

The Man Thou Gavest eBook

The Man Thou Gavest

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*** Start of this project gutenber EBOOK the man thou Gavest ***

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[Illustration: "Do you think I am the sort of girl who would sell herself for anything—even for the justice I might think was yours?"]

THE MAN THOU GAVEST

BY

HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

Author of Joyce of the north woods, A son of the hills, etc.

FRONTISPIECE BY E.F. WARD

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book of mine to the lovely spot where most of it was written

THE MACDOWELL COLONY PETERBOROUGH NEW HAMPSHIRE

AND

"To her who understands"

Deep in the pine woods is the little Studio where work is made supremely possible. Around the house the birds and trees sing together and no disturbing thing is permitted to trespass.

Within, like a tangible Presence, an atmosphere of loved labour; good will and high hopes greet the coming guests and speed the parting.

Little Studio in the pine woods, my appreciation and affection are yours!

HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

THE MAN THOU GAVEST

CHAPTER I

The passengers, one by one, left the train but Truedale took no heed. He was the only one left at last, but he was not aware of it, and then, just as the darkness outside caught his attention, the train stopped so suddenly that it nearly threw him from his seat.

“Accident?” he asked the conductor. “No, sah! Pine Cone station. I reckon the engineer come mighty nigh forgetting—he generally does at the end. The tracks stop here. You look mighty peaked; some one expecting yo’?”

“I’ve been ill. My doctor ordered me to the hills. Yes: some one will meet me.” Truedale did not resent the interest the man showed; he was grateful.

“Well, sah, if yo’ man doesn’t show up—an’ sometimes they don’t, owing to bad roads—you can come back with us after we load up with the wood. I live down the track five miles; we lie thar fur the night. Yo’ don’t look equal to taking to yo’ two standing feet.”

The entire train force of three men went to gather fuel for the return trip and, dejectedly, Truedale sat down in the gloom and silence to await events.

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No human being materialized and Truedale gave himself up to gloomy thoughts. Evidently he must return on the train and to-morrow morning take to—just then a spark like a falling star attracted his attention and to his surprise he saw, not a dozen feet away, a tall lank man leaning against a tree in an attitude so adhesive that he might have been a fungus growth or sprig of destroying mistletoe. It never occurred to Truedale that this indifferent onlooker could be interested in him, but he might be utilized in the emergency, so he saluted cordially.

"Hello, friend!"

By the upward and downward curve of the glowing pipe bowl, Truedale concluded the man was nodding.

"I'm waiting for Jim White."

"So?" The one word came through the darkness without interest.

"Do you happen to know him?"

"Sorter."

"Could you—get me to his place?"

"I reckon. That's what I come ter do."

"I—I had a trunk sent on ahead; perhaps it is in that shed?"

"It's up to—to Jim's place. Can you ride behind me on the mare? Travelling is tarnation bad."

Once they were on the mare's back, conversation dragged, then died a natural death. Truedale felt as if he were living a bit of anti-war romance as he jogged along behind his guide, his grip knocking unpleasantly against his leg as the way got rougher.

It was nine o'clock when, in a little clearing close by the trail, the lights of a cabin shone cheerily and the mare stopped short and definitely.

"I hope White is at home!" Truedale was worn to the verge of exhaustion.

"I be Jim White!" The man dismounted and stood ready to assist his guest.

"Welcome, stranger. Any one old Doc McPherson sends here brings his welcome with him."

About a fortnight later, Conning Truedale stretched his long legs out toward Jim White's roaring fire of pine knots and cones. It was a fierce and furious fire but the night was sharp and cold. There was no other light in the room than that of the fire—nor was any needed.

Jim sat by the table cleaning a gun. Truedale was taking account of himself. He held his long, brown hand up to the blaze; it was as steady as that of a statue! He had walked ten miles that day and felt exhilarated. Night brought sleep, meal time—and often in between times—brought appetite. He had made an immense gain in health.

"How long have I been here, Jim?" he asked in a slow, calm voice.

"Come Thursday, three weeks!" When Jim was most laconic he was often inwardly bursting with desire for conversation. After a silence Conning spoke again:

"Say, Jim, are there any other people in this mountain range, except you and me?"

"Ugh! just bristlin' with folks! Getting too darned thick. That's why I've got ter get into the deep woods. I just naturally hate folks except in small doses. Why"—here Jim put the gun down upon the table—"five mile back, up on Lone Dome, is the Greyson's, and it ain't nine miles to Jed Martin's place. Miss Lois Ann's is a matter o' sixteen miles; what do you call population if them figures don't prove it?"

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Something had evidently disturbed White's ideas of isolation and independence—it would all come out later. Truedale knew his man fairly well by that time; at least he thought he did. Again Jim took up his gun and Con thought lazily that he must get over to his shack. He occupied a small cabin—Dr. McPherson's property for sleeping purposes.

"Do yo' know," Jim broke in suddenly; "yo' mind me of a burr runnin' wild in a flock of sheep—gatherin' as yo' go. Yo' sho are a miracle! Now old Doc McPherson was like a shadder when he headed this way—but he took longer gatherin', owin' to age an' natural defects o' build. Your frame was picked right close, but a kind o' flabby layer of gristle and fat hung ter him an' wasn't a good foundation to build on."

Conning gave a delighted laugh. Once Jim White began to talk of his own volition his discourse flowed on until hunger or weariness overtook him. His silences had the same quality—it was the way Jim began that mattered.

"When I first took ter handlin' yo' for ole Doc McPherson, I kinder hated ter take my eyes off yo' fearin' yo' might slip out, but Gawd! yo' can grapple fo' yo' self now and—I plain hanker fur the sticks."

"The sticks?" This was a new expression.

"Woods!" Jim vouchsafed (he despised the stupidity that required interpretation of perfectly plain English), "deep woods! What with Burke Lawson suspected of bein' nigh, an' my duty as sheriff consarnin' him hittin' me in the face, I've studied it out that it will be a mighty reasonable trick fur this here officer of the law to be somewhere else till Burke settles with his friends an' foes, or takes himself off, 'fore he's strung up or shot up."

Truedale turned his chair about and faced Jim.

"Do you know," he said, "you've mentioned more names in the last ten minutes than you've mentioned in all the weeks I've been here? You give me a mental cramp. Why, I thought you and I had these hills to ourselves; instead we're threatened on every side, and yet I haven't seen a soul on my tramps. Where do they keep themselves? What has this Burke Lawson done, to stir the people?"

"You don't call your santerers real tramps, do you? Why folks is as thick as ticks up here, though they don't knock elbows like what they do where you cum from. They don't holler out ter 'tract yer attention, neither. But they're here."

"Let's hear more of Burke Lawson." Truedale gripped *him* from the seething mass of humanity portrayed by White, as the one promising most colour and interest. "Just where does Burke live?"

“Burke? Gawd! Burke don’t live anywhere. He is a born floater. He scrooges around a place and raises the devil, then he just naturally floats off. But he nearly always comes back. Since the trap-settin’ a time back, he has been mighty scarce in these parts; but any day he may turn up.”

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"The trap, eh? What about that?" With this Truedale turned about again, for Jim, having finished his work on the gun, had placed the weapon on its pegs on the wall and had drawn near the fire. He ran his hand through his crisp, gray hair until it stood on end and gave him a peculiarly bristling appearance. He was about to enjoy himself. He was as keen for gossip as any cabin woman of the hills, but Jim was an artist about sharing his knowledge. However, once he decided to share, he shared royally.

"I've been kinder waitin' fur yo' to show some interest in us-all," he began, "it's a plain sign of yo' gettin' on. I writ the same to old Doc McPherson yesterday! 'When he takes to noticin', I writ, 'he's on the mend.'"

Conning laughed good naturedly. "Oh! I'm on the mend, all right," he said.

"Now as to that trap business," Jim took up the story, "I'll have to go back some and tell yo' about the Greysons and Jed Martin—they all be linked like sassages. Pete Greyson lives up to Lone Dome. Pete came from stock; he ain't trash by a long come, but he can act like it! Pete's forbears drank wine and talked like lords; Pete has ter rely on mountain dew and that accounts fur the difference in his goin's-on; but once he's sober, he's quality—is Pete. Pete's got two darters—Marg an' Nella-Rose. Old Doc McPherson use' ter call 'em types, whatever that means. Marg is a type, sure and sartin, but Nella-Rose is a little no-count—that's what I say. But blame it all, it's Nella-Rose as has set the mountains goin', so far as I can see. Fellers come courtin' Marg and they just slip through her fingers an' Nella-Rose gets 'em. She don't want 'em 'cept to play with and torment Marg. Gawd! how them two gals do get each other edgy. Round about Lone Dome they call Nella-Rose the doney-gal—that meaning 'sweetheart'; she's responsible for more trouble than a b'ar with a sore head, or Burke Lawson on a tear."

Conning was becoming vitally interested and showed it, to Jim's delight; this was a dangerous state for White, he was likely, once started and flattered, to tell more than was prudent.

"Jed Martin"—Jim gave a chuckle—"has been tossed between them two gals like a hot corn pone. He'd take Nella-Rose quick enough if she'd have him, but barrin' her, he hangs to Marg so as ter be nigh Nella-Rose in any case. And right here Burke Lawson figgers. Burke's got two natur's, same as old Satan. Marg can play on one and get him plumb riled up to anythin'; Nella-Rose can twist him around her finger and make him act like the Second Coming."

Conning called a halt. "What's the Second Coming?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Meaning?—good as a Bible character," Jim explained huffily. "Gawd, man! do your own thinkin'. I can't talk an' splanify ter onct."

“Oh! I see. Well, go on, Jim.”

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"There be times of the moon when I declare that no-count Nella-Rose just plain seems possessed; has ter do somethin' and does it! Three months ago, come Saturday, or thereabouts, she took it into her head to worst Marg at every turn and let it out that she was goin' to round up all the fellers and take her pick! She had the blazin' face ter come down here and tell *me* that! Course Marg knew it, but the two most consarned didn't—meaning Jed and Burke. Least they suspected—but warn't sure. Jed meant to get Burke out o' the way so he could have a clear space to co't Nella-Rose, so he aimed to shoot one o' Burke's feet just enough to lay him up—Jed is the slow, calculatin' kind and an almighty sure shot. He reckoned Burke couldn't walk up Lone Dome with a sore foot, so he laid for him, meanin' afterward to say he was huntin' an' took Burke for a 'possum. Well, Burke got wind of the plot; I'm thinkin' Marg put a flea in his ear, anyway he set a trap just by the path leading from the trail to Lone Dome. Gawd! Jed planted his foot inter it same as if he meant ter, and what does that Burke do but take a walk with Nella-Rose right past the place where Jed was caught! 'Corse he was yellin' somethin' terrible. They helped Jed out and I reckon Nella-Rose was innocent enough, but Jed writ up the account 'gainst Burke and Burke floated off for a spell. He ain't floated back yet—not yet! But so long as Nella-Rose is above ground he'll naturally cum back."

"And Nella-Rose, the little no-count; did she repay Jed, the poor cuss?"

"Nella-Rose don't repay no one—she ain't more'n half real, whatever way you put it. But just see how this fixes a sheriff, will yo'? Knowing what I do, I can't jail either o' them chaps with a cl'ar conscience. Gawd! I'd like to pass a law to cage all females and only let 'em out with a string to their legs!" Then White laughed reminiscently.

"What now, Jim?"

"Gals!" White fairly spit out the word. "Gals!" There was an eloquent pause, then more quietly: "Jest when yo' place 'em and hate 'em proper, they up and do somethin' to melt yo' like snow on Lone Dome in May. I was harkin' back to the little white hen and Nella-Rose. There ain't much chance to have a livin' pet up to Greyson's place. Anything fit to eat is et. Pete drinks the rest. But once Nella-Rose came totin' up here on a cl'ar, moonlight evenin' with somethin' under her little, old shawl. 'Jim' she says—wheedlin' and coaxin'—'I want yo' to keep this here hen fo' me. I'll bring its keep, but I love it, and I can't see it—killed!' That gal don't never let tears fall—they jest wet her eyes and make 'em shine. With that she let loose the most owdacious white bantam and scattered some corn on the floor; then she sat down and laughed like an imp when the foolish thing hopped up to her and flopped onter her lap. Well, I kept the sassy little hen—there wasn't anything else ter do—but one day Marg, she followed Nella-Rose up and when she saw what was going on, she stamped in and cried out: 'So! yo' can have playthings while us-all go starved! Yo' can steal what's our'n,—an' with that she took the bantam and fo' I could say a cuss, she wrung that chicken's neck right fo' Nella-Rose's eyes!"

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“Good Lord!” exclaimed Conning; “the young brute! And the other one—what did she do?”

“She jest looked at me—her eyes swimmin’. Nella-Rose don’t talk much when she’s hurt, but she don’t forget. I tell yo’, young feller, bein’ a sheriff in this settlement ain’t no joke. Yo’ know folks too well and see the rights and wrongs more’n is good for plain justice.”

“Well?” Jim rose and stretched himself, “yo’ won’t go on the b’ar hunt ter-morrer?”

“No, Jim, but I’ll walk part of the way with you. When do you start?”

“‘Bout two o’ the mornin’.”

“Then I’ll turn in. Good-night, old man! You’ve given me a great evening. I feel as if I were suddenly projected into a crowd with human problems smashing into each other for all they’re worth. You cannot escape, old man; that’s the truth. You cannot escape. Life is life no matter where you find it.”

“Now don’t git ter talkin’ perlite to me,” Jim warned. “Old Doc McPherson’s orders was agin perlite conversation. Get a scrabble on yer! I’ll knock yer up ’bout two or thereabouts.”

Outside, Truedale stood still and looked at the beauty of the night. The moon was full and flooded the open space with a radiance which contrasted sharply with the black shadows and the outlines of the near and distant peaks.

The silence was so intense that the ear, straining for sound, ached from the effort. And just then a bewitched hen in White’s shed gave a weird cry and Truedale started. He smiled grimly and thought of the little no-count and the tragedy of the white bantam. In the shining light around him he seemed to see her pitiful face as White had described it—the eyes full of tears but never overflowing, the misery and hate, the loneliness and impotency.

At two the next morning Jim tapped on Truedale’s window with his gun.

“Comin’ fur a walk?”

“You bet!” Con was awake at once and alert. Ten minutes later, closing the doors and windows of his cabin after him, he joined White on the leaf-strewn path to the woods. He went five miles and then bade his host good-bye.

“Don’t overwork!” grinned Jim sociably. “I’ll write to old Doc McPherson when I git back.”

“And when will that be, Jim?”

“I ain’t goin’ ter predict.” White set his lips. “When I stay, I stay, but once I take ter the woods there ain’t no sayin’. I’ll fetch fodder when I cum, and mail, too—but I ain’t goin’ ter hobble myself when I take ter the sticks.”

Tramping back alone over the wet autumn leaves, Truedale had his first sense of loneliness since he came. White, he suddenly realized, had meant to him everything that he needed, but with White unhobbled in the deep woods, how was he to fill the time? He determined to force himself to study. He had wedged one solid volume in his trunk, unknown to his friends. He would brush up his capacity for work—it could not hurt him now. He was as strong as he had ever been in his life and the prospect ahead promised greater gains.

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Yes, he would study. He would write letters, too—real letters. He had neglected every one, especially Lynda Kendall. The others did not matter, but Lynda mattered more than anything. She always would! And thinking of Lynda reminded him that he had also, in his trunk, the play upon which he had worked for several years during hours that should have been devoted to rest. He would get out the play and try to breathe life into it, now that he himself was living. Lynda had said, when last they had discussed his work, “It’s beautiful, Con; you shall not belittle it. It is beautiful like a cold, stone thing with rough edges. Sometime you must smooth it and polish it, and then you must pray over it and believe in it, and I really think it will repay you. It may not mean anything but a sure guide to your goal, but you’d be grateful for that, wouldn’t you?” Of course he would be grateful for that! It would mean life to him—life, not mere existence. He began to hope that Jim White would stay away a month; what with study, and the play, and the doing for himself, the time ahead was provided for already!

Stalking noiselessly forward, Truedale came into the clearing, passed White’s shack, and approached his own with a fixed determination. Then he stopped short. He was positive that he had closed windows and doors—the caution of the city still clung to him—but now both doors and windows were set wide to the brilliant autumn day and a curl of smoke from a lately replenished fire cheerfully rose in the clear, dry air.

“Well, I’ll be—!” and then Truedale quietly slipped to the rear of the cabin and to a low, sliding window through which he could peer, unobserved. One glance transfixed him.

CHAPTER II

The furnishing of the room was bare and plain—a deal table, a couple of wooden chairs, a broad comfortable couch, a cupboard with some nondescript crockery, and a good-sized mirror in the space between the front door and the window. Before this glass a strange figure was walking to and fro, enjoying hugely its own remarkable reflection. Truedale’s bedraggled bath robe hung like a mantle from the shoulders of the intruder—they were very straight, slim young shoulders; an old ridiculous fez—an abomination of his freshman year, kept for sentimental reasons—adorned the head of the small stranger and only partly held in check the mass of shadowy hair that rippled from it and around a mischievous face.

Surprise, then wonder, swayed Truedale. When he reached the wonder stage, thought deserted him. He simply looked and kept on wondering. Through this confusion, words presently reached him. The masquerader within was bowing and scraping comically, and in a low, musical voice said:

“How-de, Mister Outlander, sir! How-de? I saw your smoke a-curling way back from home, sir, and I’ve come a-visiting ‘long o’ you, Mister Outlander.”

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Another sweeping curtsy reduced Truedale to helpless mirth and he fairly shouted, doubling up as he did so.

The effect of his outburst upon the young person within was tremendous. She seemed turned to stone. She stared at the face in the window; she turned red and white—the absurd fez dangling over her left ear. Then she emitted what seemed to be one word, so lingeringly sweet was the drawl.

“Godda’mighty!”

Seeing that there was going to be no other concession, Truedale pulled himself together, went around to the front door and knocked, ceremoniously. The girl turned, as if on a pivot, but spoke no word.

She had the most wonderful eyes—innocent and pleading; she was a mere child and, although she looked awed now, was evidently a forward young native who deserved a good lesson. Truedale determined to give her one!

“If you don’t mind,” he said, “I’ll come in and sit down.”

This he did while the big, solemn eyes followed him alertly.

“And now will you be kind enough to tell me what you mean by—wearing my clothes?”

Still the silence and the blank stare.

“You must answer my questions!” Truedale’s voice sounded stern. “I suppose you didn’t expect me back so soon?”

The deep eyes confirmed this by the drooping of the lids.

“And you broke in—what for?”

No answer.

“Who are you?”

Really the situation was becoming unbearable, so Truedale changed his tactics. He would play with the poor little thing and reassure her.

“Now that I look at you I see what you are. You’re not a human at all. You’re a spirit of something or other—probably of one of those perky mountains over yonder. The White Maid, I bet! You had to don my clothes in order to materialize before my eyes and you had to use that word of the hills—so that I could understand you. It’s quite plain now and you are welcome to my—my bath robe; I dare say that, underneath it, you are

decked out in filmy clouds and vapours and mists. Oh! come now—" The strange eyes were filling—but not overflowing!

"I was only joking. Forgive me. Why—"

The wretched fez fell from the soft hair—the bedraggled robe from the rigid shoulders—and there, garbed in a rough home-spun gown, a little plaid shawl and a checked apron, stood—

"It's the no-count," thought Truedale. Aloud he said, "Nella-Rose!"

With the dropping of the disguise years and dignity were added to the girl and Truedale, who was always at his worst in the presence of strange young women, gazed dazedly at the one before him now.

"Perhaps"—he began awkwardly—"you'll sit down. Please do!" He drew a chair toward her. Nella-Rose sank into it and leaned her bowed head upon her arms, which she folded on the table. Her shoulders rose and fell convulsively, and Truedale, looking at her, became hopelessly wretched.

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"I'm a beast and nothing less!" he admitted by way of apology and excuse. "I—I wish you *could* forgive me."

Then slowly the head was raised and to Truedale's further consternation he saw that mirth, not anguish, had caused the shaking of those deceiving little shoulders.

"Oh! I see—you are laughing!" He tried to be indignant.

"Yes."

"At what?"

"Everything—you!"

"Thank you!" Then, like a response, something heretofore unknown and unsuspected in Truedale rose and overpowered him. His shyness and awkwardness melted before the warmth and glow of the conquering emotion. He got up and sat on the corner of the table nearest his shabby little guest, and looking straight into her bewitching eyes he joined her in a long, resounding laugh.

It was surrender, pure and simple.

"And now," he said at last, "you must stay and have a bite. I am about starved. And you?"

The girl grew sober.

"I'm—I'm always hungry," she admitted softly.

They drew the table close to the roaring fire, leaving doors and windows open to the crisp, sweet, morning air.

"We'll have a party!" Truedale announced. "I'll step over to Jim's cabin and bring the best he's got."

When he returned Nella-Rose had placed cups, saucers, and plates on the table.

"Do you—often have parties?" she asked.

"I never had one before. I'll have them, though, from now on if—if you will come!"

Truedale paused with his arms full of pitchers and platters of food, and held the girl with his admiring eyes.

"And you will let me come and see you—you and your sister and your father? I know all about you. White has explained—everything. He—"

Nella-Rose braced herself against the table and quietly and definitely outlined their future relations.

"No, you cannot come to see us-all. You don't know Marg. If she doesn't find things out, there won't be trouble; when she does find things out there's goin' t' be a right smart lot of trouble brewing!"

This was said with such comical seriousness that Truedale laughed again, but sobered instantly when he recalled the incident of the white bantam which Jim had so vividly portrayed.

"But you see," he replied, "I don't want to let you go after this first party, and never see you again!"

The girl shrugged her shoulders and apparently dismissed the matter. She sat down and, with charming abandon, began to eat. Presently Truedale, amused and interested, spoke again:

"It would be very unkind of you not to let me see you."

"I'm—thinking!" Nella-Rose drew her brows together and nibbled a bit of corn bread meditatively. Then—quite suddenly:

"I'm coming here!"

"You—you mean that?" Truedale flushed.

"Yes. And the big woods—you walk in them?"

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"I certainly do."

"Sometimes—I am in the big woods."

"Where—specially?" Truedale was playing this new game with the foolish skill of the novice.

"There's a Hollow—where—" (Nella-Rose paused) "where the laurel tangle is like a jungle—"

Truedale broke in: "I know it! There's a little stream running through it, and—trails."

"Yes!" Nella-Rose leaned back and showed her white teeth alluringly.

"I—I should not—permit this!" For a moment Truedale broke through the thin ice of delight that was luring him to unknown danger and fell upon the solid rock of conservatism.

"Why?" The eyes, so tenderly innocent, confronted him appealingly. "There are nuts there and—and other things! You are just teasing; you'll let me—show you the way about?"

The girl was all child now and made Truedale ashamed to hold her to any absurd course that his standards acknowledged but that hers had never conceived.

"Of course. I'll be glad to have you for a guide. Jim White has no ideas about nuts and things—he goes to the woods to kill something; he's there now. I dare say mere are other things in the mountains besides—prey?"

Nella-Rose nodded.

"Let's sit by the fire!" she suddenly said. "I—I want to tell you—something, and then I must go."

The lack of shyness and reserve might so easily have become boldness—but they did not! The girl was like a creature of the wilds which, knowing no reason for fear, was revelling in heretofore unsuspected enjoyment. Truedale pulled the couch to the hearth for Nella-Rose, piled the pillows on one end and then seated himself on the stump of a tree which served as a settee.

"Now, then!" he said, keeping his eyes on his breezy little guest. "What have you got to tell me—before you go?"

