soon as the sleepers were open-ten o'clock, you know-and trotted back home to fetch the loot."

A reminiscent chuckle punctuated his account, but struck no echo from Sally's humour. Moveless and mute, the girl sat unconsciously clutching the edge of the table as if it were the one stable fact in her whirling world; all her bravado dissipating as her daze of wonder yielded successively to doubt, suspicion, consternation.

"I said there was plenty of time, and so there was, barring accidents. But the same wouldn't be barred. I manufactured the first delay for myself, forgetting to ask Adele for the combination. I knew where to find it, in a little book locked up in the desk; but I hadn't a key to the desk, so felt obliged to break it open, and managed that so famously I was beginning to fancy myself a bit as a Raffles when, all of a sudden-*Pow!*" he laughed-"that fat devil landed on my devoted neck with all the force and fury of two hundredweight of professional jealousy!

"And then," he added, "in you walked from God knows where-"

His eyes affixed a point of interrogation to the simple declarative.

She started nervously in response, divided between impulses which she had no longer sufficient wit to weigh. Should she confess, or try to lie out of it?

Must she believe this glibly simple and adequate account or reject it on grounds of pardonable skepticism?

If this man were what he professed to be, surely he must recognise her borrowed plumage as his sister's property. True, that did not of necessity follow; men have so little understanding of women's clothing; it pleases them or it displeases, if thrust upon their attention, but once withdrawn it is forgotten utterly. Such might well be the case in this present instance; the man gave Sally, indeed, every reason to believe him as much bewildered and mystified by her as she was by him.

On the other hand, and even so.

The infatuate impulse prevailed, to confess and take the consequences.

"I'm afraid-" she began in a quaver.

"No need to be-none I know of, at least," he volunteered promptly, if without moderating his exacting stare.

"You don't understand-"

She hesitated, sighed, plunged in desperation. "It's no use; there's nothing for me to do but own up. What you were not to-night, Mr. Savage, I was."

"Sounds like a riddle to me. What is the answer?"

"You were just make-believe. I was the real thing-a real thief. No, let me go on; it's easier if you don't interrupt. Yes, I'll tell you my name, but it won't mean anything. I'm nobody. I'm Sarah Manvers. I'm a shop-girl out of work."

"Still I don't see."

"I'm coming to that. I live on your block-the Lexington Avenue end, of course-with two other girls. And this afternoon-the studio was so hot and stuffy and lonesome, with both my friends away-I went up on the roof for better air, and fell asleep there and got caught by the storm. Somebody had closed the scuttle, and I ran across roofs looking for another that wasn't fastened down, and when I found one-it was your house-I was so frightened by the lightning I hardly knew what I was doing. I just tumbled in-

"And welcome, I'm sure," Blue Serge interpolated.

She blundered on, unheeding: "I went all through the house, but there wasn't anybody, and-I was so wet and miserable that I-made myself at home-decided to take a bath and-and borrow some things to wear until my own were dry. And then I thought."

She halted, confused, realising how impossible it would be to convince anybody with the tale of her intention merely to borrow the clothing for a single night of arabesque adventure, finding it difficult now to believe in on her own part, and hurried breathlessly on to cover the hiatus.

"And then I heard a noise on the roof. I had closed the scuttle, but I was frightened. And I crept down-stairs and-saw the light in the library and.. That's all." And when he didn't reply promptly, she added with a trace of challenge: "So now you know!"

He started as from deep reverie.

"But why call yourself a thief-for that?"

"Because.. because." Overstrung nerves betrayed her in gusty confession. "Because it's no good blinking facts: that's what I was in my heart of hearts. Oh, it's all very well for you to be generous, and for me to pretend I meant only to borrow, and-and all that! But the truth is, I did steal-and I never honestly meant to send the things back. At first-yes; then I meant to return them, but never once they were on my back. I told myself I did, I believed I did; but deep down, all along, I didn't, I didn't, I didn't! I'm a liar as well as a thief."

"Oh, come now!" Blue Serge interjected in a tone of mild remonstrance, lounging back and eyeing the girl intently. "Don't be so down on yourself."

"Well, everything I've said was true except that one word 'borrow'; but that in itself was a lie big enough to eclipse every word of truth... But you'll never understand-never! Men can't. They simply can't know what it is to be clothes-hungry-starving for something fit to wear-as I have been for years and years and years, as most of us in the shops are all our lives long."