"It's something that happened—long ago. You will not laugh if I tell you? You laugh right much."



"I? You think I laugh a good deal? Good Lord! Some folk think I don't laugh enough." He had his friends back home in mind, and somehow the memory steadied him for an instant.

"P'r'aps they-all don't know you as well as I do." This with amusing conviction.

"Perhaps they don't." Truedale was deadly solemn. "But go on, Nella-Rose. I promise not to laugh now."

"It was the beginning of—you!" The girl turned her eyes to the fire—she was quaintly demure. "At first when I saw you looking in that window, yonder, I was right scared."

Jim White's statement that Nella-Rose wasn't more than half real seemed, in the light of present happenings, little less than bald fact.

"It was the way *you* looked—way back there when I was ten years old. I had run away —"

"Are you always running away?" asked Truedale from the hollow depths of unreality.

"I run away a smart lot. You have to if you want to—see things and be different."

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"And you—you want to be different, Nella-Rose?"

"I—why, can't you see?—I *am* different."

"Of course. I only meant—do you like to be different?"

"I have to like it. I was born with a cawl."

"In heaven's name, what's that?"

"Something over your eyes, and when they take it off you see more, and farther, than any one else. You're part ha'nt."

Truedale wiped his forehead—the room was getting hot, but the heat alone was not responsible for his emotions; he was being carried beyond his depth—beyond himself—by the wild fascination of the little creature before him. He would hardly have been surprised had a draught of air wafted her out of the window like a bit of mountain mist.

"But you mustn't interrupt so much!" She turned a stern face upon him. "I ran away that time to see a—railroad train! One of the niggers told me about it—he said it was the Bogy Man. I wanted to know, so I went to the station. It's a right smart way down and I had to sleep one night under the trees. Don't the stars look starry sometimes?"

The interruption made Truedale jump.

"They certainly do," he said, looking at the soft, dark eyes with their long lashes.

"I wasn't afraid—and I didn't hurry. It was evening, and the sun just a-going down, when I got to the station. There wasn't any one about so I—I ran down the big road the train comes on—to meet it. And then" (here Nella-Rose clasped her hands excitedly and her breath came short), "and then I saw it a-coming and a-coming. The big fire-eye a-glaring and the mighty noise a-snorting and I reckoned it was old Master Satan and I just—couldn't move!"

"Go on! go on!" Truedale bent close to her—she had caught him in the mesh of her dramatic charm.

"I saw it a-coming, and set on—on devouring o' me, and still I couldn't stir. Everything was growing black and black except a big square with that monster eye a-glaring into the soul o' me!"

The girl's face was set—her eyes vacant and wild; suddenly they softened, and her little white teeth showed through the childish, parted lips.

“Then the eye went away, there was a blackness in the square place, and then a face came—a kind face it was—all a-laughing and it—it kept going farther and farther off to one side and I kept a-following and a-following and then—the big noise went rushing by me, and there I was right safe and plump up against a tree!”

“Good Lord!” Again Truedale wiped his brow.

“Since then,” Nella-Rose relaxed, “I can shut my eyes and always there is the black square and sometimes—not always, but sometimes—things come!”

“The face, Nella-Rose?”

“No, I can’t make that come. But things I want to, do and have. I always think, when I see things, that I’m going to do a big, fine thing some day. I feel upperty and then—poof! off go the pictures and I am just—lil’ Nella-Rose again!”

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A comically heavy sigh brought Truedale back to earth.

"But the face you saw long ago," Truedale whispered, "was it my face, do you think?"

Nella-Rose paused—then quietly:

"I—reckon it was. Yes, I'm mighty sure it was your face. When I saw it at that window"—she pointed across the room—"I certainly thought my eyes were closed and that—it had come—the kind, good face that saved me!" A sweet, friendly smile wreathed the girl's lips and she rose with rare dignity and held out her thin, delicate hand:

"Mister Outlander, we're going to be neighbours, aren't we?"

"Yes—neighbours!" Truedale took the hand with a distinct sense of suffocation, "but why do you call me an outlander?"

"Because—you are! You're not *of* our mountains."

"No, I wish I were!"

"Wishing can't make you. You are—or you aren't."

Truedale noted the girl's language. Distorted and crude as it often was, it was never positively illiterate. This surprised him.

"You—oh! you're not going yet!" He put his hand out, for the definite way in which Nella-Rose turned was ominous. Already she seemed to belong to the cabin room—to Truedale himself. Not a suggestion of strangeness clung to her. It was as if she had always been there but that his eyes had been holden.

"I must go!"

"Wait—oh! Nella-Rose. Let me walk part of the way with you. I—I have a thousand things to say."

But she was gone out of the door, down the path.

Truedale stood and looked after her until the long shadows reached up to Lone Dome's sharpest edge. White's dogs began nosing about, suggesting attention to affairs nearer at hand. Then Truedale sighed as if waking from a dream. He performed the duties Jim had left to his tender mercy—the feeding of the animals, the piling up of wood. Then he forced himself to take a long walk. He ate his evening meal late, and finally sat down to his task of writing letters. He wrote six to Brace Kendall and tore them up; he wrote one to his uncle and put it aside for consideration when the effect of his day dreams left him

sane enough to judge it. Finally he managed a note to Dr. McPherson and one to Lynda Kendall.

“I think”—so the letter to Lynda ran—“that I will work regularly, now, on the play. With more blood in my own body I can hope to put more into that. I’m going to get it out tomorrow and begin the infusion. I wish you were here to-night—to see the wonderful effect of the moon on the mists—but there! if I said more you might guess where I am. When I come back I shall try to describe it and some day you must see it. Several times lately I have imagined an existence here with one’s work and enough to subsist on. No worry, no nerve-racking, and always the tremendous beauty to inspire one! Nothing seems wholly real here.”

Then Truedale put down his pen. Nella-Rose crowded Lynda Kendall from the field of vision; later, he simply signed his name and let the note go with that.

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As for Nella-Rose, as soon as she left Truedale, her mind turned to sterner matters close at hand. She became aware before long of some one near by. The person, whoever it was, seemed determined to remain hidden but for that very reason it called out all the girl's cunning and cleverness. It might be—Burke Lawson! With this thought Nella-Rose gasped a little. Then, it might be Marg; and here the dark eyes grew hard—the lips almost cruel! She got down upon her knees and crawled like a veritable little animal of the wilds. Keeping close to the ground, she advanced to where the trail from Lone Dome met the broader one, and there, standing undecided and bewildered, was a tall, fair girl.

Nella-Rose sprang to her feet, her eyes ablaze.

"Marg! What you—hounding me for?"

"Nella-Rose, where you been?"

"What's that to you?"

"You've been up to Devil-may-come Hollow!"

"Have I? Let me pass, Marg. Have your mully-grubs, if you please; I'm going home."

As Nella-Rose tried to pass, Marg caught her by the arm.

"Burke's back!" she whispered, "he's hiding up to Devil-may-come! He's been seen and you know it!"

"What if I do?" Nella-Rose never ignored a possible escape for the future.

"You've been up there—to meet him. You ought to be licked. If you don't let him alone—let him and me alone—I'll turn Jed on him, I will; I swear it!"

"What is he—to you!" Nella-Rose confronted her sister squarely. Blue eyes—bold, cold blue they were—looked into dark ones even now so soft and winning that it was difficult to resist them.

"If you let him alone, he'll be everything to me!" Marg blurted out. "What do you want of him, Nella-Rose?—of him or any other man? But if you must have a sweetheart, pick and choose and let me have my day."

The rough appeal struck almost brutally on Nella-Rose's ears. She was as un-moral, perhaps, as Marg, but she was more discriminating.

"I'm mighty tired of cleaning and cooking for—for father and you!" Marg tossed her head toward Lone Dome. "Father's mostly always drunk these days and you—what do you

care what becomes of me? Leave me to get a man of my own and then I'll be human. I've been—killing the hog to-day!" Marg suddenly and irrelevantly burst out; "I—I shall never do it again. We'll starve first!"

"Why didn't father?" Nella-Rose said, softly.

"Father? Huh! he couldn't have held the knife. He went for the jug—and got it full! No, I had to do it, but it's the last time. Nella-Rose, tell me where Burke is hidden—tell me! Leave me free to—to win him; let me have my chance!"

"And then who'll kill the pig?" Nella-Rose shuddered.

"Who cares?" Marg flung back.

"No! Find him if you can. Fair play—no favours; what I find is open to you!" Nella-Rose laughed impishly and, darting past her sister, ran down the path.

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Marg stood and watched her with baffled rage and hate. For a moment she almost decided to take her chances and seek Burke Lawson in the distant Hollow. But night was coming—the black, drear night of the low places. Marg was desperate, but a primitive conservatism held her. Not for all she hoped to gain would she brave Burke Lawson alone in the secret places of Devil-may-come Hollow! So she followed after Nella-Rose and reached home while her sister was preparing the evening meal.

Peter Greyson, the father, sat huddled in a big chair by the fire. He had arrived at that stage of returning consciousness when he felt that it was incumbent upon him to explain himself. He had been a handsome man, of the dashing cavalry type and he still bore traces of past glory. In his worst moments he never swore before ladies, and in his best he remembered what was due them and upheld their honour and position with fervour.

“Lil’ Nella-Rose,” he was saying as Marg paused outside the door in the dark, “why don’t you marry Burke Lawson and settle down here with me?”

“He hasn’t asked me, father.”

“He isn’t in any position now to pick and choose”—this between hiccoughs and yawns —“I saw him early this morning; I know his back anywhere. I’d just met old Jim White. I reckon Burke was calculating to shoot Jim, but my coming upset his plans. Shooting a sheriff ain’t safe business.” What Greyson really had seen was Truedale’s retreat after parting company with Jim, but not knowing of Truedale’s existence he jumped to the conclusion which to his fuddled wits seemed probable, and had so informed Marg upon his return.

“I tell yo’, Nella-Rose,” he ran on, “yo’ better marry Burke and tame him. There ain’t nothing as tames a man like layin’ responsibilities on him.”

“Come, father, let me help you to the table. I don’t want to talk about Burke. I don’t believe he’s back.” She steadied the rolling form to the head of the table.

“I tell yo’, chile, I saw Burke’s back; don’t yo’ reckon I know Lawson when I see him, back or front? Don’t yo’ want ter marry Lawson, Nella-Rose?”

“No, I wouldn’t have him if he asked me. It would be like marrying a tree that the freshet was rolling about. I’m not going to seek and hide with any man.”

“Why don’t yo’ let Marg have ’im then? She’d be a right smart responsibility.”

“She can have him and welcome, if she can find him!” Then, hearing her sister outside, she called:

“Come in, Marg. Shut out the cold and the dark. What’s the use of acting like a little old hateful?”

Marg slouched in; there was no other word to describe her indifferent and contemptuous air.

“He’s coming around?” she asked, nodding at her father.

“Yes—he’s come,” Nella-Rose admitted.

“All right, then, I’m going to tell him something!” She walked over to her father and stood before him, looking him steadily in the eyes.

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"I—I killed the hog to-day;" she spoke sharply, slowly, as to a dense child. Peter Greyson started.

"You—you—did that?"

"Yes. While you were off—getting drunk, and while Nella-Rose was traipsing back there in the Hollow I killed the hog; but I'll never do it again. It sickened the soul of me. I'm as good as Nella-Rose—just as good. If you can't do your part, father, and she *won't* do hers, that's no reason for me being benastied with such work as I did to-day. You hear me?"

"Sure I hear you, Marg, and I'm plumb humiliated that—that I let you. It—it sha'n't happen again. I'll keep a smart watch next year. A gentleman can't say more to his daughter than that—can he?"

"Saying is all very well—it's the doing." Marg was adamant. "I'm going to look out for myself from now on. You and Nella-Rose will find out."

"What's come to you, Marg?" Peter looked concerned.

"Something that hasn't ever come before," Marg replied, keeping her eyes on Nella-Rose. "There be times when you have to take your life by the throat and strangle it until it falls into shape. I'm gripping mine now."

"It's the killing of that hog!" groaned Peter. "It's stirred you, and I can't blame you. Killing ain't for a lady; but Lord! what a man you'd ha' made, Marg!"

"But I ain't!" Marg broke in a bit wildly, "and other things are not for—for women to do and bear. I'm through. It's Nella-Rose and me to share and share alike, or—"

But there was nothing more to say—the pause was eloquent. The three ate in silence for some moments and then talked of trivial things. Peter Greyson went early to bed and the sisters washed the dishes, sharing equally. They did the out-of-door duties of caring for the scanty live stock, and at last Nella-Rose went to her tiny room under the eaves, while Marg lay down upon the living-room couch.

When everything was at rest once more Nella-Rose stole to the low window of her chamber and, kneeling, looked forth at the peaceful moonlit scene. How still and white it was and how safe and strong the high hills looked! What had happened? Why, nothing *could* happen and yet—and yet—Then Nella-Rose closed her eyes and waited. With all her might she tried to force the "good, kind face" to materialize, but to no purpose. Suddenly an owl hooted hideously and, like a guilty thing, the girl by the window crept back to bed.

Owls were very wise and they could see things in the dark places with their wide-open eyes! Just then Nella-Rose could not have borne any investigation of her throbbing heart.

CHAPTER III

Lynda Kendall closed her desk and wheeled about in her chair with a perplexed expression on her strong, handsome face. Generally speaking, she went her way with courage and conviction, but since Conning Truedale's breakdown, an element in her had arisen that demanded recognition and she had yet to learn how to control it and insist upon its subjection.

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Her life had been a simple one on the whole, but one requiring from early girlhood the constant use of her faculties. Whatever help she had had was gained from the dependence of others upon her, not hers upon them. She was so strong and sweet-souled that to give was a joy, it was a joy too, for them that received. That she was ever tired and longed for strong arms to uphold her rarely occurred to any one except, perhaps, William Truedale, the invalid uncle of Conning.

At this juncture of Lynda's career, she shrank from William Truedale as she never had before. Had Conning died, she knew she would never have seen the old man again. She believed that his incapacity for understanding Conning—his rigid, unfeeling dealing with him—had been the prime factor in the physical breakdown of the younger man. All along she had hoped and believed that her hold upon old William Truedale would, in the final reckoning, bring good results; for that reason, and a secret one that no one suspected, she kept to her course. She paid regular visits to the old man—made him dependent upon her, though he never permitted her to suspect this. Always her purpose had centred upon Con, who had, at first, appealed to her loyalty and justice, but of late to something much more personal and tender.

The day's work was done and the workshop, in which the girl sat, was beginning to look shadowy in the far corners where evidences of her profession cluttered the dim spaces. She was an interior decorator, but of such an original and unique kind that her brother explained her as a "Spiritual and Physical Interpreter." She had learned her trade, but she had embellished it and permitted it to develop as she herself had grown and expanded.

Lynda looked now at her wrist-watch; it was four-thirty. The last mail delivery had brought a short but inspiring note from Con—per Dr. McPherson.

"I've got my grip again, Lynda! The day brings appetite and strength; the night, sleep! I wonder whether you know what that means? I begin to believe I am reverting to type, as McPherson would say, and I'm intensely interested in finding out—what type? Whenever I think of study, I have an attack of mental indigestion. There is only one fellow creature to share my desolation but I am never lonely—never lacking employment. I'm busy to the verge of exhaustion in doing nothing and getting well!"

Lynda smiled. "So he's not going to die!" she murmured; "there's no use in punishing Uncle William any longer. I'll go up and have dinner with him!"

The decision made, and Conning for the moment relegated to second place, Lynda rose and smiled relievedly. Then her eyes fell upon her mother's photograph which stood upon her desk.

"I'm going, dear," she confided—they were very close, that dead mother and the live, vital daughter—"I haven't forgotten."

The past, like the atmosphere of the room, closed in about the girl. She was strangely cheerful and uplifted; a consciousness of approval soothed and comforted her and she recalled, as she had not for many a day, the night of her mother's death—the night when she, a girl of seventeen, had had the burden of a mother's confession laid upon her young heart....



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“Lynda—are you there, dear?”

It had been a frequent, pathetic question during the month of illness. Lynda had been summoned from school. Brace was still at his studies.

“Yes, mother, right here!”

“You are always—right here! Lyn, once I thought I could not stand it, and I was going to run away—going in the night. As I passed your door you awoke and asked for a drink of water. I gave it, trembling lest you might notice my hat and coat; but you did not—you only said: ‘What would I do if I woke up some night and didn’t have a mother?’ Lyn, dear, I went back and—stayed!”

Lynda had thought her mother’s mind wandering so she patted the seeking hands and murmured gently to her. Then, suddenly:

“Lyn, when I married your father I thought I loved him—but I loved another! I’ve done the best I could for you all; I never let any one know; I dared not give a sign, but I want you—by and by—to go to—William Truedale! You need not explain—just go; you will be my gift to him—my last and only gift.”

Startled and horrified, Lynda had listened, understood, and grown old while her mother spoke....

Then came the night when she awoke—and found no mother! She was never the same. She returned to school but gave up the idea of going to college. After her graduation she made a home for the father who now—in the light of her secret knowledge—she comprehended for the first time. All her life she had wondered about him. Wondered why she and Brace had not loved and honoured him as they had their mother. His weakness, his superficiality, had been dominated by the wife who, having accepted her lot, carried her burden proudly to the end!

Brace went to college and, during his last year there, his father died; then, confronting a future rich in debts but little else, he and Lynda consequently turned their education to account and were soon self-supporting, full of hope and the young joy of life.

Lynda—her mother’s secret buried deep in her loyal, tender heart—began soon after her return from school to cultivate old William Truedale, much to that crabbed gentleman’s surprise and apparent confusion. There was some excuse for the sudden friendship, for Brace during preparatory school and college had formed a deep and sincere attachment for Conning Truedale and at vacation time the two boys and Lynda were much together. To be sure the visiting was largely one-sided, as the gloomy house of the elder Truedale offered small inducement for sociability; but Lynda

managed to wedge her way into the loneliness and dreariness and eventually for reasons best known to herself became the one bright thing in the old man's existence.

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And so the years had drifted on. Besides Lynda's determination to prove herself as her mother had directed, she soon decided to set matters straight between the uncle and the nephew. To her ardent young soul, fired with ambition and desire for justice, it was little less than criminal that William Truedale, crippled and confined to his chair—for he had become an invalid soon after Lynda's mother's marriage—should misunderstand and cruelly misjudge the nephew who, brilliantly, but under tremendous strain, was winning his way through college on a pittance that made outside labour necessary in order to get through. She could not understand everything, but her mother's secret, her growing fondness for the old man, her intense interest in Conning, all held her to her purpose. She, single-handed, would right the wrong and save them all alive!

Then came Conning's breakdown and the possibility of his death or permanent disability. The shock to all the golden hopes was severe and it brought bitterness and resentment with it.

Something deep and passionate had entered into Lynda's relations with Conning Truedale. For him, though no one suspected it, she had broken her engagement to John Morrell—an engagement into which she had drifted as so many girls do, at the age when thought has small part in primal instinct. But Conning had not died; he was getting well, off in his hidden place, and so, standing in the dim workshop, Lynda kissed her mother's picture and began humming a glad little tune.

"I'll go and have dinner with Uncle William!" she said—the words fitting into the tune—"we'll make it up! It will be all right." And so she set forth.

William Truedale lived on a shabby-genteel side street of a neighbourhood that had started out to be fashionable but had been defeated in its ambitions. It had never lost character, but it certainly had lost lustre. The houses themselves were well built and sternly correct. William Truedale's was the best in the block and it stood with a vacant lot on either side of it. The detachment gave it dignity and seclusion.

There had been a time when Truedale hoped that the woman he loved would choose and place furniture and hangings to her taste and his, but when that hope failed and sickness fell upon him, he ordered only such rooms put in order as were necessary for his restricted life. The library on the first floor was a storehouse of splendid books and austere luxury; beyond it were bath and bedroom, both fitted out perfectly. The long, wide hall leading to these apartments was as empty and bare as when carpenter and painter left it. Two servants—husband and wife—served William Truedale, and rarely commented upon anything concerning him or their relations to him. They probably had rooms for themselves comfortably furnished, but in all the years Lynda Kendall had never been anywhere in the house except in the rooms devoted to her old friend's use. Sometimes she had wondered how Con fared, but nothing was ever said on the subject and she and Brace had been, in their visiting, limited to the downstairs rooms.

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When Lynda was ushered now into the library from the cold, outer hall it was like finding comfort and luxury in the midst of desolation. The opening door had not roused the man by the great open fire. He seemed lost in a gloomy revery and Lynda had time to note, unobserved, the tragic, pain-racked face and the pitifully thin outlines of the figure stretched on the invalid chair and covered by a rug of rare silver fox.

There were birds in gilded cages by the large south window—mute little mites they were; they rarely if ever sang but they were alive! There were plants, too, luxuriously growing in pots and boxes—but not a flower on one! They existed, not joyously, but persistently. A Russian hound, white as snow, lay before the fire; his soft, mournful eyes were fixed upon Lynda, but he did not stir or announce the intrusion. A cat and two kittens, also white, were rolled like snowballs on a crimson cushion near the hearth; Lynda wondered whether they ever played. Alone, like a dead thing amid the still life, William Truedale, helpless—death ever creeping nearer and nearer to his bitter heart—passed his weary days.

As she stood, watching and waiting, Lynda Kendall's eyes filled with quick tears. The weeks of her absence had emphasized every tragic detail of the room and the man. He had probably missed her terribly from his bare life, but he had made no sign, given no call.

"Uncle William!"

Truedale turned his head and fixed his deep-sunk, brilliant eyes upon her.

"Oh! So you've thought better of it?" was all that he said.

"Yes, I've thought better of it. Will you let me stay to dinner?"

"Take off your wraps. There now! draw up the ottoman; so long as you have a spine, rely upon it. Never lounge if you can help it."

Lynda drew the low, velvet-covered stool near the couch-chair; the hound raised his sharp, beautiful head and nestled against her knee. Truedale watched it—animals never came to him unless commanded—why did they go to Lynda? Probably for the same reason that he clung to her, watched for her and feared, with sickening fear, that she might never come again!

"I suppose, since Con's death isn't on my head, you felt that you could forgive me, eh?"

"Well, something like that, Uncle William."

"What business is it of yours what I do with my money—or my nephew?"

These two never approached each other by conventional lines. Their absences were periods in which to store vital topics and questions—their meetings were a series of explosive outbursts.

“None of my business, Uncle William, but if I could not approve, why—”

“Approve! Huh! Who are you that you should judge, approve, or disapprove your elders?”

There was no answer to this. Lynda wanted to laugh, but feared she might cry. The hard, indignant words belied the quivering gladness of the voice that greeted her in every tone with its relief and surrender.

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"I've got a good deal to say to you, girl. It is well you came to-day—you might otherwise have been too late. I'm planning a long journey."

Lynda started.

"A—long journey?" she said. Through the past years, since the dread disease had attacked Truedale, his travelling had been confined to passing to and from bedchamber and library in the wheelchair.

"You—you think I jest?" There was a grim humour in the burning eyes.

"I do not know."

"Well, then, I'll tell you. I am quite serious. While I have been exiled from your attentions—chained to this rock" (he struck the arms of the chair like a passionate child), "I have reached a conclusion I have always contemplated, more or less. Now that I have recognized that the time will undoubtedly come when you, Con—the lot of you—will clear out, I have decided to prove to you all that I am not quite the dependant you think me."

"Why—what can you mean, Uncle William?"

This was a new phase and Lynda bent across the dog at her knee and put her hand on the arm of the chair. She was frightened, aroused. Truedale saw this and laughed a dry, mirthless laugh.

"Oh! a chair that can roll the length of this house can roll the distance I desire to go. Money can pay for anything—anything! Thank God, I have money, plenty of it. It means power—even to such a thing as I am. Power, Lynda, power! It can snarl and unsnarl lives; it can buy favour and cause terror. Think what I would have been without it all these years. Think! Why, I have bargained with it; crushed with it; threatened and beckoned with it—now I am going to play with it! I'm going to surprise every one and have a gala time myself. I'm going to set things spinning and then I'm going on a journey. It's queer" (the sneering voice fell to a murmur), "all my prison-years I've thought of this and planned it; the doing of it seems quite the simplest part. I wonder now why I have kept behind the bars when, by a little exertion—a little indifference to opinion—I might have broadened my horizon. But good Lord! I haven't wasted time. I've studied every detail; nothing has escaped me. This" (he touched his head—a fine, almost noble head, covered by a wealth of white hair), "this has been doing double duty while these" (he pointed to his useless legs) "have refused to play their part. While I felt conscientiously responsible, I stuck to my job; but a man has a right to a little freedom of his own!"

Lynda drew so close that her stool touched the chair. She bent her cheek upon the shrivelled hand resting upon the arm. The excitement and feverish banter of Truedale affected her painfully. She reproached herself bitterly for having left him to the mercy of his loneliness and imagination. Her interest in, her resentment for, Conning faded before the pitiful display of feeling expressed in every tone and word of Truedale.

The touch of the warm cheek against his hand stirred the man. His eyes softened, his face twitched and, because the young eyes were hidden, he permitted his gaze to rest reverently upon the bowed head. She was the only thing on earth he loved—the only thing that cut through his crust of hardness and despair and made him human. Then, from out the unexpected, he asked:

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"Lynda, when did you break your engagement to John Morrell?"

The girl started, but she did not change her position. She never lied or prevaricated to Truedale—she might keep her own counsel, but when she spoke it was simple truth.

"About six months ago."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"There was nothing to tell, Uncle William."

"There was the fact, wasn't there?"

"Oh! yes, the fact."

"Why did you do it?"

"That—is—a long story." Lynda looked up, now, and smiled the rare smile that only the stricken man understood. Appeal, confusion, and detachment marked it. She longed, helplessly, for sympathy and understanding.

"Well, long stories are welcome enough here, child; especially after the dearth of them. Ring the bell; let's have dinner. Pull down the shades and" (Truedale gave a wide gesture) "put the live stock out! An early meal, a long evening—what better could we add than a couple of long stories?"

In the doing of what Truedale commanded, Lynda found a certain relief. These visits were like grim plays, to be sure, but they were also sacred duties. This one, after the lapse of time filled with new and strange emotions, was a bit grimmer than usual, but it had the effect of a tonic upon the ragged nerves of the two actors.

The round table was set by the fire—it was the manservant who attended now; silver and glass and linen were perfect, and the simple fare carefully chosen and prepared.

Truedale was never so much at his ease as when he presided at these small dinners. He ate little; he chose the rarest bits for his guest; he talked lightly—sometimes delightfully. At such moments Lynda realized what he must have been before love and health failed him.

To-night—shut away from all else, the strain of the past weeks ignored, the long stories deliberately pushed aside—Truedale spoke of the books he had been reading; Lynda, of her work.

"I have two wonderful houses to do," she said, poising a morsel of food gracefully. "One is for a couple recently made rich; they do not dare to move for fear of going wrong. I have that place from garret to cellar. It's an awful responsibility—but lots of fun!"

"It must be. Spending other people's money and making them as good as new at the same time, must be rare sport. And the other contract?"

"Oh! that is another matter." Lynda leaned back and laughed. "I'm toning up an old house. Putting false fronts on, a bit of rouge, filling in wrinkles; in short, giving a side-tracked old lady something to interest her. She doesn't know it, but I'm letting her do the work, and she's very happy. She has a kind of rusty good taste. I'm polishing it without hurting her. The living room! Why, Uncle William, it is a picture. It is a tender dream come true."

"And you are charging for that, you pirate?"

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"I do not have to. The dear soul is so grateful that I'm forced to refuse favours."

"Lynda, ring for Thomas." Truedale drew his brows close. "I think I'll—I'll smoke. It may help me to sleep after the long stories and—when I am alone." He rarely indulged in this way—tobacco excited instead of soothed him—but the evening must have all the clear thought possible!

CHAPTER IV

Lynda sat again upon her ottoman—her capacity for sitting hours without a support to her back had always been one of her charms for William Truedale. The old man looked at her now; how strong and fine she was! How reliant and yet—how appealing! How she would always give and give—be used to the breaking point—and rarely understood. Truedale understood her through her mother!

"I want to ask you, Lynda, why do you come here—you of all the world? I have often wondered."

"I—I like to come, generally, Uncle William."

"But—other times, out of the general? You come oftener then. Why?"

And now Lynda turned her clear, dark eyes upon him. A sudden resolve had been taken. She was going to comfort him as she never had before, going to recompense him for the weeks just past when she had failed him while espousing Con's cause. She was going to share her secret with him!

"Just before mother went, Uncle William, she told me—"

The hand holding the cigar swayed—it was a very frail, thin hand.

"Told you—what?"

"That you once—loved her."

The old wound ached as it was bared. Lynda meant to comfort, but she was causing excruciating pain.

"She—told you that? And you so young! Why should she so burden you—she of all women?"

"And—my mother loved you, Uncle William! She found it out too late and—and after that she did her best for—for Brace and me and—father!"

The room seemed swaying, as all else in the universe was, at that moment, for William Truedale. Everything that had gone to his undoing—to the causing of his bitter loneliness and despair—was beaten down by the words that flooded the former darkness with almost terrifying light. For a moment or two he dared not speak—dared not trust his voice. The shock had been great. Then, very quietly:

“And—and why did she—speak at the last?”

Lynda’s eyes filled with tears.

“Because,” she faltered, “since she could not have come to you without dishonour—she sent me! Her confidence has been the sacredest thing in my life and I have tried to do as she desired. I—I have failed sadly—lately, but try to forgive me for—my mother’s sake!”

“And you—have”—the voice trembled pitifully in spite of the effort Truedale made to steady it—“kept silence—since she went; why? Oh! youth is so ignorant, so cruel!” This was said more to himself than to the girl by his knee upon whose bowed head his shrivelled hand unconsciously rested.

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"First it was for father that I kept the secret. He seemed so stricken after—after he was alone. And then—since I was trying to be to you what mother wanted me to be—it did not seem greatly to matter. I wanted to win my way. I always meant to tell you, and now, after these weeks of misunderstanding, I felt you should know that there will always be a reason for me, of all the world, to share your life."

"I see! I see!" A great wave of emotion rose and rose, carrying the past years of misery with it. The knowledge, once, might have saved him, but now it had come too late. By and by he would be able to deal with this staggering truth that had been so suddenly hurled upon him, but not now while Katherine Kendall's daughter knelt at his side!

"Lynda, I cannot talk to you about this. When you are older—when life has done its best or its worst for you—you will understand better than you do to-day; but remember this: what you have told me has cut deep, but it has cut, by one stroke, the hardness and bitterness from my heart. Remember this!"

Then with a sudden reversion to his customary manner he said:

"And now tell me about Morrell."

Lynda started; the situation puzzled her. She had meant to comfort—instead she seemed to have hurt and confused her old friend.

"About John Morrell?" she murmured with a rising perplexity; "there isn't much to tell."

"I thought it was a long story, Lynda."

"Somehow it doesn't seem long when you get close to it. But surely you must see, Uncle William, that after—after father and mother—I would naturally be a bit keener than most girls. It would never do for me to marry the wrong man and, of course, a girl never really knows until—she faces the situation at close quarters. I should never have engaged myself to John Morrell—that was the real mistake; and it was only when he felt sure of me—that I knew! Uncle William, I must have my own life, and John—well, he meant to have his own and mine, too. I couldn't stand it! I have struggled up and conquered little heights just as he has—just as Con and Brace have; we've all scrambled up together. It didn't seem quite fair that they should—well, fly their colours from their peaks and that I should" (here Lynda laughed) "cuddle under John's standard. I don't always believe in his standard; I don't approve of it. Much as I like men, I don't think they are qualified to arrange, sort, fix, and command the lives of women. If a woman thinks the abdication justifies the gains, that's all right. If I had sold myself, honourably, to John Morrell I would have kept to the agreement; I hate and loathe women who don't! I'm not belittling the romance and sentiment, Uncle William, but when all's told the usual marriage is a bargain and half the women whine about holding to it—the others play up and, if there is love enough, it pans out pretty well—but



I couldn't! You see I had lived with father and mother—felt the lack between them—and I saw mother's eyes when she—let go and died! No! I mean to have my own life!"

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"And you are going to forego a woman's heritage—home and children—for such a whim? Your mother had recompenses; are you not afraid of the—future?"

"Not if I respect it and do not dishonour the present."

"A lonely man or woman—an outcast from the ordinary—is a creature of hell!"

Lynda shook her head.

"Go on!" Truedale commanded sternly. "Morrell is a good fellow. From my prison I took care to find that out. Brace did me practical service when he acted as sleuth before your engagement!"

Lynda coloured and frowned.

"I did not know about that," was all she said.

"It doesn't matter—only I'm glad I can feel sorry for him and angry at you. I never knew you could be a fool, Lynda."

"I dare say we all can, if we put our minds to it—sometimes without. Well! that's the whole story, Uncle William."

"It's only the preface. See here, Lynda, did it ever strike you that a woman like you doesn't come to such a conclusion as you have without an experience—a contrast to go by?"

"I—I do not know what you mean, Uncle William."

"I think you do. I have no right to probe, but I have a right to—to help you if I can. You've done much for your mother; can you deny me the—the honour of doing something for her?"

"There's nothing—to do."

"Let us see! You're just a plain girl when all's said and done. You've got a little more backbone and wit than some, but your heart's in the same place as other women's and you're no different in the main. You want the sane, right things just as they do—home, children, and security from the things women dread. A man can give a woman a chance for her best development; she ought to recognize that and—yes—appreciate it."

"Surely!" this came very softly from the lips screened now by two cold shivering hands. "A woman does recognize it; she appreciates it, but that does not exclude her from—choice."

“One man—of course within limits and reason—is as good as another when he loves a woman and makes her love him. You certainly thought you loved Morrell. You had nothing to gain unless you did. You probably earned as much as he.”

“That’s true. All quite true.”

“Then something happened!” Truedale flung his half-smoked cigar in the fire. “What was it, Lynda?”

“There—was nothing—really—”

“There was something. There was—Con!”

“Oh! how—how can you?” Lynda started back. She meant to say “How dare you?”—but the drawn and tortured face restrained her.

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"Because I must, Lynda. Because I must. You know I told you I had a story? You must bear with me and listen. Sit down again and try to remember—I am doing this for your mother! I repeat—there was Con. At first you took up arms for him as Brace did; your sex instincts were not awakened. You were all good fellows together until you drifted, blindfolded, into the trap poor Morrell set for you. You thought I was ill-treating Con—disregarding his best interests—starving his soul! Oh! you poor little ignoramus; the boy never had a soul worth mentioning until it got awakened, in self-defense, and grew its own limit. What did you and Brace know of the past—the past that went into Con's making? You were free enough with your young condemnation and misplaced loyalty—but how about justice?"

Lynda's eyes were fixed upon Truedale's face. She had never seen him in this mood and, while he fascinated, he overawed her.

"Why, girl, Con's father, my younger brother, was as talented as Con, but he was a scamp. He had money enough to pave the way to his own destruction. Until it was gone he spurned me—spurned even his own genius. He married a woman as mad as himself and then—without a qualm—tossed her aside to die. He had no sense of responsibility—no shame. He had temperament—a damnable one—and he drifted on it to the end. When it was all over, I brought Conning here. Just at that time—well, it was soon after your mother married your father—this creeping disease fell upon me. If it hadn't been for the boy I'd have ended the whole thing then and there, but with the burden laid upon me I couldn't slip out. It has been a kind of race ever since—this menace mounting higher and higher and the making of Con keeping pace. I swore that if he had talent it must prove itself against hardship, not in luxury. I made life difficult in order to toughen and inspire. I never meant to kill—you must do me that justice. Only you see, chained here, I couldn't follow close enough, and Con had pride, thank God! and he thought he had hate—but he hasn't or he'd have starved rather than accept what I offered. In his heart he—well, let us say—respects me to a certain extent. I saw him widening the space between himself and his inheritance—and it has helped me live; you saw him making a man of himself and it became more absorbing than the opportunity of annexing yourself to a man already made. Oh, I have seen it all and it has helped me in my plan."

"Your—plan?" The question was a feeble attempt to grapple with a situation growing too big and strong. "Your plan—what is your plan?"

"Lynda, I have made my will! Sitting apart and looking on, the doing of this has been the one great excitement of my life. Through the years I have believed I was doing it alone; now I see your mother's guiding hand has led me on; I want you to believe this as—I do!"

"I—I will try, Uncle William." Lynda no longer struggled against that which she could not understand. She felt it must have its way with her.

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"This house," Truedale was saying, "was meant for your mother. I left it bare and ready for her taste and choice. After—I go, I want you to fit it out for her—and me! You must do it at once."

"No! No!" Lynda put up a protesting hand, but Truedale smiled her into silence and went on: "I may let you begin to-morrow and not wait! You must fill the bare corners—spare no expense. You and I will be quite reckless; I want this place to be a—home at last."

And now Lynda's eyes were shining—her rare tears blinded her.

"You have always tried indirectly, Lynda, to secure Con's greatest good; you have done it! I mean to leave him a legacy of three thousand a year. That will enable him to let up on himself and develop the talent you think he has. I have seen to it that the two faithful souls who have served me here shall never know want. There will be money, and plenty of it, for you to carry out my wishes regarding this house, should—well—should anything happen to me! After these details are attended to, my fortune, rather a cumbersome one, goes to—Dr. McPherson, my old and valued friend!"

Lynda started violently.

"To—to Dr. McPherson?" she gasped, every desire for Conning up in arms.

"There! there! do not get so excited, Lynda. It is only for—three years. McPherson and I understand."

"And then?"

"It will go to Conning—if—"

"If what?" Lynda was afraid now.

"If he—marries you!"

"Oh! this is beyond endurance! How could you be so cruel, Uncle William?" The hot, passionate tears were burning the indignant face.

"He will not know. The years will test and prove him."

"But I shall know! If you thought best to do this thing, why have you told me?"

"There have been hours when I myself did not know why; I understand to-night. Your mother led me!"

"My mother could never have hurt me so. Never!"

“You must trust—her and me, Lynda.”

“Suppose—oh! suppose—Con does not ... Oh! this is degrading!”

“Then the fortune will—be yours. McPherson and I have worked this out—most carefully.”

“Mine! Mine! Why”—and here Lynda flung her head back and laughed relievedly—“I refuse absolutely to accept it!”

“In that case it goes—to charities.”

A hush fell in the room. Baffled and angry, Lynda dared not trust herself to speak and Truedale sank back wearily. Then came a rattle of wheels in the quiet street—a toot of a taxi horn.

“Thomas has not forgotten to provide for your home trip; but the man can wait. The night is mild”—Truedale spoke gently—“and you and I are rich.”

Lynda did not seem to hear. Her thoughts were rushing wildly over the path set for her by her old friend’s words.

“Conning would not know!” she grasped and held to that; “he would be able to act independently. At first it had seemed impossible. Her knowledge could affect no one but herself! If”—and here Lynda breathed faster—“if Conning should want her enough to ask her to share his life that the three thousand dollars made possible, why then the happiness of bringing his own to him would be hers!—hers!”

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Again the opposite side of the picture held her. “But suppose he did *not* want her—in that way? Then she, his friend—the one who, in all the world, loved him the best—would profit by it; she would be a wealthy woman, for her mother’s sake or”—the alternative staggered her—“she could let everything slip, everything and bear the consequences!”

At this point she turned to Truedale and asked pitifully again:

“Oh! why, why did you do this?”

There was no anger or rebellion in the words, but a pathos that caused the old man to close his eyes against the pleading in the uplifted face. It was the one thing he could not stand.

“Time will prove, child; time will prove. I could not make you understand; your mother might have—I could not. But time will show. Time is a strange revealer. All my life I have been working in darkness until—now! I should have trusted more—you must learn from me.

“There, do not keep the man waiting longer. I wonder—do not do it unless you want to, or think it right—but I wonder if you could kiss me good-bye?”

Lynda rose and, tear-blinded, bent over and kissed him—kissed him twice, once for her mother!—and she felt that he understood. She had never touched her lips to his before, and it seemed a strange ceremony.

An hour later Truedale called for Thomas and was wheeled to his bedroom and helped to bed.

“Perhaps,” he said to the man, “you had better put those drops on the stand. If I cannot sleep—” Thomas smiled and obeyed. There had been a time when he feared that small, dark bottle, but not now! He believed too sincerely in his master’s strength of character. Having the medicine near might, by suggestion, help calm the restlessness, but it had never been resorted to, so Thomas smiled as he turned away with a cheery:

“Very well, sir; but there will be no need, I hope.”

“Good-night, Thomas. Raise the shade, please. It’s a splendid night, isn’t it? If they should build on that rear lot I could not see the moon so well. I may decide to buy that property.”

When Thomas had gone and he was alone at last, Truedale heaved a heavy sigh. It seemed to relieve the restraint under which he had been labouring for weeks.

All his life the possibility of escape from his bondage had made the bondage less unendurable. It was like knowing of a secret passage from his prison house—an exit dark and attended by doubts and fears, but nevertheless a sure passage to freedom. It had seemed, in the past, a cowardly thing to avail himself of his knowledge—it was like going with his debts unpaid. But now, in the bright, moonlit room it no longer appeared so. He had finished his task, had ended the bungling, and had heard a clear call ringing with commendation and approval. There was nothing to hold him back!

Over in the cabinet by the window were a photograph and a few letters; Truedale turned toward them and wondered if Lynda, instead of his old friend McPherson, would find them? He wished he had spoken—but after all, he could not wait. He had definitely decided to take the journey! But he spoke softly as if to a Presence:

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“And so—you played a part? Poor girl! how well—you played it! And you—suffered—oh! my God—and I never did you the justice of understanding. And you left your girl—to me—I have tried not to fail you there, Katherine!”

Then Truedale reached for the bottle. He took a swallow of the contents and waited! Presently he took another and a thrill of exhilaration stirred his sluggish blood. Weakly, gropingly, he stretched his benumbed hand out again; he was well on his way now. The long journey was begun in the moonlight and, strange to say, it did not grow dark, nor did he seem to be alone. This surprised him vaguely, he had always expected it would be so different!

And by and by one face alone confronted him—it was brighter than the moonlit way. It smiled understandingly—it, too, had faced the broad highway—it could afford to smile.

Once more the heavy, dead-cold hand moved toward the stand beside the bed, but it fell nerveless ere it reached what it sought.

The escape had been achieved!

CHAPTER V

The days passed and, unfettered, Jim White remained in the deep woods. After Nella-Rose’s disturbing but thrilling advent, Truedale rebounded sharply and, alone in his cabin, brought himself to terms. By a rigid arraignment he relegated, or thought he had relegated, the whole matter to the realm of things he should not have permitted, but which had done no real harm. He brought out the heavy book on philosophy and endeavoured to study. After a few hours he even resorted to the wet towel, thinking that suggestion might assist him, but Nella-Rose persistently and impishly got between his eyes and the pages and flouted philosophy by the magic of her superstition and bewitching charm.

Then Truedale attacked his play, viciously, commandingly. This was more successful. He reconstructed his plot somewhat—he let Nella-Rose in! Curbed and somewhat remodelled, she materialized and, while he dealt strictly with her, writing was possible.

So the first day and night passed. On the second day Truedale’s new strength demanded exercise and recreation. He couldn’t be expected to lock himself in until White returned to chaperone him. After all, there was no need of being a fool. So he packed a gunny sack with food and a book or two, and sallied forth, after providing generously for the live stock and calling the dogs after him.

But Truedale was unaware of what was going on about him. Pine Cone Settlement had, since the trap episode, been tense and waiting. Not many things occurred in the mountains and when they did they were made the most of. With significant silence the

friends and foes of Burke Lawson were holding themselves in check until he returned to his old haunts; then there would be considerable shooting—not necessarily fatal, a midnight raid or two, a general rumpus, and eventually, a truce.

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All this Jim White knew, and it was the propelling factor that had sent him to the deep woods. His sentiments conflicted with duty. Guilty as Lawson was, the sheriff liked him better than he did Martin and he meant, should he come across Burke in “the sticks,” to take him off for a bear hunt and some good advice. Thus he would justify his conscience and legal duties. But White, strange to say, was as ignorant as Truedale was of an element that had entered into conditions. It had never occurred to Jim to announce or explain his visitor’s arrival. To Pine Cone a “furriner” aroused at best but a superficial interest and, since Truedale had arrived, unseen, at night, why mention him to a community that could not possibly have anything in common with him? So it was that Greyson and a few others, noting Truedale at a distance and losing sight of him at once, concluded that he was Burke, back and in hiding; and a growing but stealthy excitement was in the air. He was supposed by both factions to be with the sheriff, and feeling ran high. In the final estimate, could White have known it, he himself held no small part!

Beloved and hated, Lawson divided the community for and against himself about equally. There were those who defended and swore they would kill any who harmed the young outlaw—he was of the jovial, dare-devil type and as loyal to his friends as he was unyielding to his foes. Others declared that the desperado must be “finished”; the trap disagreement was but the last of a long list of crimes; it was time to put a quietus on one who refused to fall into line—who called the sheriff his friend and had been known to hobnob with revenue men! That, perhaps, was the blackest deed to be attributed to any native.

So all Pine Cone was on the war path and Truedale, heedless and unaware, took his air and exercise at his peril.

The men of the hills had a clear case now, since Peter Greyson had given his evidence, which, by the way, became more conclusive hour by hour as imagination, intoxication, and the delight of finding himself important, grew upon Greyson.

“Jim told me,” Peter had confided to Jed Martin, “that he was going to get a posse from way-back and round Lawson up.”

This was wholly false. White never took any one into his business secrets, least of all Greyson for whom he had deep contempt. “But I don’t call that clean to us-all, Jed. We don’t want strangers to catch Burke; we don’t want them to—to string him up or shoot him full of holes; what we-all want is to force White to hand him over to justice, give him a fair trial, and then send him to one of them prison traps to eat his soul out behind bars. Jed—just you shut your eyes and see Burke Lawson behind bars—eating sop from a pan, drinking prison water—just you call that picture up.”

Jed endeavoured to do so and it grew upon his imagination.

“We-all wants to trail him,” Greyson continued, “we don’t want to give him a free passage to Kingdom-Come by rope or shot—we-all want prison for Lawson, prison!”

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As Jed was the one most concerned, this edict went abroad by mountain wireless.

“Catch him alive!” Friend and foe were alert.

“And when all’s fixed and done—when Burke’s trapped,” Greyson said, “what you going to do—for me, Jed?”

This was a startling, new development.

“I didn’t reckon yo’ war doin’ this—fur pay!” Jed faltered. Then Greyson came forth:

“No pay, Jed. Gawd knows I do my duty as I see it. But being keen about duty, I see more than one duty. When you catch and cage Lawson, Jed, I want to be something closer to you than a friend.”

“Closer than—” Jed gasped.

“And duty drives me to confess to you, Jed, that the happiness of a lady is at stake.”

Jed merely gaped now. Visions of Nella-Rose made him giddy and speechless.

“The day you put Lawson in jail, Jed, that day I’ll give you the hand of my daughter. She loves you; she has confessed! You shall come here and share—everything! The hour that Burke is convicted—Marg is yours!”