"Perhaps *I* understand, though," he argued with an odd look. "I know what you mean, at any rate, even if I'm not ready to admit that shop-girls are the only people who ever know what it is to desire the unattainable. Other people want things, at times, just as hard as you do clothes."

"Well, but." She stammered, unable to refute this reasonable contention, but, womanlike, persistent to try: "It's different-when you've never had anything. Try to think what it must be to work from eight till six-sometimes later-six days a week, for just enough to keep alive on, if you call such an existence being alive! Why, in ten years I haven't seen the country or the sea-unless you count trips to Coney on crowded trolley-cars, and mighty few of them. I never could afford a vacation, though I've been idle often enough-never earned more than ten dollars a week, and that not for many weeks together. I've lived on as little as five-on as little as charity, on nothing but the goodness of my friends at times. That's why, when I saw myself prettily dressed for once, and thought nothing could stop my

getting away, I couldn't resist the temptation. I didn't know where I was going, dressed like this, and not a cent; but I was going some place, and I wasn't ever coming back!"

"Good Lord!" the man said gently. "Who'd blame you?"

"Don't sympathise with me," she protested, humanly quite unconscious of her inconsistency. "I don't deserve it. I'm caught with the goods on, literally, figuratively, and I've got to pay the penalty. Oh, I don't mean what you mean. I'm no such idiot as to think you'll have me sent to jail; you've been too kind already and-and, after all, I did do you a considerable service, I did help you out of a pretty dangerous fix. But the penalty I'll pay is worse than jail: it's giving up these pretty things and all my silly, sinful dreams, and going back to that scrubby studio-and no job-"

She pulled up short, mystified by a sudden change in the man's expression, perceiving that she was no longer holding his attention as completely as she had. She remarked his look of embarrassment, that his eyes winced from something descried beyond and unknown to her. But he was as ready as ever to recover and demonstrate that, if his attention had wandered, he hadn't missed the substance of her harangue; for when she paused he replied:

"Oh, perhaps not. Don't let's jump at conclusions. I've a premonition you won't have to go back. Here comes some one who'll have a word to say about that-or I don't know!"

And he was up before Sally had grasped his meaning-on his feet and bowing civilly, if with a twinkling countenance, to a woman who swooped down upon him in a sudden, wild flutter of words and gestures:

"Walter! Thank God I've found you! I've been so upset-hardly knew what to do-when you didn't show up.."

What more she might have said dried instantly on the newcomer's lips as her gaze embraced Sally. She stiffened slightly and drew back, elevating her eyebrows to the frost-line.

"Who is this woman? What does this mean?" Without awaiting an answer to either question, she observed in accents that had all the chilling force and cutting edge of a winter wind:

"My dress! My hat!"

CHAPTER V

CONSPIRACY

"My dear sister!" interposed Mr. Savage with an imitation so exact of the woman's tone that he nearly wrung a smile even from Sally. "Do calm yourself-don't make a scene. The matter is quite easy to explain-"

"But what-"

"Oh, give us a chance. But permit me!" He bowed with his easy laugh. "Adele, this is Miss Manvers-Miss Manvers, my sister Mrs. Standish. And now" – as Sally half started from her chair and Mrs. Standish acknowledged her existence by an embittered nod-"do sit down, Adele!"

With the manner of one whose amazement has paralysed her parts of speech, the woman sank mechanically into the chair which Savage (having thoughtfully waved away the hovering waiter) placed beside the table, between himself and his guest. But once seated, precisely as if that position were a charm to break the spell that sealed them, promptly her lips reformed the opening syllables of "*What does this mean?*"

Mr. Savage, however, diplomatically gave her no chance to utter more than the first word.

"Do hold your tongue," he pleaded with a rudeness convincingly fraternal, "and listen to me. I am deeply indebted to Miss Manvers-for my very life, in fact. Oh, don't look so blamed incredulous; I'm perfectly sober. Now *will* you please give me a show?"

And, the lady executing a gesture that matched well her look of blank resignation, her brother addressed himself to a terse summing up of the affair which, while it stressed the gravity of the adventure with the fat burglar, did not seem to extenuate Sally's offence in the least and so had the agreeable upshot of leaving the sister in a much-placated humour and regarding the girl with a far more indulgent countenance than Sally had found any reason at first to hope for.

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