“Marg!” The word came on a gasp.

“Not a word!” Greyson waved his hand in a princely way—this gesture was an heirloom from his ancestry. “I understand your feelings—I’ve seen what has been going on—but naturally I want my daughter to marry one worthy of her. You shall have my Marg when you have proven yourself! I’ve misjudged you, Jed, but this will wipe away old scores.”

With a sickening sense of being absorbed, Jed sank into black silence. If Marg wanted him and old Greyson was helping her, there was no hope! Blood and desire would conquer every time; every mountaineer recognized that!

And so things were seething under a surface of deadly calm, when Truedale, believing that he had himself well in control, packed his gunny sack and started forth for a long tramp. He had no particular destination in mind—in fact, the soft, dreamy autumn day lulled him to mental inertia—he simply went along, but he went as directly toward the rhododendron slick as though he had long planned his actions. However, it was late afternoon before he came upon Nella-Rose.

On the instant he realized that he had been searching for her all day. His stern standards crumbled and became dry dust. One might as well apply standards to

flickering sunlight or to swirling trifles of mountain mist as to Nella-Rose. She came upon him gaily; the dogs had discovered her on one of their ventures and were now quietly accompanying her.

“I—I’ve been looking for you—all day!” Truedale admitted, with truth but indiscretion. And then he noted, as he had before, the strange impression the girl gave of having been blown upon the scene. The pretty, soft hair resting on the cheek in a bewildering curve; the large, dreamy eyes and black lashes; the close clinging of her shabby costume, as if wrapped about her slim body by the playful gale that had wafted her along; all held part in the illusion.

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"I had to—to lead Marg to Devil-may-come Hollow. She's hunting there now!" Nella-Rose's white teeth showed in a mischievous smile. "We're right safe with Marg down there, scurrying around. Come, I know a sunny place—I want to tell you about Marg."

Her childish appropriation of him completed Truedale's surrender. The absolute lack of self-consciousness drove the last remnant of caution away. They found the sunny spot—it was like a dimple in a hill that had caught the warmth and brightness and held them always to the exclusion of shadows. It almost seemed that night could never conquer the nook.

And while they rested there, Nella-Rose told him of the belief of the natives that he was the refugee Lawson.

"And Marg would give you up like—er—this" (Nella-Rose puffed an imaginary trifle away with her pretty pursed lips). "She trailed after me all day—she lost me in a place where hiding's good—and there I left her! She'll tell Jed Martin this evening when she gets back. Marg is scenting Burke for Jed and his kind to catch—that's her way and Jed's!" Stinging contempt rang in the girl's voice.

"But not your way I bet, Nella-Rose." The fun, not the danger, of the situation struck Truedale.

"No!—I'd do it all myself! I'd either warn him and have done with it, or I'd stand by him."

"I'm not sure that I like the misunderstanding about me," Truedale half playfully remarked, "they may shoot me in the back before they find out."

"Do you" (and here Nella-Rose's face fell into serious, dangerously sweet, lines), "do you reckon I would leave you to them-all if there was that danger? They don't aim to shoot or string Burke up; they reckon they'll take him alive and—get him locked up in jail to—to—"

"What, Nella-Rose?"

"Die of longing!"

"Is that what would happen to Burke Lawson?"

The girl nodded. Then the entrancing mischief returned to her eyes and she became a child once more—a creature so infinitely young that Truedale seemed grandfatherly by comparison.

"Can't you see how mighty funny it will be to lead them and let them follow on and then some day—they'll plump right up on you and find out! Godda'mighty!"

Irresponsible mirth swayed the girl to and fro. She laughed, silently, until the tears stood in the clear eyes. Truedale caught the spirit of her mood and laughed with her. The picture she portrayed of setting jealousy, malice, and stupidity upon the wrong trail was very funny, but suddenly he paused and said seriously:

“But in the meantime this Burke Lawson may return; you may be the death of him with your pranks.”

Nella-Rose shook her head. “I would know!” she declared confidently. “I know everything that’s going on in the hills. Burke would let me know—first!”

“It’s like melodrama,” Truedale murmured half to himself. By some trick of fancy he seemed to be looking on as Brace Kendall might have. The thought brought him to bay. What would good old Brace do in the present situation?

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"What is melodrama?" Nella-Rose never let a new word or suggestion escape her. She was as keen as she was dramatic and mischievous.

"It would be hard to make you understand—but see here"—Truedale drew the gunny sack to him—"I bet you're hungry!" He deliberately put Brace from his thoughts.

"I reckon I am." The lovely eyes were fixed upon the hand that was bringing forth the choicest morsels of the food prepared early that morning. As he laid the little feast before her, Truedale acknowledged that, in a vague way, he had been saving the morsels for Nella-Rose even while he had fed, earlier, upon coarser fare.

"I don't know about giving you a chicken wing!" he said playfully. "You look as if you were about to fly away as it is—but unfortunately I've eaten both legs!"

"Oh! please"—Nella-Rose reached across the narrow space separating them, she was pleading prettily—"I just naturally admire wings!"

"I bet you do! Well, eat plenty of bread with them. And see here, Nella-Rose, while you are eating I'm going to read a story to you. It is the sort of thing that we call melodrama."

"Oh!" This through the dainty nibbling of the coveted wing. "I'm right fond of stories."

"Keep quiet now!" commanded Truedale and he began the spirited tale of love and high adventure that, like the tidbits, he knew he had brought for Nella-Rose!

The warm autumn sun fell upon them for a full hour, then it shifted and the chill of the approaching evening warned the reader of the flight of time. He stopped suddenly to find that his companion had long since forgotten her hunger and food. Across the debris she bent, absorbed and tense. Her hands were clasped close—cold, little hands they were—and her big eyes were strained and wonder-filled.

"Is that—all?" she asked, hoarsely.

"Why, no, child, there's more."

"Go on!"

"It's too late! We must get back."

"I—I must know the rest! Why, don't you see, you know how it turns out; I don't!"

"Shall I tell you?"

“No, no. I want it here with the warm sun and the pines and your—yourself making it real.”

“I do not understand, Nella-Rose!” But as he spoke Truedale began to understand and it gave him an uneasy moment. He knew what he ought to do, but knew that he was not going to do it! “We’ll have to come again and hear the rest,” was what he said.

“Yes? Why”—and here the shadowy eyes took on the woman-look, the look that warned and lured the man near her—“I did not know it ever came like that—really.”

“What, Nella-Rose?”

“Why—love. They-all knew it—and took it. It was just like it was something all by itself. That’s not the sort us-all have. Does it only come that—er—way in mel—melerdrammer?”

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"No, little girl. It comes that way in real life when hearts are big enough and strong enough to bear it." Truedale watched the effect of his words upon the strange, young face before him. They forced their way through her ignorance and untrained yearning for love and admiration. It was a perilous moment, for conscience, on Truedale's part, seemed drugged and sleeping and Nella-Rose was awakening to that which she had never known before. Gone, for her, were caprice and mischief; she seemed about to see and hear some wonderful thing that eluded but called her on.

And after that first day they met often. "Happened upon each other" was the way Truedale put it. It seemed very natural. The picturesque spots appealed to them both. There was reading, too—carefully selected bits. It was intensely interesting to lead the untrained mind into bewildering mazes—to watch surprise, wonder, and perplexity merge into understanding and enjoyment. Truedale experienced the satisfaction of seeing that, for the first time in his life, he was a great power. The thought set his brain whirling a bit, but it made him seriously humble as well.

Gradually his doubts and introspections became more definite; he lived day by day, hour by hour; while Jim White tarried, Nella-Rose remained; and the past—Truedale's past—faded almost from sight. He could hardly realize, when thinking of it afterward, where and how he decided to cut loose from his past, and all it meant, and accept a future almost ludicrously different from anything he had contemplated.

One day a reference to Burke Lawson was made and, instead of letting it pass as heretofore, he asked suddenly of Nella-Rose:

"What is he to you?"

The girl flushed and turned away.

"Burke?—oh, Burke isn't—anything—now!"

"Was he ever—anything?"

"I reckon he wasn't; I *know* he wasn't!"

Then, like a flash, Truedale believed he understood what had happened. This simple girl meant more to him than anything else—more than the past and what it held! A baser man would not have been greatly disturbed by this knowledge; a man with more experience and background would have understood it and known that it was a phase that must be dealt with sternly and uncompromisingly, but that it was merely a phase and as such bound to pass. Not so Truedale. He was stirred to the roots of his being; every experience was to him a concrete fact and, consequently, momentous. In order to keep pure the emotions that overpowered him at times, he must renounce all that separated him from Nella-Rose and reconstruct his life; or—he must let *her* go!



Once Truedale began to reason this out, once he saw Nella-Rose's dependence upon him—her trust and happiness—he capitulated and permitted his imagination to picture and colour the time on ahead. He refused to turn a backward glance.

Of course all this was not achieved without struggle and foreboding; but he saw no way to hold what once was dear, without dishonour to that which now was dearer; and he—let go!

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This determined, he strenuously began to prepare himself for the change. Day by day he watched Nella-Rose with new and far-seeing interest—not always with love and passion-blinded eyes. He felt that she could, with his devotion and training, develop into a rarely sweet and fine woman. He was not always a fool in his madness; at times he was wonderfully clear-sighted. He meant to return home, when once his health was restored, and take the Kendalls into his confidence; but the thought of Lynda gave him a bad moment now and then. He could not easily depose her from the most sacred memories of his life, but gradually he grew to believe that her relations to him were—had always been—platonic; and that she, in the new scheme, would play no small part in his life and Nella-Rose's.

There would be years of self-denial and labour and then, by and by, success would be achieved. He would take his finished work, and in this he included Nella-Rose, back to his old haunts and prove his wisdom and good fortune. In short, Truedale was love-mad—ready to fling everything to the ruthless winds of passion. He blindly called things by wrong names and steered straight for the rocks.

He meant well, as God knew; indeed all the religious elements, hitherto unsuspected in him, came to the fore now. Conventions were absurd when applied to present conditions, but, once having accepted the inevitable, the way was divinely radiant. He meant to pay the price for what he yearned after. He had no other intention.

Now that he was resigned to letting the past go, he could afford to revel in the joys of the present with a glad sense of responsibility for the future.

Presently his course seemed so natural that he wondered he had ever questioned it. More and more men with a vision—and Truedale devoutly believed he had the vision—were recognizing the absurdity of old ideals.

Back to the soil meant more than the physical; it meant back to the primitive, the simple, the real. The artificial exactions of society must be spurned if a new and higher morality were to be established.

If Truedale in this state of mind had once seen the actual danger, all might have been well; but he had swung out of his orbit.

At this juncture Nella-Rose was puzzling her family to the extent of keeping her father phenomenally sober and driving Marg to the verge of nerve exhaustion.

The girl had, to put it in Greyson's words, "grown up over night." She was dazzling and recalled a past that struck deep in the father's heart.

There had been a time when Peter Greyson, a mere boy, to be sure—and before the cruel war had wrecked the fortunes of his family—had been surrounded by such women

as Nella-Rose now suggested. Women with dancing eyes and soft, white hands. Women born and bred for love and homage, who demanded their privileges with charm and beauty. There had been one fascinating woman, a great-aunt of Nella-Rose's,

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who had imperilled the family honour by taking her heritage of worship with a high hand. Disregarding the rights of another, she boldly rode off with the man of her choice and left the reconstruction of her reputation to her kith and kin who roused instantly to action and lied, like ladies and gentlemen, when truth was impossible. Eventually they so toned down and polished the deed of the little social highwaywoman as to pass her on in the family history with an escutcheon shadowed only, rather than smirched.

Nella-Rose, now that her father considered, was dangerously like her picturesque ancestress! The thought kept Peter from the still, back in the woods, for many a day. He, poor down-at-heel fellow, was as ready as any man of his line to protect women, especially his own, but he was sorely perplexed now.

Was it Burke Lawson who, from his hiding place, was throwing a glamour over Nella-Rose?

Then Peter grew ugly. The protection of women was one thing; ridding the community of an outlaw was another. Men knew how to deal with such matters and Greyson believed himself to be very much of a man.

"Nella-Rose," he said one day as he smoked reflectively and listened to his younger daughter singing a camp meeting hymn in a peculiarly sweet little voice, "when my ship comes in, honey, I'm going to buy you a harp. A gold one."

"I'd rather have a pink frock, father, and a real hat; I just naturally hate sunbonnets! I'd favour a feather on my hat—flowers fade right easy."

"But harps is mighty elegant, Nella-Rose. Time was when your—aunts and—and grandmothers took to harps like they was their daily nourishment. Don't you ever forget that, Nella-Rose. Harps in families mean *blood*, and blood don't run out if you're careful of it."

Nella-Rose laughed, but Marg, in the wash-house beyond, listened and—hated!

No one connected *her* with harps or blood, but she held, in her sullen heart and soul, the true elements of all that had gone into the making of the best Greysons. And as the winter advanced, Marg, worn in mind and body, was brought face to face with stern reality. Autumn was gone—though the languorous hours belied it. She must prepare. So she gathered her forces—her garden products that could be exchanged for necessities; the pork; the wool; all, all that could be spared, she must set in circulation. So she counted three dozen eggs and weighed ten pounds of pork and called Nella-Rose, who was driving her mad by singing and romping outside the kitchen door.

"You—Nella-Rose!" she called, "are you plumb crazy?"

Nella-Rose became demure at once and presented herself at the door.

“Do I look it?” she said, turning her wonderful little face up for inspection. Something in the words and in the appealing beauty made Marg quiver. Had happiness and justice been meted out to Marg Greyson she would have been the tenderest of sisters to Nella-Rose. Several years lay between them; the younger girl was encroaching upon the diminishing rights of the older. The struggle between them was as old as life itself, but it could not kill utterly what should have existed ardently.

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"You got to tote these things"—Marg held forth the basket—"down to the Centre for trade, and you can fetch back the lil' things like pepper, salt, and sugar. Tell Cal Merrivale to fetch the rest and bargain for what I've got ready here, when he drives by. If you start now you can be back by sundown."

To Marg's surprise, Nella-Rose offered no protest to the seven-mile walk, nor to the heavy load. She promptly pulled her sunbonnet to the proper angle on her head and gripped the basket.

"Ain't you goin' to eat first?" asked Marg.

"No. Put in a bite; I'll eat it by the way."

As the Centre was in the opposite direction from the Hollow, as seven miles going and seven miles coming would subdue the spirits and energy even of Nella-Rose, Marg was perplexed. However, she prepared food, tucked it in the basket, and even went so far as to pin her sister's shawl closely under her chin. Then she watched the slim, straight figure depart—still puzzled but at peace for the day, at least.

Nella-Rose, however, was plotting an attack upon Truedale quite out of the common. By unspoken consent he and she had agreed that their meetings should be in the open. Jim White might return at anytime and neither of them wanted at first to include him in the bewildering drama of their lives. For different reasons they knew that Jim's cold understanding of duty would shatter the sacred security that was all theirs. Truedale meant to confide everything to White upon his return—meant to rely upon him in the reconstruction of his life; but he knew nothing could be so fatal to the future as any conflict at the present with the sheriff's strict ideas of conduct. As for Nella-Rose, she had reason to fear White's power as woman-hater and upholder of law and order. She simply eliminated Jim and, in order to do this, she must keep him in the dark.

Early that morning she had looked, as she did every day, from the hill behind the house and she had seen but one thin curl of smoke from the clearing! If White had not returned the night before the chances were that he would make another day of it! Nella-Rose often wondered why others did not note the tell-tale smoke—a clue which often played a vital part in the news of the hills. Only because thoughts were focussed on the Hollow and on White's absence, was Truedale secure in his privacy.

"I'll hurry mighty fast to the Centre," Nella-Rose concluded, after escaping from Marg's disturbed gaze, "then I'll hide the things by the big road and I'll—go to his cabin. I'll—I'll surprise him!"

Truedale had told her the day before, in a moment of caution, that he would have to work hard for a time in order to make ready for White's return. The fact was he had now got to that point in his story when he longed for Jim as he might have longed for safety

on a troubled sea. With Jim back and fully informed—everything on ahead would be safe.

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"I'll surprise him!" murmured Nella-Rose, with the dimples in full play at the corners of her mouth; "old Jim White can't keep me away. I'll watch out—it's just for a minute; I'll be back by sundown; it will be only to say 'how-de?'"

Something argued with the girl as she ran on—something quite new and uncontrolled. Heretofore no law but that of the wilds had entered into her calculations. To get what she could of happiness and life—to make as little fuss as possible—that had been her code; but now, the same restraint that had held Marg from going to the Hollow awhile back, when she thought that, with night, Burke Lawson might disclose his whereabouts, held Nella-Rose! So insistent was the rising argument that it angered the girl. "Why? Why?" her longings and desires cried. "Because! Because!" was the stern response, and the *woman* in Nella-Rose thrilled and throbbed and trembled, while the girlish spirit pleaded for the excitement of joy and sweetness that was making the grim stretches of her narrow existence radiant and full of meaning.

On she went doggedly. The dimples disappeared; the mouth fell into the pathetic, drooping lines that by and by, unless something saved Nella-Rose, would become permanent and mark her as a hill-woman—one to whom soul visions were denied.

CHAPTER VI

Wisdom had all but conquered Nella-Rose's folly when she came in sight of Calvin Merrivale's store. But—who knows?—perhaps the girl's story had been written long since, and she was not entirely free. Be that as it may, she paused, for no reason whatever as far as she could tell, and carefully took one dozen eggs from the basket and hid them under some bushes by the road! Having done this she went forward so blithely and lightly that one might have thought her load had been considerably eased. She appeared before Calvin Merrivale, presently, like a refreshing apparition from vacancy. It was high noon and Merrivale was dozing in a chair by the rusty stove, in which a fire, prepared against the evening chill, was already burning.

"How-de, Mister Merrivale?" Calvin sprang to his feet.

"If it ain't lil' Nella-Rose. How'se you-all?"

"Right smart. I've brought you three dozen eggs and ten pounds of pork." Nella-Rose almost said po'k—not quite! "And you must be mighty generous with me when you weigh out—let me see!—oh, yes, pepper, salt, and sugar."

"I'll lay a sifftin' more in the scale, Nella-Rose, on 'count o' yo' enjoyin' ways. But I can't make this out"—he was counting the eggs—"yo' said three dozen aigs?"

"Three dozen, and ten pounds of pork!" This very firmly.

Merrivale counted again and as he did so Nella-Rose remembered! The red came to her face—the tears to her ashamed eyes.

“Stop!” she said softly, going close to the old man. “I forgot. I took one dozen out!”

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Merrivale stood and looked at her and then, what he thought was understanding, came to his assistance.

“Who fo’, Nella-Rose, who fo’?”

There was no reply to this.

“Yo’ needn’t be afraid to open yo’ mind ter me, Nella-Rose. Keeping sto’ is a mighty help in gettin’ an all-around knowin’ o’ things. Folks jest naterally come here an’ talk an’ jest naterally I listen, an’ ’twixt Jim White, the sheriff, an’ old Merrivale, there ain’t much choosin’, jedgmatically speakin’. I know White’s off an’ plannin’ ter round up Burke Lawson from behind, as it war. T’warnt so in my day, lil’ Nella-Rose. When we-uns had a reckonin comin’, we naterally went out an’ shot our man; but these torn-down scoundrels like Jed Martin an’ his kind they trap ’em an’ send ’em to worse’n hell. Las’ night”—and here Merrivale bent close to Nella-Rose—“my hen coop was ’tarnally gone through, an’ a bag o’ taters lifted. I ain’t makin’ no cry-out. I ain’t forgot the year o’ the fever an’—an’—well, yo’ know who—took care o’ me day an’ night till I saw faces an’ knew ’em! What’s a matter o’ a hen o’ two an’ a sack o’ taters when lined up agin that fever spell? I tell yo’, Nella-Rose, if yo’ say thar war three dozen aigs, thar war three dozen aigs, an’ we’ll bargain accordin’!”

And now the dimples came slowly to the relieved face.

“I’ll—I’ll bring you an extra dozen right soon, Mister Merrivale.”

“I ain’t a-goin’ ter flex my soul ’bout that, Nella-Rose. Aigs is aigs, but human nater is human nater; an’ keepin’ a store widens yo’ stretch o’ vision. Now, watch out, lil’ girl, an’ don’t take too much fo’ granted. When a gun goes off yo’ hear it; but when skunks trail, yo’ don’t get no sign, ’less it’s a smell!”

Nella-Rose took her packages, smiled her thanks, and ran on. She ate her lunch by the bushes where the eggs lay hidden, then depositing in the safe shelter the home bundles Merrivale had so generously weighed, she put the eggs in the basket, packed with autumn leaves, and turned into the trail leading away from the big road.

Through the bare trees the clear sky shone like a shield of blue-gray metal. It was a sky open for storm to come and pass unchecked. The very stillness and calm were warnings of approaching disturbance. Nature was listening and waiting for the breaking up of autumn and the clutch of frost.

It was only two miles from the Centre to White’s clearing and the afternoon was young when Nella-Rose paused at the foot of the last climb and took breath and courage. There was a tangled mass of rhododendrons by the edge of the wood and suddenly the girl’s eyes became fixed upon it and her heart beat wildly. Something alive was

crouching there, though none but a trained sense could have detected it! They waited—the hidden creature and the quivering girl! Then a pair of eager, suspicious eyes shone between the dead leaves of the bushes; next a dark, thin face peered forth—it was Burke Lawson's! Nella-Rose clutched her basket closer—that was all. After a moment she spoke softly, but clearly:

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"I'm alone. You're safe. How long have you been back?"

"Mor'n two weeks!"

Nella-Rose started. So they had known all along, and while she had played with Marg the hunt might at any moment have become deadly earnest.

"More'n two weeks," Lawson repeated.

"Where?" The girl's voice was hard and cold.

"In the Holler. Miss Lois Ann helped—but Lord! you can't eat a helpless old woman out of house and home. Last night—"

"Yes, yes; I know. And oh, Burke, Mister Merrivale hasn't forgot—the fever and your goodness. He won't give you up."

"He won't need to. I'm right safe, 'cept for food. There's an old hole, back of a deserted still—I can even have a bit of fire. The devil himself couldn't find me. After a time I'm going—"

"Where? Where, Burke?"

"Nella-Rose, would you come with me? 'Twas you as brought me back—I had to come. If you will—oh! my doney-gal—"

"Stop! stop, Burke. Some one might be near. No, no; I couldn't leave the hills—I'd die from the longing, you know that!"

"If I—dared them all—could you take me, Nella-Rose? I'd run my chances with you! Night and day you tug and pull at the heart o' me, Nella-Rose."

Fear, and a deeper understanding, drove Nella-Rose to the wrong course.

"When you dare to come out—when they-all let you stay out—then ask me again, Burke Lawson. I'm not going to sweetheart with one who dare not show his head."

Her one desire was to get Lawson away; she must be free!

"Nella-Rose, I'll come out o' this."

"No! no!" the girl gasped, "they're not after you to shoot you, Burke; Jed Martin is for putting you in jail!"

"Good God—the sneaking coward."



“And Jim White is off raising a posse, he means to—to see fair play. Wait until Jim comes back; then give yourself up.”

“And then—then, Nella-Rose?”

The young, keen face among the dead leaves glowed with a light that sent the blood from Nella-Rose’s heart.

“See”—she said inconsequently—“I have” (she counted them out), “I have a dozen eggs; give them to Miss Lois Ann!”

“Let me touch you, Nella-Rose! Just let me touch your lil’ hand.”

“Wait until Jim White comes back!”

Then, because a rabbit scurried from its shelter, Burke Lawson sank into his, and Nella-Rose in mad haste took to the trail and was gone! A moment later Lawson peered out again and tried to decide which way she went, but his wits were confused—so he laughed that easy, fearless laugh of his and put in his hat the eggs Nella-Rose had left. Then, crawling and edging along, he retraced his steps to that hole in the Hollow where he knew he was as safe as if he were in his grave.

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With distance and reassurance on her side, Nella-Rose paused to take breath. She had been thoroughly frightened. Her beautiful plans, unsuspected by all the world, had been threatened by an unlooked-for danger. She had never contemplated Burke Lawson as a complication. She was living day by day, hour by hour. Jim White she had accepted as a menace—but Burke never! She was no longer the girl Lawson had known, but how could she hope to make him understand that? Her tender, love-seeking nature had, in the past, accepted the best the mountains offered—and Burke had been the best. She had played with him—teased Marg with him—revelled in the excitement, but *now*? Well, the blindness had been torn from her eyes—the shackles from her feet. No one, nothing, could hold her from her own! She must not be defrauded and imprisoned again!

Yes, that was it—imprisoned just when she had learned to use her wings!

Standing in the tangle of undergrowth, Nella-Rose clenched her small hands and raised wide eyes to the skies.

“I seem,” she panted—and at that moment all her untamed mysticism swayed her—“like I was going along the tracks in the dark and something is coming—something like that train long ago!”

Then she closed her eyes and her uplifted face softened and quivered. Behind the drooping lids she saw—Truedale! Quite vividly he materialized to her excited fancy. It was the first time she had ever been able to command him in this fashion.

“I’m going to him!” The words were like a passionate prayer rather than an affirmation. “I’m going to follow like I followed long ago!” She clutched the basket and fled along.

And while this was happening, Truedale, in his cabin, was working as he had not worked in years. He had burned all his bridges and outlying outposts; he was waiting for White, and his plans were completed. He meant to confide everything to his only friend—for such Jim seemed in the hazy and desolated present—then he would marry Nella-Rose off-hand; there must be a minister somewhere! After that? Well, after that Truedale grasped his manuscript and fell to work like one inspired.

Lynda Kendall would never have known the play in its present form. Truedale’s ideal had always been to portray a free woman—a super-woman; one who had evolved into the freedom from shattered chains. He now had a heroine free, in that she had never been enslaved. If one greater than he had put a soul in a statue, Truedale believed that he could awaken a child of nature and show her her own beautiful soul. He had outlined, a time back, a sylvan Galatea; and now, as he sat in the still room, the framework assumed form and substance; it breathed and moved him divinely. It and he were alone in the universe; they were to begin the world—he and—



Just then the advance messenger of the coming change of weather entered by way of a lowered window. It was a smart little breeze and it flippantly sent the ashes flying on the hearth and several sheets of paper broadcast in the room. Truedale sprang to recover his treasures; he caught four or five, but one escaped his notice and floated toward the door, which was ajar.

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"Whew!" he ejaculated, "that was a narrow escape," and he began to sort and arrange the sheets on the table.

"Sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two. Now where in thunder is that sixty-three?"

A light touch on his arm made him spring to his feet, every nerve a-tingle.

"Here it is! It seemed like it came to meet me."

"Nella-Rose!"

The girl nodded, holding out the paper.

"So you have come? Why—did you?"

The dimples came into play and Truedale stood watching them while many emotions flayed him; but gradually his weakness passed and he was able to assume an extremely stern though kindly manner. He meant to set the child right; he meant to see *only* the *child* in her until White returned; he would ignore the perilously sweet woman-appeal to his senses until such time as he could, with safety, let them once more hold part in their relations with each other.

But even as he arrived at this wise conclusion, he was noting, as often before he had noted, the fascinating colour and quality of Nella-Rose's hair. It was both dark and light. If smoke were filled with sunlight it would be something like the mass of more or less loosened tendrils that crowned the girl's pretty head. Stern resolve began to melt before the girlish sweetness and audacity, but Truedale made one last struggle; he thought of staunch and true Brace Kendall! And, be it to Brace Kendall's credit, the course Conning endeavoured to take was a wise one.

"See here, Nella-Rose, you ought not to come here—alone!"

"Why? Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course. But why did you come?" This was risky. Truedale recognized it at once.

"Just to say—'how-de'! You certainly do look scroogy."

At this Truedale laughed. Nella-Rose's capacity for bringing forth his happier, merrier nature was one of her endearing charms.

"You didn't come just for that, Nella-Rose!" This with stern disapproval.

"Take off the scroogy face—then I'll tell you why I came."

“Very well!” Truedale smiled weakly. “Why?”

“I’m right hungry. I—I want a party.”

Of course this would never do. White, or one of the blood-and-thunder raiders, might appear.

“You must go, Nella-Rose.”

“Not”—here she sat down firmly and undid her ridiculous plaid shawl—“not till you give me a bite. Just a mighty little bite—I’m starving!”

At this Truedale roared with laughter and went hurriedly to his closet. The girl must eat and—*go*. Mechanically he set about placing food upon the table. Then he sat opposite Nella-Rose while she ate with frank enjoyment the remains of his own noon-day meal. He could not but note, as he often did, the daintiness with which she accomplished the task. Other women, as Truedale remembered, were not prepossessing when attacking food; but this girl made a gracious little ceremony of the affair. She placed the small dishes in orderly array before her; she poised herself lightly on the edge of the chair and nibbled—there was no other word for it—as a perky little chipmunk might, the morsels she raised gracefully to her mouth. She was genuinely hungry and for a few minutes devoted her attention to the matter in hand.

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Then, suddenly, Nella-Rose did something that shattered the last scrap of self-control that was associated with the trusty Kendall and his good example. She raised a bit of food on her fork and held it out to Truedale, her lovely eyes looking wistfully into his.

"Please! I feel so ornery eating alone. I want to—share! Please play party with me!"

Truedale tried to say "I had my dinner an hour ago"; instead, he leaned across his folded arms and murmured, as if quite outside his own volition:

"I—I love you!"

Nella-Rose dropped the fork and leaned back. Her lids fell over the wide eyes—the smile faded from her lips.

"Do you belong to any one—else, Nella-Rose?"

"No—oh! no." This like a frightened cry.

"But others—some one must have told you—of love. Do you know what love means?"

"Yes."

"How?"

And now she looked at him. Her eyes were dark, her face deadly pale; her lips were so red that in the whiteness they seemed the only trace of colour.

"How do I know? Why because—nothing else matters. It seems like I've been coming all my life to it—and now it just says: 'Here I am, Nella-Rose—here!'"

"I, too, have been coming to it all my life, little girl. I did not know—I was driven. I rebelled, because I did not know; but nothing else *does* matter, when—love gets you!"

"No. Nothing matters." The girl's voice was rapt and dreamy. Truedale put his hands across the space dividing them and took hold of hers.

"You will be—mine, Nella-Rose?"

"Seems like I must be!"

"Yes. Doesn't it? Do you—you must understand, dear? I mean to live the rest of my life here in the hills—your hills. You once said one was of the hills or one wasn't; will they let me stay?"

"Yes"—almost fiercely—"but—but your folks—off there—will they let you stay?"

"I have no folks, Nella-Rose. I'm lonely and poor—at least I was until I found you! The hills have given me—everything; I mean to serve them well in return. I want you for my wife, Nella-Rose; we'll make a home—somewhere—it doesn't matter; it will be a shelter for our love and—" He stopped short. Reality and conventions made a last vain appeal. "I don't want you ever again to go out of my sight. You're mine and nothing could make that different—but" (and this came quickly, desperately) "there must be a minister somewhere—let's go to him! Do not let us waste another precious day. When he makes you mine by his"—Truedale was going to say "ridiculous jargon" but he modified it to—"his authority, no one in all God's world can take you from me. Come, come *now*, sweetheart!"

In another moment he would have had her in his arms, but she held him off.

"I'm mighty afraid of old Jim White!" she said.

Truedale laughed, but the words brought him to his senses.

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"Then you must go, darling, until White returns. After I have explained to him I will come for you, but first let me hold you—so! and kiss you—so! This is why—you must go, my love!"

She was in his arms, her lifted face pressed to his. She shivered, but clung to him for a moment and two tears rolled down her cheeks—the first he had ever seen escape her control. He kissed them away.

"Of what are you thinking, Nella-Rose?"

"Thinking? I'm not thinking; I'm—happy!"

"My—sweetheart!" Again Truedale pressed his lips to hers.

"Us-all calls sweetheart—'doney-gal'!"

"My—my doney-gal, then!"

"And"—the words came muffled, for Truedale was holding her still—"and always I shall see your face, now. It came to-day like it came long ago. It will always come and make me glad."

Truedale lifted her from his breast and held her at arms' length. He looked deep into her eyes, trying to pierce through her ignorance and childishness to find the elusive woman that could meet and bear its part in what lay before. Long they gazed at each other—then the light in Nella-Rose's face quivered—her mouth drooped.

"I'm going now," she said, "going till Jim White comes back."

"Wait—my—"

But the girl had slipped from his grasp; she was gone into the misty, threatening grayness that had closed in about them while love had carried them beyond their depths. Then the rain began to fall—heavy, warning drops. The wind, too, was rising sullenly like a monster roused from its sleep and slowly gathering power to vent its rage.

Into this darkening storm Nella-Rose fled unheeding. She was not herself—not the girl of the woods, wise in mountain lore; she was bewitched and half mad with the bewildering emotions that, at one moment frightened her—the next, carried her closer to the spiritual than she had ever been.

CHAPTER VII

Alone in his cabin, Truedale was conscious of a sort of groundless terror that angered him. The storm could not account for it—he had the advantage of ignorance there! Certainly his last half-hour could not be responsible for his sensations. He justified every minute of it by terms as old as man's desires and his resentment of restrictions. "Our lives are our own!" he muttered, setting to work to build a fire and to light the lamp. "They will all come around to my way of seeing things when I have made good and taken her back to them!"

Still this arguing brought no peace, and more and more Truedale found himself relying upon Jim White's opinions. In that troubled hour the sheriff stood like a rugged sign post in the path. One unflinching finger pointed to the past; the other—to the future.

"Well! I've chosen," thought Truedale; "it's the new way and—thank God!" But he felt that the future could be made possible or miserable by Jim's favour or disapproval.

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Having decided to follow upon White's counsel, Truedale mentally prayed for his return, and at once. The fact was, Truedale was drugged and he had just sense enough left to know it! He vaguely realized that the half-hour with Nella-Rose had been a dangerous epoch in his life. He was safe, thank heaven! but he dared not trust himself just now without a stronger will to guide him!

While he busied himself at feeding the animals, preparing and clearing away his own evening meal, he grew calmer. The storm was gaining in fury—and he was thankful for it! He was shut away from possible temptation; he even found it easy to think of Kendall and of Lynda, but he utterly eliminated his uncle from his mind. Between him and old William Truedale the gulf seemed to have become impassable!

And while Truedale sank into an unsafe mental calm, Nella-Rose pushed her way into the teeth of the storm and laughed and chattered like a mad and lost little nymph. Wind and rain always exhilarated her and the fury of the elements, gaining force every minute, did not alarm her while the memory of her great experience held sway over her. She shook her hair back from her wide, vague eyes. She was undecided where to go for the night—it did not matter greatly; to-morrow she would go again to Truedale, or he would come to her. At last she settled upon seeking the shelter of old Lois Ann, in Devil-may-come Hollow, and turned in that direction.

It was eight o'clock then and Truedale, with his books and papers on the table before him, declared: "I am quite all right now," and fell to work upon the manuscript that earlier had engrossed him.

As the time sped by he was able to visualize the play; *he* was sitting in the audience—he beheld the changing scenes and the tense climax. He even began to speculate upon the particular star that would be fitted for the leading part. His one extravagance, in the past, had been cut-rate seats in the best theatres.

Suddenly the mood passed and all at once Truedale realized that he was tired—deadly tired. The perspiration stood on his forehead—he ached from the strain of cramped muscles. Then he looked at his watch; it was eleven o'clock! The stillness out of doors bespoke a sullen break in the storm. A determined drip-drip from roof and trees was like the ticking of a huge clock running down, but good for some time. The fire had died out, not a bit of red showed in the ashes, but the room was hot, still. Truedale decided to go to bed without it, and, having come to that conclusion, he bent his head upon his folded arms and sank into a deep sleep.

Suddenly he awoke. The room was cold and dark! The lamp had burned itself out and the storm was again howling in its second attack. Chilled and obsessed by an unnerving sense of danger, Truedale waited for—he knew not what! Just then something pressed against his leg and he put his hand down thinking one of the dogs was crouching close, but a whispered "sh!" set every muscle tense.

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"Nella-Rose?"

"Yes—but, oh! be mighty still. They may be here any minute."

"They? Who?"

"All of them. Jed Martin, my father, and the others—the ones who are friends of—of—"

"Whom, Nella-Rose?"

"Burke Lawson! He's back—and they think—oh! they think they are on his trail—here! I—I was trying to get away but the streams were swollen and the big trees were bending and—and I hid behind a rock and—I heard!"

"First it was Jed and father; they said they were going to shoot—they'd given up catching Burke alive! Then they went up-stream and the—the others came—the friends, and they 'lowed that Burke was here and they meant to get here before Jed and—and da some killing on their side. I—I thought it was fun when they-all meant to take Burke alive, but now—oh! now can't you see?—they'll shoot and find out afterward! They may come any minute! I put the light out. Come, we must leave the cabin empty-looking—like you had gone—and hide!"

The breathless whispering stopped and Truedale collected his senses in the face of this real danger.

"But you—you must not be here, Nella-Rose!"

Every nerve was alert now. "This is pure madness. Great heavens! what am I going to do with you?"

The seriousness of the situation overpowered him.

"Sh!" The warning was caused by the restlessness of the dogs outside. Their quick ears were sensing danger or—the coming of their master! Either possibility was equally alarming.

"Oh! you do not understand," Nella-Rose was pleading by his knee. "If they-all see you, they will have you killed that minute. Burke is the only one in their minds—they don't even know that you live; they're too full of Burke, and if they see me—why—they'd kill you anyway."

"But what can I do with you?" That thought alone swayed Truedale.

Then Nella-Rose got upon her feet and stood close to him.



"I'm yours! I gave myself to you. You—you wanted me. Are you sorry?"

The simple pride and dignity went straight to Truedale's heart.

"It's because I want you so, little girl, that I must save you."

Somehow Nella-Rose seemed to have lost her fear of the oncoming raiders; she spoke deliberately, and above a whisper:

"Save me?—from what?"

There were no words to convey to her his meaning. Truedale felt almost ashamed to hold it in his own mind. They so inevitably belonged to each other; why should they question?

"I—I shall not go away—again!"

"My darling, you must."

"Where?"

The word brought him to his senses—where, indeed? With the dark woods full of armed men ready to fire at any moving thing in human shape, he could not let her go! That conclusion reached, and all anchors cut, the danger and need of the hour claimed him.

"Yes; you are mine!" he whispered, gathering her to him. "What does anything matter but our safety to-night? To-morrow; well, to-morrow—"

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“Sh!”

No ear but one trained to the secrets of the still places could have detected a sound.

“They are coming! Yes, not the many—it is Jed! Come! While you slept I carried a right many things to the rhododendron slick back of the house! See, push over the chair—leave the door open like you’d gone away before the storm.”

Quickly and silently Nella-Rose suited action to word. Truedale watched her like one bewitched. “Now!” She took him by the hand and the next minute they were out on the wet, sodden leaves; the next they were crouching close under the bushes where even the heavy rain had not penetrated. Half-consciously Truedale recognized some of his property near by—his clothing, two or three books, and—yes—it was his manuscript! The white roll was safe! How she must have worked while he slept.

Once only did she speak until danger was past. Nestling close in his arms, her head upon his shoulder, she breathed:

“If they-all shoot, we’ll die together!”

The unreality of the thing gradually wore upon Truedale’s tense nerves. If anything was going to happen he wanted it to happen! In another half-hour he meant to put an end to the farce and move his belongings back to the cabin and take Nella-Rose home. It was a nightmare—nothing less!

“Sh!” and then the waiting was over. Two dark figures, guns ready, stole from the woods behind White’s cabin. Where were the dogs? Why did they not speak out?—but the dogs were trained to be as silent as the men. They were all part and parcel of the secret lawlessness of the hills. In the dim light Truedale watched the shadowy forms enter Jim’s unlocked cabin and presently issue forth, evidently convinced that the prey was not there—had not been there! Then as stealthy as Indians they made their way to the other cabin—Truedale’s late shelter. They kept to the bushes and the edge of the woods—they were like creeping animals until they reached the shack; then, standing erect and close, they went in the doorway. So near was the hiding place of Truedale and his companion that they could hear the oaths of the hunters as they became aware that their quarry had escaped.

“He’s been here, all right!” It was Jed Martin who spoke.

“I reckon he’s caught on,” Peter Greyson drawled, “he’s makin’ for Jim White. White ain’t more’n fifteen miles back; we can cut him off, Jed, ’fore he reaches safety—the skunk!”

Then the two emerged from the cabin and strode boldly away.

“The others!” whispered Truedale—“will they come?”

“Wait!”

There was a stir—a trampling—but apparently the newcomers did not see Martin and Greyson. There was a crackling of underbrush by feet no longer feeling need of caution, then another space of silence before safety was made sure for the two in the bushes.

At last Truedale dared to speak.

“Nella-Rose!” He looked down at the face upon his breast. She was asleep—deeply, exhaustedly asleep!

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Truedale shifted his position. He was cramped and aching; still the even breathing did not break. He laid her down gently and put a heavy coat about her—one that earlier she had carried from the cabin in her effort to save him. He went to the house and grimly set to work. First he lighted a fire; then he righted the chairs and brought about some order from the chaos. He was no longer afraid of any man on God's earth; even Jim White was relegated to the non-essentials. Truedale was merely a primitive creature caring for his own! There was no turning back now—no waiting upon conventions. When he had made ready he was going out to bring his own to her home!

The sullen, soggy night, with its bursts of fury and periods of calm, had settled down, apparently, to a drenching, businesslike rain. The natives knew how to estimate such weather. By daylight the streams would be raging rivers on whose currents trees and animals would be carried ruthlessly to the lowlands. Roads would be obliterated and human beings would seek shelter wherever they could find it.

But Truedale was spared the worry this knowledge might have brought him. He concentrated now upon the present and grimly accepted conditions as they were. All power or inclination for struggle was past; the inheritance of weakness which old William Truedale had feared and with which Conning himself had so contended in his barren youth, asserted itself and prepared to take unquestioningly what the present offered.

At that moment Truedale believed himself arbiter of his own fate and Nella-Rose's. Conditions had forced him to this position and he was ready to assume responsibility. There was no alternative; he must accept things as they were and make them secure later on. For himself the details of convention did not matter. He had always despised them. In his youthful spiritual anarchy he had flouted them openly; they made no claim upon his attention now, except where Nella-Rose was concerned. Appearances were against him and her, but none but fools would allow that to daunt them. He, Truedale, felt that no law of man was needed to hold him to the course he had chosen, back on the day when he determined to forsake the past and fling his fortunes in with the new. Never in his life was Conning Truedale more sincere or, he believed, more wise, than he was at that moment. And just then Nella-Rose appeared coming down the rain-drenched path like a little ghost in the grim, gray dawn. She still wore the heavy coat he had put about her, and her eyes were dreamy and vague.

Truedale strode toward her and took her in his arms.

"My darling," he whispered, "are you able to come with me now—at once—to the minister? It must be now, sweetheart—now!"

She looked at him like a child trying to understand his mood.

“Oh!” she said presently, “I ’most forgot. The minister has gone to a burying back in the hills; he’ll be gone a right long time. Bill Trim, who carries all the news, told me to-day.”

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"Where is he, Nella-Rose?" Something seemed tightening around Truedale's heart.

"Us-all don't know; he left it written on his door."

"Where is there another minister, Nella-Rose?"

"There is no other."

"This is absurd—of course there is another. We must start at once and find him."

"Listen!" The face upon Truedale's breast was lifted. "You hear that?"

"Yes. What is it?" Truedale was alarmed.

"It means that the little streams are rivers; it means that the trails are full of rocks and trees; it means"—the words sank to an awed whisper—"it means that we must *fight* for what we-all want to keep."

"Good God! Nella-Rose, but where can I take you?"

"There is no place—but here."

It seemed an hour that the silence lasted while Truedale faced this new phase and came to his desperate conclusion.

Had any one suggested to him then that his decision was the decision of weakness, or immemorial evil, he would have resented the thought with bitterest scorn. Unknowingly he was being tempted by the devil in him, and he fell; he had only himself to look to for salvation from his mistaken impulses, and his best self, unprepared, was drugged by the overpowering appeal that Nella-Rose made to his senses.

Standing with the girl in his arms; listening to the oncoming danger which, he realized at last, might destroy him and her at any moment; bereft of every one—everything that could have held them to the old ideals; Truedale saw but one course—and took it.

"There is no place but here—no one but you and me!"

The soft tones penetrated to the troubled place where Truedale seemed to stand alone making his last, losing fight.

"Then, by heaven!" he said, "let us accept it—you and I!"

He had crossed his Rubicon.

They ate, almost solemnly; they listened to that awful roar growing more and more distinct and menacing. Nella-Rose was still and watchful, but Truedale had never been

more cruelly alive than he was then when, with his wider knowledge, he realized the step he had taken. Whether it were for life or death, he had blotted out effectually all that had gone to the making of the man he once was. Whatever hope he might have had of making Lynda Kendall and Brace understand, had things gone as he once had planned, there was no hope now. No—he and Nella-Rose were alone and helpless in the danger-haunted hills. He and she!

The sun made an effort to come forth later but the rush and roar of the oncoming torrent seemed to daunt it. For an hour it struggled, then gave up. But during that hour Truedale led Nella-Rose from the house. Silently they made their way to a little hilltop from which they could see an open space of dull, leaden sky. There Truedale took the girl's hands in his and lifted his eyes while his benumbed soul sought whatever God there might be.

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"In Thy sight," he said slowly, deeply, "I take this woman for my wife. Bless us; keep us; and"—after a pause—"deal Thou with me as I deal with her."

Then the earnest eyes dropped to the frightened ones searching his face.

"You are mine!" Truedale spoke commandingly, with a force that never before had marked him.

"Yes." The word was a faint, frightened whisper.

"My darling, kiss me!"

She kissed him with trembling lips.

"You love me?"

"I—I love you."

"You—you trust me?"

"I—oh! yes; yes."

"Then come, my doney-gal! For life or death, it is you and I, little woman, from now on!"

Like a flash his gloom departed. He was gay, desperate, and free of all hampering doubts. In such a mood Nella-Rose lost all fear of him and walked by his side as complacently as if the one minister in her sordid little world had with all his strange authority said his sacred "Amen" over her.

CHAPTER VIII

There were five days of terrific storm. Truedale and Nella-Rose had fought to save White's live stock—even his cabin itself; for the deluge had attacked that while leaving safe the smaller cabin near by. All one morning they had worked gathering debris and placing it so that it turned the course of a rapid stream that threatened the larger house. It had been almost a lost hope, but as the day wore on the torrent lessened, the rough barrier held—they were successful! The gate and snake-fence were carried away, but the rest was saved!

In the strenuous labour, in the dangerous isolation, the ordinary things of life lost their importance. With death facing them their love and companionship were all that were left to them and neither counted the cost. But on the sixth day the sun shone, the flood was past, and with safety and the sure coming of Jim White at hand, they sat confronting each other in a silence new and potent.

“Sweetheart, you must go—for a few hours!”

Truedale bent across the table that separated them and took her clasped hands in his. He had burned all his social bridges, but poor Nella-Rose’s progress through life had not been made over anything so substantial as bridges. She had proceeded by scrambling down and up primitive obstacles; she felt that at last she had come to her Land of Promise.

“You are going to send me—away? Where?”

“Only until White returns, little girl. See here, dear, you and I are quite gloriously mad, but others are stupidly sane and we’ve got to think of them.”

Truedale was talking over her head, but already Nella-Rose accepted this as a phase of their new relations. A mountain man might still love his woman even if he beat her and, while Nella-Rose would have scorned the suggestion that she was a mountain woman, she did seriously believe that men were different from women and that was the end of the matter!

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"You run along, small girl of mine—the skies are clear, the sun warm—but I want you to meet me at three o'clock at the spot where the trail joins the road. I will be there and I will wait for you."

"But why?—why?" The blue-gray eyes were troubled.

"Sweetheart, we're going to find that minister of yours if we have to travel from one end of the hills to the other!"

"But we-all are married!" This with a little gasp. "Back on the hill, when you told God and said He understood; then we-all were married."

"And so we were, my sweet, no minister could make you more mine than you already are, but the others—your people. Should they try to separate us they might cause trouble and the minister can make it impossible for any one to take you away from my love and care."

And at that moment Truedale actually believed what he said. In his heart he had always been a rebel—defiant and impotent. He had, in this instance, proved his theories; but he did not intend to leave loose ends that might endanger the safety of others—of this young girl, most of all. He was only going to carry out his original plans for her safety—not his own. After the days just past—days of anxiety, relief, and the proving of his love and hers—no doubt remained in Truedale's heart; he was of the hills, now and forever!

"No one can—*now*!" This came passionately from Nella-Rose as she watched him.

"They might make trouble until they found that out. They're too free with their guns. There's a lot to explain, little doney-gal." Conning smiled down her doubts.

"Until three o'clock!" Nella-Rose pouted, "that's a right long time. But I'll—just run along. Always and always I'm going to do what you say!" Already his power over her was absolute. She put her arms out with a happy, wilful gesture and Truedale held her closer.

"Only until three, sweetheart."

Nella-Rose drew herself away and turned to pick up her little shawl and hat from the couch by the fire; she was just reaching for her basket, when a shadow fell across the floor. Truedale and the girl turned and confronted—Jim White! What he had seen and heard—who could tell from his expressionless face and steady voice? The door had been on the latch and he had come in!

"Mail, and truck, and rabbits!" he explained, tossing his load upon the table. Then he turned toward Truedale as if noticing him for the first time.

“How-de?” he said. Finally his gaze shifted to Nella-Rose and seemed to burn into her soul.

“Goin’, p’r’aps, or—comin’?” he questioned.

“I—I am—going!” Fright and dismay marked the girl’s voice. Truedale went toward her. The covert brutality in White’s words shocked and angered him. He gave no thought to the cause, but he resented the insult.

“Wait!” he commanded, for Nella-Rose was gone through the open door. “Wait!”

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Seeing that she had for the moment escaped him, Truedale turned to White and confronted him with clear, angry eyes.

“What have you got to say for yourself?” he demanded fiercely.

The shock had been tremendous for Jim. Three weeks previously he had left his charge safe and alone; he had come back and found—But shock always stiffened Jim White; that was one reason for his success in life. He was never so inflexible and deadly self-possessed as he was when he could not see the next step ahead.

“Gawd, but I’m tired!” he said, when he had stared at Truedale as long as he cared to, “I’m going over to my place to turn in. Seems like I’ll sleep for a month once I get started.”

“You don’t go, White, until you explain what you meant by—”

But Truedale mistook his man. Jim, having drawn his own conclusion, laughed and strode toward the door.

“I go when I’m damned pleased ter go!” he flung out derisively, “and I come the same way, young feller. There’s mail for yo’ in the sack and—a telegram.” White paused by the door a moment while Truedale picked the yellow envelope from the bag and tore it open.

“Your uncle died suddenly on the 16th. Come at once. Vitally important. McPHERSON.”

For a moment both men forgot the thing that had driven them wide apart.

“Bad news?” asked the sheriff.

Something was happening to Truedale—he felt as if the effect of some narcotic were losing its power; the fevered unreality was giving place to sensation but the brain was recording it dully.

“What date is this?” he asked, dazed.

“Twenty-fifth,” Jim replied as he moved out of the door.

“When can I get a train from the station?”

“There’s one as leaves anywhere ’twixt nine and ten ter-night.”

"That gives me time to pack. See here, White, while it isn't any of your business, I want to explain a thing or two—before I go. I'll be back as soon as I can—in a week or ten days at furthest. When I return I intend to stay on, probably for the rest of my life."

White still held Truedale by the cold, steely gleam of his eyes which was driving lucidity home to the dulled brain. By a power as unyielding as death Jim was destroying the screen Truedale had managed to raise against the homely codes of life and was leaving his guest naked and exposed.

The shock of the telegram—the pause it evolved—had given Truedale time to catch the meaning of White's attitude; now that he realized it, he knew he must lay certain facts open—he could not wait until his return.

Presently Jim spoke from outside the door.

"I ain't settin' up for no critic. I ain't by nater a weigher or trimmer and I don't care a durn for what ain't my business. When I see my business I settle it in my own way!"—there was almost a warning in this. "I'm dead tired, root and branch. I'm goin' ter take a bite an' turn in. I may sleep a couple o' days; put off yo' 'splainifyin' 'til yo' come back ter end yo' days. Take the mare an' leave her by the trail; she'll come home. Tell old Doc McPherson I was askin' arter him."

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By that time Jim had ceased scorching his way to Truedale's soul and was on the path to his own cabin.

"Looks like yo' had a tussle with the storm," he remarked. "Any livin' thing killed?"

"No."

"Thank yo'!" Then, as if determined not to share any further confidence, White strode on.

For a moment Truedale stood and stared after his host in impotent rage. Was Jim White such a lily of purity that he presumed to take that attitude? Was the code of the hills that of the Romany gypsies? How dare any man judge and sentence another without trial?

The effect of the narcotic still worked sluggishly, now that White's irritating presence was removed. Truedale shrugged his shoulders and turned to his packing. He was feverishly eager to get to Nella-Rose. Before nightfall she would be his before the world; in two weeks he would be back; the future would shame White and bring him to his senses. Jim had a soft heart; he was just, in his brutal fashion. When he understood how matters were, he would feel like the fool he was—a fool willing to cast a man off, unheard! But Truedale blamed himself for the hesitation that meant so much. The telegram—his fear of making a wrong step—had caused the grave mistake that could not be righted now.

At two o'clock Truedale started—on Jim's mare! White's cabin had all the appearance of being barred against intrusion. Truedale did not mean to test this, but it hurt him like a blow. However, there was nothing to do but remedy, as soon as possible, the error he had permitted to arise. No man on earth could make Nella-Rose more his than his love and good faith had made her, still he was eager now to resort to all the time-honoured safeguards before he left. Once married he would go with a heart almost light. He would confide everything to Kendall and Lynda—at least he would his marriage—and urge them to return with him to the hills, and after that White and all the others would have an awakening. The possibility thus conceived was like a flood of light and sweet air in a place dark and bewildering but not evil—no, not that!

As he turned from the clearing Truedale looked back at his cabin. Nella-Rose seemed still there. She would always be part of it just as she was now part of his life. He would try and buy the cabin—it would be sacrilege for others to enter!

So he hurried the mare on, hoping to be at the crossing before Nella-Rose.

The crisp autumn air was redolent of pines and the significance of summer long past. It had a physical and spiritual power.

Then turning suddenly from the trail, Truedale saw Nella-Rose sitting on a rock—waiting! She had on a rough, mannish-looking coat, and a coarse, red hood covered her bright head. Nella-Rose was garbed in winter attire. She had worn this outfit for five years and it looked it.

Never again was Truedale to see a face of such radiant joy and trust as the girl turned upon him. Her eyes were wide and filled with a light that startled him. He jumped from the horse and took her in his arms.

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"What is it?" he asked, fearing some intangible danger.

"The minister was killed by the flood!" Nella-Rose's tones were thrilling. "He was going through Devil-may-come Hollow and a mighty big rock struck him and—he's dead!"

"Then you must come with me, Nella-Rose." Truedale set his lips grimly; there was no time to lose. Between three and nine o'clock surely they could locate a minister or a justice of the peace. "Come!"

"But why, Mister Man?" She laughed up at him. "Where?"

"It doesn't matter. To New York if necessary. Jump up!" He turned to the horse, holding the girl close.

"Me go away—in this? Me shame you before—they-all?"

Nella-Rose stood her ground and throwing the rough coat back displayed her shabby, shrunken dress.

"I went home—they-all were away. I got my warm things, but I have a white dress and a pink ribbon—I'll get them to-morrow. Then—But why must we go—away?"

For the first time this thought caught her—she had been whirled along too rapidly before to note it.

"I have had word that my uncle is dead. I must go at once, my dear, and you—you must come with me. Would you let a little thing like a—a dress weigh against our love, and honour?"

Above the native's horror of being dragged from her moorings was that subtle understanding of honour that had come to Nella-Rose by devious ways from a source that held it sacred.

"Honour?" she repeated softly; "honour? If I thought I had to go in rags to make you sure; if I thought I needed to—I'd—"

Truedale saw his mistake. Realizing that if in the little time yet his he made her comprehend, he might lose more than he could hope to gain, he let her free while he took a card and pen from his pocket. He wrote clearly and exactly his address, giving his uncle's home as his.

"Nella-Rose," he said calmly, "I shall be back in two or three weeks at the latest, but if at any moment you want me, send word here—telegraph from the station—you come first, always! You are wiser than I, my sweet; our honour and love are our own. Wait for me, my doney-gal and—trust me."

She was all joy again—all sweetness. He kissed her, turned, then came back.

“Where will you go, my darling?” he asked.

“Since they-all do not know”—she was lying against his breast, her eyes heavy now with grief at the parting—“I reckon I will go home—to wait.”

Solemnly Truedale kissed her and turned dejectedly away. Once again he paused and looked back. She stood against the tree, small and shabby, but the late afternoon sun transfigured her. In the gloomy setting of the woods, that fair, little face shone like a gleaming star and so Truedale remembered her and took her image with him on his lonely way.

Nella-Rose watched him out of sight and then she turned and did something that well might make one wonder if a wise God or a cruel demon controls our fates—she ran away from the home path and took the trail leading far back to the cabin of old Lois Ann!

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There was safety; there were compassion and comprehension. The old woman could tell marvellous tales and so could beguile the waiting days. Nella-Rose meant to confide in her and ask her to hide her until Truedale came for her. It was a sudden inspiration and it brought relief.

And that night—it was past midnight and cold as the north land—Burke Lawson came face to face with Jed Martin! Lawson was issuing from his cranny behind the old still and Martin was nosing about alone. He, like a hungry thing of the wilds, had found his foe's trail and meant to bag him unaided and have full vengeance and glory. But so unexpectedly, and alarmingly unconcerned, did Burke materialize in the emptiness that Jed's gun was a minute too late in getting into position. Lawson had the drop on him! They were both very quiet for a moment, then Lawson laughed and did it so boldly that Jed shrank back.

"Coming to make a friendly call, Martin?"

"Something like that!"

"Well, come in, come right in!"

"I reckon you an' me can settle what we've got ter settle in the open!" Jed stuttered. It seemed a hideous, one-sided settlement.

"As yo' please, Jed, as yo' please. I have a leanin' to the open myself. I'd just decided ter come out; I was going up ter Jim White's and help him mete out justice, but maybe you and me can save him the trouble."

"You—goin' ter shoot me, Burke—like a—like a—hedgehog?"

"No. I'm goin' ter do unto yo' as yo' would have—" Here Burke laughed—he was enjoying himself hugely.

"What yo' mean?"

"Well, I'm goin' ter put yer in my quarters and tie yer to a chair. Yo'll be able to wiggle out in time, but it will take yer long enough fur me to do what I'm set about doin'. Yo' torn down traitor!—yo' were 'lowing to put me behind bars, wasn't yer? Yo' meant to let outsiders take the life out o' me—yo' skunk! Well, instead, Jed—I'm goin' on my weddin' trip—me and lil' Nella-Rose. I've seen her; she done promised to have me, when I come out o' hidin'. I'm coming out now! Nella-Rose an' me are goin' to find a bigger place than Pine Cone Settlement. Yo'll wiggle yer blasted hide loose by mornin' maybe; but then her an' me'll be where you-all can't ketch us! Go in there, now, you green lizard; turn about an' get on yer belly like the crawlin' thing yo' are! That's it—go! the way opens up."

Jed was crawling through the bushes, Lawson after him with levelled gun. "Now, then, take a seat an' make yerself ter home!" Jed got to the chair and turned a green-white face upon his tormentor.

"Yer goin' ter let me starve here?" he asked with shaking voice.

"That depends on yo' power to wiggle. See, I tie you so!" Lawson had pounced upon Jed and had him pinioned. "I ain't goin' ter turn a key on yer like yo' was aimin' ter do on me! It's up to yo' an' yer wigglin' powers, when yo' get free. The emptier yer belly is, the more room ye'll have fer wiggling. God bless yer! yer dog-gone hound! Bless yer an'—curse yer! I'm off—with the doney-gal!"

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And off he was—he and his cruel but gay laugh.

There was no fire in the cave-like place; no light but the indirect moonlight which slanted through the opening. It was death or wiggle for Jed Martin—so he wiggled!

In the meantime, Burke headed for Jim White's. He meant to play a high game there—to fling himself on White's mercy—appeal to the liking he knew the sheriff had for him—confess his love for Nella-Rose—make his promise for future redemption and then go, scot-free, to claim the girl who had declared he might speak when once again he dared walk upright among his fellows. So Lawson planned and went bravely to the doing of it.

CHAPTER IX

At Washington, Truedale telegraphed to Brace Kendall. He felt, as he drew nearer and nearer to the old haunts, like a stranger, and a blind, groping one at that. The noises of the city disturbed and confused him; the crowds irritated him. When he remembered the few weeks that lay between the present and the days when he was part and parcel of this so-called life, he experienced a sensation of having died and been compelled to return to earth to finish some business carelessly overlooked. He meant to rectify the omission as soon as possible and get back to the safety and peace of the hills. How different it all would be with settled ideas, definite work, and Nella-Rose!

While waiting for his train in the Washington station he was startled to find that, of a sudden, he was adrift between the Old and the New. If he repudiated the past, the future as sternly repudiated him. He could not reconcile his love and desire with his identity. Somehow the man he had left, when he went South, appeared now to have been waiting for him on his return, and while his plans, nicely arranged, seemed feasible the actual readjustment struck him as lurid and impossible. The fact was that his experience of life in Pine Cone made him now shrink from contact with the outside world as one of its loyal natives might have done. It could no more survive in the garish light of a city day than little Nella-Rose could have. That conclusion reached, Truedale was comforted. He could not lure his recent past to this environment, but so long as it lay safe and ready to welcome him when he should return, he could be content. So he relegated it with a resigned sigh, as he might have done the memory of a dear, absent friend, to the time when he could call it forth to some purpose.

It was well he could do this, for with the coming of Brace Kendall upon the scene all romantic sensation was excluded as though by an icy-clear, north wind. Brace was at the New York station—Brace with the armour of familiarity and unbounded friendliness. "Old Top!" he called Truedale, and shook hands with him so vigorously that the last remnant of thought that clung to the distant mountains was freed from the present.

“Well, of all the miracles! Why, Con, I bet you tip the scales at a hundred and sixty. And look at your paw! Why, it’s callous and actually horny! And the colour you’ve got! Lord, man! you’re made over.

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"You're to come to your uncle's house, Con. It's rather a shock, but we got you as soon as we could. In the meantime, we've followed directions. The will has not been read, of course, but there was a letter found in your uncle's desk that commanded—that's the only word to express it, really—Lynda and you and me to come to the old house right after the funeral. We waited to hear from you, Con, but since you could not get here we had to do the best we could. Dr. McPherson took charge."

"I was buried pretty deep in the woods, Ken, and there was a bad hitch in the delivery of the telegram. Such things do not count down where I was. But I'm glad about the old house—glad you and Lynda are there."

"Con!"—and at this Brace became serious—"I think we rather overdid our estimate of your uncle. Since his—his going, we've seen him, Lyn and I, in a new light. He was quite—well, quite a sentimentalist! But see—here we are!"

"The house looks different already!" Conning said, leaning from the cab window.

"Yes, Lyn's had a lot to do, but she's managed to make a home of the place in the short time."

Lynda Kendall had heard the sound of wheels in the quiet street—had set the door of welcome open herself, and now stood in the panel of light with outstretched hands. Like a revelation Truedale seemed to take in the whole picture at once. Behind the girl lay the warm, bright hall that had always been so empty and drear in his boyhood. It was furnished now. Already it had the look of having been lived in for years. There were flowers in a tall jar on the table and a fire on the broad hearth. And against this background stood the strong, fine form of the young mistress.

"Welcome home, Con!"

Truedale, for a moment, dared not trust his voice. He gripped her hands and felt as if he were emerging from a trance. Then, of a sudden, a deep resentment overpowered him. They could not understand, of course, but every word and tone of appropriation seemed an insult to the reality that he knew existed. He no longer belonged to them, to the life into which they were trying to draw him. To-morrow he would explain; he was eager to do so and end the restraint that sprang into being the moment he touched Lynda's hands.

Lynda watched the tense face confronting her and believed Conning was suffering pangs of remorse and regret. She was filled with pity and sympathy shone in her eyes. She led him to the library and there familiarity greeted him—the room was unchanged. Lynda had respected everything; it was as it always had been except that the long, low chair was empty.

They talked together softly in the quiet place until dinner—talked of indifferent things, realizing that they must keep on the surface.

“This room and his bedchamber, Con,” Lynda explained, “are the same. For the rest? Well, I hope you will like it.”

Truedale did like it. He gave an exclamation of delight when later they entered the dining room, which had never been furnished in the past; like much of the house it had been a sad tribute to the emptiness and disappointment that had overcome William Truedale's life. Now it shone with beauty and cheer.

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"It is not merely a place in which to eat," explained Lynda; "a dining room should be the heart of the home, as the library is the soul."

"Think of living up to that!"—Brace gave a laugh—"and not having it interfere with your appetite!" They were all trying to keep cheerful until such time as they dared recall the recent past without restraint.

Such an hour came when they gathered once more in the library. Brace seized his pipe in the anticipation of play upon his emotions. By tacit consent the low chair was left vacant and by a touch of imagination it almost seemed as if the absent master were waiting to be justified.

"And now," Truedale said, huskily, "tell me all, Lynda."

"He and I were sitting here just as we all are sitting now, that last night. He had forgiven me for—for staying away" (Lynda's voice shook), "and we were very happy and confidential. I told him some things—quite intimate things, and he, well, he came out of his reserve and gruffness, Con—he let me see the real man he was! I suppose while he had been alone—for I had neglected him—he had had time to think, to regret his mistakes; he was very just—even with himself. Con"—and here Lynda had to pause and get control of herself—"he—he once loved my mother! He bought this house hoping she would come and, as its mistress, make it beautiful. When my mother married my father, nothing mattered—nothing about the house, I mean. Before my mother died she told me—to be kind to Uncle William. She, in a sacred way, left him to me; me to him. That was one of the things I told him that last night. I wish I had told him long ago!" The words were passionate and remorseful. "Oh, it might have eased his pain and loneliness. When shall we ever learn to say the right thing when it is most needed? Well, after I had told him he—he grew very still. It was a long time before he spoke—the joy was sinking in, I saw that, and it carried the bitterness away. When he did speak he made me understand that he could not trust himself further on that subject, but he tried to—to explain about you, Con. Poor man! He realized that he had made a failure as a guide; but in his own way he had endeavoured to be a guardian. You know his disease developed just before you came into his life. Con, he lived all through the years just for you—just to stand by!"

From out the shadow where he sat, Brace spoke unevenly:

"Too bad you don't—smoke, old man!" It was the only suggestion he had to offer in the tense silence that gripped them all.

"It's all right!" Truedale said heavily. "Go on when you can, Lynda."

"Do you—remember your father, Con?"

“Yes.”

“Well, your uncle feared that too much ease and money might—”

“I—I begin to understand.”

“So he went to the other extreme. Every step of your well-fought way was joy to him—the only joy he knew. From his detachment and loneliness he planned—almost plotted—for you, but he did not tell you. It would all have been so different—oh! so different if we had all known. Then he told me a little—about his will.”

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No one saw the sudden crimson that dyed Lynda's white face and throat. "He was very fantastic about that. He made certain arrangements that were to take effect at once. He has left you three thousand a year, Con, without any restrictions whatever. He told me that. He left his servants and employees generous annuities. He left me this house—for my mother's sake. He insisted that it should be a home at last. A large sum is provided for its furnishing and upkeep—I'm a trustee! The most beautiful thing, perhaps, was the thought expressed in these words of his, 'I want you to do your mother's work and mine, while still following your own rightful desires. Make this house a place of welcome, peace, and friendliness!' I mean to do my best, Con."

"And he's left me"—Brace found relief in the one touch of humour that presented itself—"he's left me a thousand dollars as a token of his appreciation of my loyalty to you, when you most needed it."

But Truedale hardly heeded. His eyes were fixed upon the empty chair and, since he had not understood in the past, he could not express himself now. He was suffering the torture that all feel when, too late, revelation makes clear what never should have been hidden.

"And then"—Lynda's low, even voice went on—"he sent me away and Thomas put him to bed. He asked for some medicine that it seems he always had in case of need; he took too much—and—"

"So it was suicide!" Truedale broke in desperately. "I feared that. Good God!" The tragedy and loneliness clutched his imagination—he seemed to see it all, it was unbearable!

"Con!" Lynda laid her firm hand upon his arm, "I have learned to call it something else. It has helped me; perhaps it will help you. He had waited wearily on this side of the door of release; he—he told me that he was going on a long journey he had often contemplated—I did not understand then! I fancy the—the journey was very short. There was no suffering. I wish you could have seen the peace and majesty of his face! He could wait no longer. Nothing mattered here, and all that he yearned for called loudly to him. He simply opened the door himself—and went out!"

Truedale clasped the hand upon his arm. "Thank you, Lynda. I did not realize how kind you could be," was all he said.

The logs fell apart and filled the room with a rich glow. Brace shook the ashes from his pipe upon the hearth—he felt now that he could trust himself.

"For the future," Lynda's calm voice almost startled the two men by its practicability and purpose, "this is home—in the truest, biggest sense. No one shall even enter here and feel—friendless. This is my trust; it shall be as *he* wished it, and I mean to have my own

life, too! Why, the house is big enough for us all to live our lives and not interfere with each other. I mean to bring my private business here in the rooms over the extension. I'll keep the uptown office for interviews. And you, Con?"

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Truedale almost sprang to his feet, then, hands plunged in pockets, he said:

"There does not seem to be anything for me to do; at least not until the will is read. I think I shall go back—I left things at loose ends; there will be time to consider—later."

"But, Con, there is something for you to do. You will understand after you see the lawyers in the morning. There is a great deal of business: many interests of your uncle's that he expected you to represent in his name—to see that they were made secure. Dr. McPherson has told me something about the will—enough to help me to begin."

Truedale looked blankly at Lynda. "Very well, after that—I will go back," he spoke almost harshly. "I will arrange affairs somehow. I'm no business man, but I daresay Uncle William chose wise assistants."

"What's the matter with you, Con?" Brace eyed his friend critically; "you look fit as a fellow can. This has demanded a good deal of self-denial and faith from us all, but somehow this duty was the biggest thing in sight; we rather owe him that, I fancy. You know you cannot run to cover just now, old man. This has been a jog, but by morning you'll reconsider and play your part." There was a new note in Kendall's voice. It was a call to something he hoped was in his friend, but which he had never tested. There was a sudden fear, too, of the change that had come to Truedale. It was not all physical. There was a baffling suggestion of unreality about him that made him almost a stranger.

"I dare say you are right, Ken." Truedale walked the length of the room and back. "I own to being cut up over this. I never did my part—I see that now—and of course I'll endeavour to do what I should. My body's all right but my nerves still jangle at a shock. To-morrow the whole thing will settle into shape. You and Lynda have been—well—I cannot express what I feel." He paused. The hour was late, and for the first time he seemed to realize that the old home was not his in the sense it once had been. Lynda understood the moment's hesitation and smiled slightly.

"Con, there's one other thing in the house that remains as it was. Under the eaves the small room that was yours is yours still. I saw to it myself that not a book or picture was displaced. There are other rooms at your disposal—to share with us—but that room is yours, always."

Truedale stood before Lynda and put out his hands in quite the old way. His eyes were dim and he said hoarsely: "That's about the greatest thing you've done yet, Lyn. Thank you. Good-night."

At the door he hesitated—he felt he must speak, but to bring his own affairs into the tense and new conditions surrounding him seemed impossible. To-morrow he would

explain everything. It was this slowness in reaching a decision that most defeated Truedale's best interest. While he deplored it—he seemed incapable of overcoming it.

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Alone in the little room, later, he let himself go. Burying his tired head upon his folded arms he gave himself up to waves of recollection that threatened to engulf him. Everything was as it always had been—a glance proved that. When he had parted from his uncle he had taken only such articles as pertained to his maturer years. The pictures on the walls—the few shabby books that had drifted into his lonely and misunderstood childhood—remained. There was the locked box containing, Conning knew full well, the pitiful but sacred attempts at self-expression. The key was gone, but he recollected every scrap of paper which lay hidden in the old, dented tin box. Presently he went to the dormer window and opened it wide. Leaning out he tried to find his way back to Pine Cone—to the future that was to be free of all these cramping memories and hurting restrictions—but the trail was too cluttered; he was lost utterly!

“It is because they do not know,” he thought. “After to-morrow it will be all right.”

Then he reflected that the three thousand dollars Lynda had mentioned would clear every obstacle from his path and Nella-Rose’s. He no longer need struggle—he could give his time and care to her and his work. He did not consider the rest of his uncle’s estate, it did not matter. Lynda was provided for and so was he. And then, for the first time in many days, Truedale speculated upon bringing Nella-Rose away from her hills. He found himself rather insisting upon it, until he brought himself to terms by remembering her as he had seen her last—clinging to her own, vehemently, passionately.

“No, I’ve made my choice,” he finally exclaimed; “the coming back unsettled me for the moment but her people shall be my people.”

Below stairs Lynda was humming softly an old tune—“The Song of To-morrow,” it was called. It caught and held Truedale’s imagination. He tried to recall the lines, but only the theme was clear. It was the everlasting Song of To-morrow, always the one tune set to changing ideals.

It was the same idea as the philosophy about each man’s “interpretation” of the story already written, which Conning had reflected upon so often.

At this time Truedale believed he firmly accepted the principle of foreordination, or whatever one chose to call it. One followed the path upon which one’s feet had been set. One might linger and wander, within certain limits, but always each must return to his destined trail!

A distant church clock struck one; the house was still at last—deathly still. Two sounded, but Truedale thought on.

He finally succeeded in eliminating the entangling circumstances that seemed to lie like a twisted skein in the years stretching between his going forth from his uncle’s house to

this night of return. He tried to understand himself, to estimate the man he was. In no egotistical sense did he do this, but sternly, deliberately, because he felt that the future demanded it. He must account to others, but first he must account to himself.

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He recalled his boyhood days when his uncle's distrust and apparent dislike of him had driven him upon himself, almost taking self-respect with it. He re-lived the barren years when, longing for love and companionship, he found solace in a cold pride that carried him along through school and into college, with a reputation for hard, unyielding work, and unsocial habits.

How desperately lonely he had been—how cruelly underestimated—but he had made no outcry. He had lived his years uncomplainingly—not even voicing his successes and achievements. Through long practise in self-restraint, his strength lay in deliberate calculation—not indifferent action. He hid, from all but the Kendalls, his private ambitions and hopes. He studied in order that he might shake himself free from his uncle's hold upon him. He meant to pay every cent he had borrowed—to secure, by some position that would supply the bare necessities of life, time and opportunity for developing the talent he secretly believed was his. He was prepared, once loose from obligation to old William Truedale, to starve and prove his faith. And then—his breakdown had come!

Cast adrift by loss of health, among surroundings that appealed to all that was most dangerous in his nature—believing that his former ambitions were defeated—old longings for love, understanding and self-revelment arose and conquered the weak creature he was. But they had appealed to the best in him—not the evillest—thank God! And now? Truedale raised his head and looked about in the dim room, as if to find the boy he once had been and reassure him.

“There is no longer any excuse for hesitation and the damnable weakness of considering the next step,” thought Truedale. “I have chosen my own course—chosen the simple and best things life has to offer. No man in God's world has a right to question my deeds. If they cannot understand, more's the pity.”

And in that hour and conclusion, the indifference and false pride that had upheld Truedale in the past fell from him as he faced the demands of the morrow. He was never again to succumb to the lack of confidence his desolate youth had developed; physically and spiritually he roused to action now that exactions were made upon him.

CHAPTER X

The following day Truedale heard the will read. Directly after, he felt like a man in a quicksand. Every thought and motion seemed but to sink him deeper until escape appeared impossible.

He had felt, for a moment, a little surprise that the bulk of his uncle's great fortune had gone to Dr. McPherson—an already rich and prosperous man; then he began to understand. Although McPherson was left free to act as he chose, there had evidently

been an agreement between him and William Truedale as to the carrying out of certain affairs and, what was more startling and embarrassing, Conning was hopelessly involved in these. Under supervision, apparently, he was to be recognized as his uncle's representative and, while not his direct heir, certainly his respected nephew.

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Truedale was confounded. Unless he were to disregard his uncle's wishes, there was no way open for him but to follow—as he was led. Far from being dissatisfied with the distribution of the fortune, he had been relieved to know that he was responsible for only a small part of it; but, on the other hand, should he refuse to cooperate in the schemes outlined by McPherson, he knew that he would be miserably misunderstood.

Confused and ill at ease he sought McPherson later in the day and that genial and warm-hearted man, shrinking always behind so stern an exterior that few comprehended him, greeted him almost affectionately.

"I ordered six months for you, Truedale," he exclaimed, viewing the result of his prescription keenly, "and you've made good in a few weeks. You're a great advertisement for Pine Cone. And White! Isn't he God's own man?"

"I hadn't thought of him in just that way"—Conning reverted to his last memory of the sheriff—"but he probably showed another side to you. He has a positive reverence for you and I imagine he accepted me as a duty you had laid upon him."

"Nonsense, boy! his health reports were eulogies—he was your friend.

"But isn't he a freebooter with all his other charms? His contempt for government, as we poor wretches know it, is sublime; and yet he is the safest man I know. The law, he often told me, was like a lie; useful only to scoundrels—torn-down scoundrels, he called them.

"I tell you it takes a God's man to run justice in those hills! White's as simple and direct as a child and as wise as a judge ought to be. I wouldn't send some folk I know to White, they might blur his vision; but I could trust him to you."

Silently Truedale contemplated this image of White; then, as McPherson talked on, the dead uncle materialized so differently from the stupid estimate he had formed of him that a sense of shame overpowered him. Lynda had somewhat opened Truedale's eyes, but Lynda's love and compassion unconsciously coloured the picture she drew. Here was a hard-headed business man, a man who had been close to William Truedale all his life, proving him now, to his own nephew, as a far-sighted, wise, even patient and merciful friend.

Never had Truedale felt so small and humble. Never had his past indifference and false pride seemed so despicable and egotistical—his return for the silent confidence reposed in him, so pitifully shameful.

He must bear his part now! There was no way but that! If he were ever to regain his own self-respect or hope to hold that of others, he must, to the exclusion of private inclination, rise as far as in him lay to the demands made upon him.

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"Your uncle," McPherson was saying, "tied hand and foot as he was, looked far and wide during his years of illness. I thought I knew, thought I understood him; but since his death I have almost felt that he was inspired. It's a damnable pity that our stupidity and callousness prevent us realizing in life what we are quick enough to perceive in death—when it is too late! Truedale's faith in me, when I gave him so little to go by, is both flattering and touching. He knew he could trust me—and that knowledge is the best thing he bequeathed to me. But I expect you to do your part, boy, and by so doing to justify much that might, otherwise, be questioned. To begin with, as you have just heard, the sanatorium for cases like your uncle's is to be begun at once. Now there is a strip of land, which, should it suit our purpose, can be had at great advantage if taken at once, and for cash. We will run down to see it this week and then we'll know better where we stand."

"I'd like," Truedale coloured quickly, "to return to Pine Cone for a few days. I could start at once. You see I left rather suddenly and brought—"

But McPherson laughed and waved his hand in the wide gesture that disposed of hope and fear, lesser business and even death itself, at times.

"Oh! Jim won't tamper with anything. Certainly your traps are safe enough there. Such things can wait, but this land-deal cannot. Besides there are men to see: architects, builders, etc. The wishes of your uncle were most explicit. The building, you recall, was to be begun within three months of his death. Having all the time there was, himself, he has left precious little for others."

Again the big laugh and wide gesture disposed of Pine Cone and the tragic affairs of little Nella-Rose. Unless he was ready to lay bare his private reasons, Truedale saw he must wait a few days longer. And he certainly had no intention of confiding in McPherson.

"Very well, doctor," he said after a slight pause, "set me to work. I want you to know that as far as I can I mean—too late, as you say—to prove my good intentions at least to—my uncle."

"That's the way to talk!" McPherson rose and slapped Conning on the back. "I used to say to old Truedale, that if he had taken you more into his confidence, he might have eased life for us all; but he was timid, boy, timid. In many ways he was like a woman—a woman hurt and sensitive."

"If I had only known—only imagined"; Conning was walking toward the door; "well, at least I'm on the job now, Dr. McPherson."

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And then for an hour or two Truedale walked the city streets perplexed and distraught. He was being absorbed without his own volition. By a subtle force he was convinced that he was part of a scheme bigger and stronger than his own desires and inclinations. Unless he was prepared to play a coward's role he must adjust his thoughts and ideas to coincide with the rules and regulations of the game of life and men. With this knowledge other and more blighting convictions held part. In his defiance and egotism he had muddled things in a desperate way. In the cold, clear light of conventional relations the past few weeks, shorn of the glamour cast by his romantic love and supposed contempt for social restrictions, stood forth startlingly significant. At the moment Truedale could not conceive how he had ever been capable of playing the fool as he had! Not for one instant did this realization affect his love and loyalty to Nella-Rose; but that he should have been swept from his moorings by passion, reduced him to a state of contempt for the folly he had perpetrated. And, he thought, if he now, after a few days, could so contemplate his acts how could he suppose that others would view them with tolerance and sympathy?

No; he must accept the inevitable results of his action. His love, his earnest intention of some day living his own life in his own way, were to cost him more than he, blinded by selfishness and passion in the hills, had supposed.

Well, he was ready to pay to the uttermost though it cost him the deepest heart-ache. As he was prepared to undertake the burden his uncle's belief in him entailed, so he was prepared, now that he saw things clearly, to forego the dearest and closest ties of his old life.

He wondered how he could ever have dreamed that he could go to Lynda and Brace with his amazing confession and expect them, in the first moment of shock, to open their hearts and understand him. He almost laughed, now, as he pictured the absurdity. And just then he drew himself up sharply and came to his conclusion.

He could not lay himself bare to any one as a sentimental ass; he must arrange things as soon as possible to return South; he would, just before starting, tell Lynda and Brace of his attachment for Nella-Rose. They would certainly understand why, in the stress and strain of recent events, he had not intruded his startling news before. He would neither ask nor expect sympathy or cooperation. He must assume that they could not comprehend him. This was going to be the hardest wrench of his life, Truedale recognized that, but it was the penalty he felt he must pay.

Then he would go—for his wife! He would secure her privately, by all the necessary conventions he had spurned so madly—he would bring her to his people and leave to her sweetness and tender charm the winning of that which he, in his blindness, had all but lost.

So, in this mood, he returned to his uncle's house and wrote a long letter to Nella-Rose. He phrased it simply, as to a little child. He reminded her of the old story she had once told him of her belief that some day she was to do a mighty big thing.

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"And now you have your chance!" he pleaded. "I cannot live in your hills, dear, though often you and I will return to them and be happy in the little log house. But you must come with me—your husband. Come down the Big Road, letting me lead you, and you must trust me and oh! my doney-gal, by your blessed sweetness and power you must win for me—for us both—what I, alone, can never win."

There was more, much more, of love and longing, of tender loyalty and passionate reassurance, and having concluded his letter he sealed it, addressed it, and putting it in an envelope with a short note of explanation to Jim White as to its delivery, *etc.*, he mailed it with such a sense of relief as he had not known in many a weary day.

He prepared himself for a period of patient waiting. He knew with what carelessness mail matter was regarded in the hills, and winter had already laid its hold upon Pine Cone, he felt sure. So while he waited he plunged eagerly into each day's work and with delight saw how everything seemed to go through without a hitch. It began to look as if, when Nella-Rose's reply came, there would be no reason for delay in bringing her to the North.

But this hope and vision did not banish entirely Truedale's growing sorrow for the part he must inevitably take when the truth was known to Lynda and Brace. Harder and harder the telling of it appeared as the time drew near. Never had they seemed dearer or more sacred to him than now when he realized the hurt he must cause them. There were moments when he felt that he could not bear the eyes of Lynda—those friendly, trusting eyes. Would she ever be able, in the years to come, to forgive and forget? And Brace—how could that frank, direct nature comprehend the fever of madness that had, in the name of love, betrayed the confidence and faith of a lifetime? Well, much lay in the keeping of the little mountain girl whose fascination and loveliness would plead mightily. Of Nella-Rose's power Truedale held no doubt.

Then came White's devastating letter at the close of an exhausting day when Conning was to dine with the Kendalls.

That afternoon he had concluded the immediate claims of business, had arranged with McPherson for a week's absence, and meant in the evening to explain to Brace and Lynda the reason for his journey. He was going to start South on the morrow, whether a letter came or not. He had steeled himself for the crucial hour with his friends; had already, in his imagination, bidden farewell to the relations that had held them close through the past years. He believed, because he was capable of paying this heavy price for his love, that no further proof would be necessary to convince even Lynda of its intensity.

They dined cheerfully and alone and, as they crossed the hall afterward, to the library, Lynda asked casually:

“Did you get the letters for you, Con? The maid laid them on the stand by the door.”

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Then she went on into the bright room with its long, vacant chair, singing “To-morrow’s Song” in that sweet contralto of hers that deserved better training.

There were three letters—one from a man whose son Truedale had tutored before he went away, one from the architect of the new hospital, and a bulky one from Dr. McPherson. Truedale carried them all into the library where Brace sat comfortably puffing away before the fire; and Lynda, some designs for interior decoration spread out before her on a low table, still humming, rocked gently to and fro in a very feminine rocker. Conning drew up a chair opposite Kendall and tore open the envelope from his late patron.

“I tell you, Brace,” he said, “if any one had told me six weeks ago that I should ever be indifferent to a possible offer to tutor, I would have laughed at him. But so it is. I must turn down the sure-paying Mr. Smith for lack of time.”

Lynda laughed merrily. “And six weeks ago if any one had come to me in my Top Shelf where I carried on my profession, and outlined this for me”—she waved her hand around the room—“I’d have called the janitor to put out an unsafe person. Hey-ho!” And then the brown head was bent over the problem of an order which had come in that day.

“Oh! I say, Lyn!” Truedale turned from his second letter. “Morgan suggests that *you* attend to the decorating and furnishing of the hospital. I told him to choose his man and he prefers you if I have no objection. Objection? Good Lord, I never thought of you. I somehow considered such work out of your line, but I’m delighted.”

“Splendid!” Lynda looked up, radiant. “How I shall revel in those broad, clean spaces! How I shall see Uncle William in every room! Thank him, Con, and tell him I accept—on his terms!”

Then Truedale opened the third envelope and an enclosed letter fell out, bearing the postmark of the Junction near Pine Cone!

There was a small electric reading lamp on the arm of Truedale’s chair; he turned the light on and, while his face was in shadow, the words before him stood out illumined.

“Sir—Mister Truedale.” The sheriff had evidently been sorely perplexed as to the proper beginning of the task he had undertaken.

“I send this by old Doc McPherson, not knowing any better way.”

(Jim’s epistle was nearly innocent of punctuation, his words ran on almost unbroken and gave the reader some trouble in following.)

Your letter to a certain young person has come and been destroyed owing to my thinking under the present circumstances, some folks what don’t know about you, better

not hear now. I took the letter to Lone Dome as you set down for me to do meaning to give it to Nella-Rose like what you said, but she wasn't there. Pete was there and Marg —she's Nella-Rose's sister, and getting ready to marry that torn-down scamp Jed Martin which to my way of thinking is about the best punishment what

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could be dealt out to him. Pete was right sober for him and spruced up owing to facts I am now coming to and when Pete's sober there ain't a more sensible cuss than what he is nor a gentlemaner. Well, I asked natural like for Nella-Rose and Marg scrooged up her mouth, knowing full well as how I knew Jed was second choice for her—but Pete he done tell me that Nella-Rose had married Burke Lawson and run to safer parts and when I got over the shock I was certainly thankful for being a sheriff ain't all it might be when your ideas of justice and liking gets crossed. I didn't ask any more questions. Peter was sober—he only lies when he's drunk and not having any wish to rouse Marg I just come away and burned the letter what you sent. But I've done some thinking on my own 'count since your letter came and I reckon I've studied the thing clear on circumstantial evidence which is what I mostly have to go on in the sticks. I certainly done you a black insult that day I came upon you and Nella-Rose. I didn't let on, and I never will, about her being to my place, but no wonder the poor child was terrible upset when I came in. She had come to me, so I study out, and found you—stark stranger! How you ever soothed the poor little thing I don't know—her being wild as a flea—but on top of that, in I slam and lit out on you both and 'corse she couldn't 'splain about Burke before you and that's plain enough what she had come to do, and I didn't leave either one of you a leg to stand on. I've been pretty low in my spirits I can tell you and I beg your pardon humble, young feller, and if ever I can do Nella-Rose a turn by letting Burke free, no matter what he does—I will! But 'tain't likely he'll act up for some time. Nella-Rose always could tame him and he's been close on her trail ever since she was a toddler. I'm right glad they took things in their own hands and left. She didn't sense the right black meaning I had in my heart that day when she ran—but you did and I sure am ashamed of the part I done played.

If you can overlook what no man has a call to overlook in another—your welcome is red hot here for you at any time.

JIM WHITE

Sheriff.

Truedale read and reread this amazing production until he began to feel his way through the tangle of words and catch a meaning—false, ridiculously false of course, but none the less designed as an explanation and excuse. Then the non-essentials dropped away and one bald fact remained! Truedale sank back in his chair, turned off the electric light, and closed his eyes.

“Tired, old man?” Kendall asked from across the hearth.

“Yes. Dead tired.”

“You'll travel easier when you get the gait.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Take a bit of a nap,” Lynda suggested.

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"Thanks, Lyn, I will." Then Truedale, safe from intrusion, tried to make his way out of the maze into which he had been thrown. Slowly he recovered from the effect of the staggering blow and presently got to the point where he felt it was all a cruel lie or a stupid jest. There he paused. Jim was not the kind to lie or joke about such a thing. It was a mistake—surely a mistake. He would go at once to Pine Cone and make everything right. Nella-Rose could not act alone. Tradition, training, conspired to unfit her for this crisis; but that she had gone from his love and faith into the arms of another man was incredible. No; she was safe, probably in hiding; she would write him. She had the address—she was keen and quick, even though she was helpless to cope with the lawlessness of her mountain environment. Truedale saw the necessity of caution, not for himself, but for Nella-Rose. He could not go, unaided, to search for her. Evidently there had been wild doings after he left; no one but White and Nella-Rose knew of his actual existence—he must utilize White in assisting him, but above all he must expect that Nella-Rose would make her whereabouts known. Never for a moment did he doubt her or put any credence in the conclusions White had drawn. How little Jim really knew! By to-morrow word would come from Nella-Rose; somehow she would manage, once she was safe from being followed, to get to the station and telegraph. But there could be no leaving the girl in the hills after this; he must, as soon as he located her, bring her away; bring her into his life—to his home and hers!

A cold sweat broke out on Truedale's body as he lashed himself unmercifully in the still room where his two friends, one believing him asleep, waited for his awakening.

Well, he was awake at last, thank God! The only difference between him and a creature such as good men and women abhor was that he meant to retrieve, as far as in him lay, the past error and injustice. All his future life should prove his purpose. And then, like a sweet fragrance or a spirit touch, his love pleaded for him. He had been weak, but not vicious. The unfettered life had clouded his reason, and his senses had played him false, but love was untarnished—and it was love. That girl of the hills was the same now as she had always been. She would accept him and his people and he would make her life such that, once the homesickness for the hills was past, she would have no regrets.

Then another phase held Truedale's thought. In that day when Nella-Rose accepted, in the fullest sense, his people and his people's code—how would he stand in her eyes? A groan escaped him, then another, and he started nervously.

"Con, what is it—a bad dream?" Lynda touched his arm to arouse him.

"Yes—a mighty bad one!"

"Tell it to me. Tell it while it is fresh in your mind. They say once you have put a dream in words, its effect is killed forever."

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Truedale turned dark, sorrowful eyes upon Lynda.

"I—I wish I could tell it," he said with a seriousness that made her laugh, "but it was the kind that eludes—words. The creeping, eating impression—sort of nightmare. Good Lord! how nerves play the deuce with you."

Brace Kendall did not speak. From his place he had been watching Truedale, for the firelight had betrayed the truth. Truedale had not been sleeping: Truedale had been terribly upset by that last letter of his!

And just then Conning leaned forward and threw his entire mail upon the blazing logs!

CHAPTER XI

For Truedale to await, calmly, further developments was out of the question. He did, however, force himself to act as sanely as possible. He felt confident that Nella-Rose, safely hidden and probably enjoying it in her own elfish way, would communicate with him in a few days at the latest, now that things had, according to White, somewhat settled into shape after the outlaw Lawson had taken himself off the scene.

To get to the station and telegraph would mean quite a feat for Nella-Rose at any time, and winter was in all likelihood already gripping the hills. To write and send a letter might be even more difficult. So Truedale reasoned; so he feverishly waited, but he was not idle. He rented a charming little suite of rooms, high up in a new apartment house, and begged Lynda to set them in order at once. Somehow he believed that in the years ahead, after she understood, Lynda would be glad that he had asked this from her.

"But why the hurry, Con?" she naturally questioned; "if people are going to be so spasmodic I'll have to get a partner. It may be all right, looked at financially, but it's the ruination of art."

"But this is a special case, Lyn."

"They're all special cases."

"But this is a—welcome."

"For whom?"

"Well, for me! You see I've never had a real home, Lyn. It's one of the luxuries I've always dreamed of."

"I had thought," Lynda's clear eyes clouded, "that your uncle's house would be your home at last. It is big enough for us all—we need not run against each other."

“Keep my room under the roof, Lyn.” Truedale looked at her yearningly and she—misunderstood! “I shall often come to that—to you and Brace—but humour me in this fancy of mine.”

So she humoured him—working early and late—putting more of her own heart in it than he was ever to know, for she believed—poor girl—that he would offer it to her some day and then—when he found out about the money—how exactly like a fairy tale it all would be! And Lynda had had so few fairy tales in her life.

And while she designed and Conning watched and suggested, they talked of his long-neglected work.

“You’ll have time soon, Con, to give it your best thought. Did you do much while you were away?”

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"Yes, Lyn, a great deal!" Truedale was sitting by the tiny hearth in his diminutive living room. He and Lynda had demanded, and finally succeeded in obtaining an open space for real logs; disdaining, much to the owner's amazement, an asbestos mat or gas monstrosity. "I really put blood in the thing."

"And when may I hear some of it? I'm wild to get back to our beaten tracks."

Truedale raised his eyes, but he was looking beyond Lynda; he was seeing Nella-Rose in the nest he was preparing for her.

"Soon, Lyn. Soon. And when you do—you, of all the world, will understand, sympathize, and approve."

"Thank you, Con, thank you. Of course I will, but it is good to have you know it! Let me see, what colour scheme shall we introduce in the living room?"

"Couldn't we have a sort of blue-gray; a rather smoky tint with sunshine in it?"

"Good heavens, Con! And it is a north room, too."

"Well, then, how about a misty, whitish—"

"Worse and worse. Con, in a north room there must be warmth and real colour."

"There will be. But put what you choose, Lyn, it will surely be all right."

"Suppose, then, we make it golden brown, or—dull, soft reds?"

Truedale recalled the shabby little shawl that Nella-Rose had worn before she donned her winter disguise.

"Make it soft dull red, Lyn—but not *too* dull."

Truedale no longer meant to lay his secret bare before departing for the South. While he would not acknowledge it to his anxious heart, he realized that he must base the future on the outcome of his journey. Once he laid hands upon Nella-Rose, he would act promptly and hopefully, but—he must be sure, now, before he made a misstep. There had been mistakes enough, heaven knew; he must no longer play the fool.

And then when the little gilded cage was ready, Truedale conceived his big and desperate idea. Two weeks had passed since Jim White's letter and no telegram or note had come from Nella-Rose. Neither love nor caution could wait longer. Truedale decided to go to Pine Cone. Not as a returned traveller, certainly not—at first—to White, but to Lone Dome, and there, passing himself off as a chance wayfarer, he would gather as much truth as he could, estimate the value of it, and upon it take his future

course. In all probability, he thought—and he was almost gay now that he was about to take matters into his own hands—he would ferret out the real facts and be back with his quarry before another week. It was merely a matter of getting the truth and being on the spot.

Nella-Rose's family might, for reasons of their own, have deceived Jim White. Certainly if they did not know at the time of Nella-Rose's whereabouts they would, like others, voice the suspicion of the hills; but by now they would either have her with them or know positively where she was. For all his determination to believe this, Truedale had his moments of sickening doubt. The simple statement in White's letter, burned, as time went on, into his very soul.

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But, whatever came—whatever there was to know—he meant to go at once to headquarters. He would remain, too, until Peter Greyson was sober enough to state facts. He recalled clearly Jim's estimate of Greyson and his dual nature depending so largely upon the effect of the mountain whisky.

It was late November when Truedale set forth. No one made any objection to his going now. Things were running smoothly and if he had to go at all to straighten out any loose ends, he had better go at once.

To Lynda the journey seemed simple enough. Truedale had left, among other belongings, his manuscript and books. Naturally he would not trust them to another's careless handling.

At Washington, Truedale bought a rough tramping rig and continued his journey with genuine enjoyment of the adventure. Now that he was nearing the scene of his past experience he could better understand the delay. Things moved so slowly among the hills and naturally Nella-Rose, trusting and fond, was part of the sluggish life. How she would show her small, white teeth when, smiling in his arms, she told him all about it! It would not take long to make her forget the weary time of absence and White's misconception.

Truedale proceeded by deliberate stages. He wanted to gather all he possibly could as a foundation upon which to build. The first day after he left the train at the station—and it had bumped at the end of the rails just as it had on his previous trip—he walked to the Centre and there encountered Merrivale.

"Well, stranger," the old man inquired, "whar yer goin', if it ain't askin' too much?"

And Truedale expansively explained. He was tramping through the mountains for pure enjoyment; had heard of the hospitality he might expect and meant to test it.

Merrivale was pleased but cautious. He was full of questions himself, but ran to cover every time his visitor ventured one. Truedale soon learned his lesson and absorbed what was offered without openly claiming more. He remained over night with Merrivale and stocked up the next morning from the store.

He had heard much, but little to any purpose. He carried away with him a pretty clear picture of Burke Lawson who, by Merrivale's high favour, appeared heroic. The storm, the search, Lawson's escape and supposed carrying off of Nella-Rose, were the chief topics of conversation. Merrivale chuckled in delight over this.

The afternoon of the second day Truedale reached Lone Dome and came upon Peter, sober and surprisingly respectable, sunning himself on the west side of the house.

The first glance at the stately old figure, gone to decay like a tree with dead rot, startled and amazed Truedale and he thanked heaven that the master of Lone Dome was himself and therefore to be relied upon; no one could possibly suspect Peter of cunning or deceit in his present condition.

Greyson greeted the stranger cordially. He was in truth desperately forlorn and near the outer edge of endurance. An hour more and he would have defied the powers that had recently taken control of him, and made for the still in the deep woods; but the coming of Truedale saved him from that and diverted his tragic thoughts.

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The fact was Marg and Jed had gone away to be married. Owing to the death of the near-by minister in the late storm, they had to travel a considerable distance in order to begin life according to Marg's strict ideas of propriety. Before leaving she had impressed upon her father the necessity of his keeping a clear head in her absence.

"We-all may be gone days, father," she had said, "and yo' certainly do drop in owdacious places when you're drunk. Yo' might freeze or starve. Agin, a lurking beast, hunting fo' food, might chaw yo' fo' yo' got yo' senses."

Something of this Greyson explained to his guest while setting forth the evening meal and apologizing for the lack of stimulant.

"Being her marriage trip I let Marg have her way and a mind free o' worry 'bout me. But women don't understand, God bless 'em! What's a drop in yo' own home? But fo' she started forth Marg spilled every jug onto the wood pile. When I see the flames extry sparkling I know the reason!"

Greyson chuckled, walking to and fro from table to pantry, with steady, almost dignified strides.

"That's all right," Truedale hastened to say, "I'm rather inclined to agree with your daughter; and—" raising the concoction Peter had evolved—"this tea—"

"Coffee, sir."

"Excuse me! This coffee goes right to the spot."

They ate and grew confidential. Edging close, but keeping under cover, Truedale gained the confidence of the lonely, broken man and, late in the evening, the hideous truth, as Truedale was compelled to believe, was in his keeping.

For an hour Greyson had been nodding and dozing; then, apologetically, rousing. Truedale once suggested bed, but for some unexplainable reason Peter shrank from leaving his guest. Then, risking a great deal, Truedale asked nonchalantly:

"Have you other children besides this daughter who is on her wedding trip? It's rather hard—leaving you alone to shift for yourself."

Greyson was alert. Not only did he share the mountain dweller's wariness of question, but he instantly conceived the idea that the stranger had heard gossip and he was in arms to defend his own. His ancestors, who long ago had shielded the recreant great-aunt, were no keener than Peter now was to protect and preserve the honour of the little girl who, by her recent acts—and Greyson had only Jed's words and the mountain talk to go by—had aroused in him all that was fine enough to suffer. And Greyson was

suffering as only a man can who, in a rare period of sobriety, views the wrecks of his own making.

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Ordinarily, as White truly supposed, Peter lied only when he was drunk; but the sheriff could not estimate the vagaries of blood and so, at Truedale's question, the father of Nella-Rose, with the gesture inherited from a time of prosperity, rallied his forces and lied! Lied like a gentleman, he would have said. Broken and shabby as Greyson was, he appeared, at that moment, so simple and direct, that his listener, holding to the sheriff's estimate, was left with little doubt concerning what he heard. He, watching the weak and agonized face, believed Greyson was making the best of a sad business; but that he was weaving from whole cloth the garment that must cover the past, Truedale in his own misery never suspected. While he listened something died within him never to live again.

"Yes, sir. I have another daughter—lil' Nella-Rose."

Truedale shaded his face with his hand, but kept his eyes on Greyson's distorted face.

"Lil' Nella-Rose. I have to keep in mind her youth and enjoying ways or I'd be right hard on Nella-Rose. Yo' may have heard, while travelling about—o' Nella-Rose?" This was asked nervously—searchingly.

"I've—I've heard that name," Truedale ventured. "It's a name that—somehow clings and, being a writer-man, everything interests me."

Then Greyson gave an account of the trap episode tallying so exactly with White's version that it established a firm structure upon which to lay all that was to follow.

"And there ain't nothing as can raise a woman's tenderness and loyalty to a man," Greyson went on, "like getting into a hard fix, and sho' Burke Lawson was in a right bad fix.

"I begin to see it all now. Nella-Rose went to Merrivale's and he told her Burke had come back. Merrivale told me that. Naturally it upset her and she followed him up to warn him. Think o' that lil' girl tracking 'long the hills, through all that storm, to—to save the man she had played with and flouted but loved, without knowing it! Nella-Rose was like that. She lit on things and took her fun—but in the big parts she always did come out strong."

Truedale shifted his position.

"I reckon I'm wearying you with my troubles?" Greyson spoke apologetically.

"No, no. Go on. This interests me very much."

"Well, sir, Burke Lawson and Jed Martin came on each other in the deep woods the night of the big storm and Burke and Jed had words and a scene. Jed owned up to that. It was life and death and I ain't blaming any one and I have one thing to thank

Burke for—he might have done different and left a stain on a lady's name, sir! He told Jed how he had seen Nella-Rose and how she had scorned him for being a coward, but how she would take her words back if he dared come out and show his head. And he 'lowed he was going to come out then and there, which he did, and he and Nella-Rose was going off to Cataract Falls where the Lawsons hailed from, on the mother's side."

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"But—how do you know that your daughter kept her word? This Lawson may have been obliged to make away with himself—alone." Truedale grew more daring. He saw that Greyson, absorbed by his trouble, was less on guard. But Greyson was keenly observant.

"He's heard the gossip," thought the old man, "it's ringing through the hills. Well, a dog as can fetch a bone can carry one!" With that conclusion reached, Peter made his master stroke.

"I've heard from her," he half whispered.

"Heard from her?" gasped Truedale, and even then Greyson seemed unaware of the attitude of the stranger. "How—did you hear from her?"

"She wrote and sent the letter long of—of Bill Trim, a half-wit—but trusty. Nella-Rose went with Lawson—she 'lowed she had to. He came on her in the woods and held her to her word. She said as how she wanted to—to come home, but Lawson set forth as how an hour might mean his life—and put it up to lil' Nella-Rose! He—he swore as how he'd shoot himself if she didn't go with him—and it was like Burke to do it. He was always crazy mad for Nella-Rose, and there ain't anything he wouldn't do when he got balked. She—she had ter go—or see Lawson kill himself; so she went—but asked my pardon fo' causing the deep trouble. Lawson married her at the first stopping place over the ridge. He ain't worthy o' my lil' Nella-Rose—but us-all has got to make the best o' it. Come spring—she'll be back, and then—I'll forgive her—my lil' Nella-Rose!"

From the intensity of his emotions Greyson trembled and the weak tears ran down his lined face. Taking advantage of the tense moment Truedale asked desperately:

"Will you show me that letter, Mr. Greyson?"

So direct was the request, so apparently natural to the old man's unguarded suffering, that it drove superficialities before it and merely confirmed Greyson in his determination to save Nella-Rose's reputation at any cost. Ignoring the unwarrantable curiosity, alert to the necessity of quick defense, he said:

"I can't. I wish to Gawd I could and then I could stop any tongue what dares to tech my lil' gal's name."

"Why can you not show me the letter?" Truedale was towering above the old man. By some unknown power he had got control of the situation. "I have a reason for—asking this, Mr. Greyson."

"Marg burned it! It was allus Marg or lil' Nella-Rose for Lawson, and Nella-Rose got him! When Marg knew this fur certain, there was no length to which she—didn't go! This is my home, sir; I'm old—Marg is a good girl and the trouble is past now; her and

Jed is making me comfortable, but we-all don't mention Nella-Rose. It eases me, though, to tell the truth for lil' Nella-Rose. I know how the tongues are wagging and I have to sit still fo'—since Marg and Jed took up with each other—my future lies 'long o' them. I'm an old man and mighty dependent; time was when—" Greyson rose unsteadily and swayed toward the fireplace.

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"Gawd a'mighty!" he flung out desperately, "how I want—whisky!"

Truedale saw the wildness in the old man's eyes—saw the trembling and twitching of the outstretched hands, and feared what might be the result of trouble and enforced sobriety. He pulled a large flask from his pocket and offered it.

"Here!" he said, "take a swallow of this and pull yourself together."

Greyson, with a cry, seized the liquor and drained every drop before Truedale could control him.

"God bless yo'!" whined Greyson, sinking back into his chair, "bless and—and keep yo'!"

Truedale dared not leave the house though his soul recoiled from the sight before him. He waited an hour, watching the effect of the stimulant. Greyson grew mellow after a time—at peace with the world; he smiled foolishly and became maudlinly familiar. Finally, Truedale approached him again. He bent over him and shook him sharply.

"Did you tell me—the truth—about—Nella-Rose?" he whispered to the sagging, bleary-eyed creature.

"Yes, sir!" moaned Peter, "I sho' did!"

And Truedale did not reflect that when Greyson was-drunk—he lied!

Truedale never recalled clearly how he spent the hours between the time he left Greyson's until he knocked on the door of White's cabin; but it was broad daylight and biting cold when Jim flung the door open and looked at the stranger with no idea, for a moment, that he had ever seen him before. Then, putting his hand out wonderingly, he muttered:

"Gawd!" and drew Truedale in. Breakfast was spread on the table; the dogs lay before the blazing fire.

"Eat!" commanded Jim, "and keep yer jaws shet except to put in food."

Conning attempted the feat but made a pitiful showing.

"Come to stay on?"

White's curiosity was betraying him and the sympathy in his eyes filled Truedale with a mad desire to take this "God's man" into his confidence.

"No, Jim. I've come to pack and go back to—to my job!"



"Gosh! it can't be much of a job if you can tackle it—lookin' like what you do!"

"I've been tramping for—for days, old man! Rather overdone the thing. I'm not so bad as I look."

"Glad to hear it!" laconically.

"I'll put up with you to-night, Jim, if you'll take me in." Truedale made an effort to smile.

"Provin' there ain't any hard feeling?"

"There never was, White. I—understood."

"Shake!"

They got through the day somehow. The crust was forming over Truedale's suffering; he no longer had any desire to let even White break through it. Once, during the afternoon, the sheriff spoke of Nella-Rose and without flinching Truedale listened.

"That gal will have Burke eatin' out o' her hand in no time. Lawson is all right at the kernel, all he needed was some one ter steady him. Once I made sure he'd married the gal, I felt right easy in my mind."

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"And you—did make sure, Jim? There was no doubt? I—I remember the pretty little thing; it would have been damnable to—to hurt her."

"I scrooged the main fact out o' old Pete, her father. There was a mighty lot o' talk in the hills, but I was glad ter get the facts and shut the mouths o' them that take ter—ter hissin' like all-fired scorpions! Nella-Rose had writ to her father, but Marg, the sister, tore the letter up in stormin' rage 'cause Nella-Rose had got the man she had sot her feelin's on. Do you happen to call ter mind what I once told you 'bout those two gals and a little white hen?"

Truedale nodded.

"Same old actin' up!" Jim went on. "But when Greyson let out what war in the letter—knowin' Burke like what I do—I studied it out cl'ar enough. Nella-Rose was sure up agin blood and thunder whatever way yo' put it—so she ran her chances with Burke. There ain't much choosin' fo' women in the hills and Burke is an owdacious fiery feller, an' he ain't ever set his mind to no woman but Nella-Rose."

That night Truedale went to his old cabin. He built a fire on the hearth, drew the couch before it, and then the battle was on—the fierce, relentless struggle. In it—Nella-Rose escaped. Like a bit of the mist that the sun burns, so she was purified—consumed by the fire of Truedale's remorse and shame. Not for a moment did he let the girl bear a shadow of blame—he was done with that forever!—but he held himself before the judgment seat of his own soul and he passed sentence upon himself in terms that stern morality has evolved for its own protection. But from out the wreck and ruin Truedale wrenched one sacred truth to which he knew he must hold—or sink utterly. He could not expect any one in God's world to understand; it must always be hidden in his own soul, but that marriage of his and Nella-Rose's in the gray dawn after the storm had been holy and binding to him. From now on he must look upon the little mountain girl as a dear, dead wife—one whose childish sweetness was part of a time when he had learned to laugh and play, and forget the hard years that had gone to his un-making, not his upbuilding.

CHAPTER XII

Truedale travelled back to the place of his new life bearing his books, his unfinished play, and his secret sorrow with him. His books and papers were the excuse for his journey; for the rest, no one suspected nor—so thought Truedale—was any one ever to know. That part of his life-story was done with; it had been interpreted bunglingly and ignorantly to be sure, but the lesson, learned by failure, had sunk deep in his heart.

He arranged his private work in the little room under the eaves. He intended, if time were ever his again, to begin where he had left off when broken health interrupted.

In the extension room over William Truedale's bedchamber Lynda carried on her designing and her study; her office, uptown, was reserved for interviews and outside business. Her home workshop had the feminine touch that the other lacked. There were her tea table by the hearth, work bags of dainty silk, and flowers in glass vases. The dog and the cats were welcome in the pleasant room and sedately slept or rolled about while the mistress worked.

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But Truedale, while much in the old home, still kept his five-room flat. He bought a good, serviceable dog that preferred a bachelor life to any other and thrived upon long evening strolls and erratic feeding. There were plants growing in the windows—and these Conning looked after with conscientious care.

When the first suffering and sense of abasement passed, Truedale discovered that life in his little apartment was not only possible, but also his salvation. All the spiritual essence left in him survived best in those rooms. As time went by and Nella-Rose as an actuality receded, her memory remained unembittered. Truedale never cast blame upon her, though sometimes he tried to view her from the outsider's position. No; always she eluded the material estimate.

"Not more than half real," so White had portrayed her, and as such she gradually became to Truedale.

He plunged into business, as many a man had before him, to fill the gaps in his life; and he found, as others had, that the taste of power—the discovery that he could meet and fulfil the demands made upon him—carried him out of the depths and eventually secured a place for him in the world of men that he valued and strove to prove himself worthy of. He wisely went slowly and took the advice of such men as McPherson and his uncle's old lawyer. He grew in time to enjoy the position of trust as his duties multiplied, and he often wondered how he could ever have despised the common lot of his fellows. He deliberately, and from choice, set his personal tastes aside—time enough for his reading and writing when he had toughened his mental muscles, he thought. Lynda deplored this, but Truedale explained:

"You see, Lyn, when I began to carve the thing out—the play, you know—I had no idea how to handle the tools; like many fools with a touch of talent, I thought I could manage without preparation. I've learned better. You cannot get a thing over to people unless you know something of life—speak the language. I'm learning, and when I feel that I cannot *help* writing—I'll write."

"Good!" Lynda saw his point; "and now let's haunt the theatres—see the machinery in running order. We'll find out what people want and *why*."

So they went to the theatre and read plays. Brace made the wholesome third and their lives settled into calm enjoyment that was charming but which sometimes—not often, but occasionally—made Lynda pause and consider. It would not do—for Con—to fall into a pace that might defeat his best good.

But this thought brought a deep crimson to the girl's cheeks.

And then something happened. It was so subtle that Lynda Kendall, least of all, realized the true significance.

Once in the early days of her secured self-support, William Truedale had said to her:
“You give too much attention, girl, to your tailor and too little to your dressmaker.”

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Lynda had laughingly called her friend frivolous and defended her wardrobe.

“One cannot doll up for business, Uncle William.”

“Is business your whole life, Lynda? If so you had better reform it. If women are going to pattern their lives after men’s they must go the whole way. A sensible man recognizes the need of shutting the office door sometimes and putting on his dress suit.”

“Well, but Uncle William, what is the matter with this perfectly built suit? I always slip a fresh blouse on when I am off duty. I hate to be always changing.”

“If you had a mother, Lynda, she would make you see what I mean. An old fungus like me cannot be expected to command respect from such an up-to-date humbug as you!”

They had laughed it off and Lynda had, once or twice, donned a house gown to please her critical friend, but eventually had slipped back into suits and blouses.

All of a sudden one day—it was nearing holiday time—she left her workroom at midday and, almost shamefacedly, “went shopping.” As the fever got into her blood she became reckless, and by five o’clock had bought and ordered home more delicate and exquisite finery than she had ever owned in all her life before.

“It’s scandalous!” she murmured to her gay, young heart, “an awful waste of good money, but for the first time, I see how women can get clothes-mad.”

She devoted the hour and a half before dinner to locating an artistic dressmaker and putting herself in her hands.

The result was both startling and exciting. The first gown to come home was a dull, golden-brown velvet thing so soft and clinging and individual that it put its wearer into quite a flutter. She “did” and undid her hair, and, in the process, discovered that if she pulled the “sides” loose there was a tendency to curl and the effect was distinctly charming—with the strange gown, of course! Then, marshalling all her courage, she trailed down to the library and thanked heaven when she found the room empty. It would be easier to occupy the stage than to make a late entrance when the audience was in position. So Lynda sat down, tried to read, but was so nervous that her eyes shone and her cheeks were rosy.

Brace and Conning came in together. “Look who’s here!” was Kendall’s brotherly greeting. “Gee! Con, look at our lady friend!” He held his sister off at arms’ length and commented upon her “points.”

“I didn’t know your hair curled, Lyn.”



"I didn't, myself, until this afternoon. You see," she trembled a bit, "now that I do not have to go in the subway to business there's no reason for excluding—this sort of thing" (she touched the pretty gown), "and once you let yourself go, you do not know where you will land. Curls go with these frills; slippers, too—look!"

Then she glanced up at Conning.

"Do you think I'm very—frivolous?" she asked.

"I never knew"—he was gazing seriously at her—"how handsome you are, Lyn. Wear that gown morning, noon and night; it's stunning."

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"I'm glad you both like it. I feel a little unusual in it—but I'll settle down. I have been a trifle prim in dress."

Like the giant's robe, Lynda Kendall's garments seemed to transform her and endow her with the attributes peculiar to themselves. So gradually, that it caused no wonder, she developed the blessed gift of charm and it coloured life for herself and others like a glow from a hidden fire.

All this did not interfere with her business. Once she donned her working garb she was the capable Lynda of the past. A little more sentiment, perhaps, appeared in her designs—a wider conception; but that was natural, for happiness had come to her—and a delicious sense of success. She, womanlike, began to rejoice in her power. She heard of John Morrell's marriage to a young western girl, about this time, with genuine delight. Her sky was clearing of all regrets.

"Morrell was in the office to-day," Brace told his sister one evening, "it seemed to me a bit brash for him to lay it on so thick about his happiness and all that sort of rot."

"Brace!"

"Well, it might be all right to another fellow, but it sounded out of tune, somehow, to me. He says she is the kind that has flung herself body and soul into love; I wager she's a fool."

Lynda looked serious at once.

"I hope not," she said thoughtfully, "and she'll be happier with John, in the long run, if she has some reservations. I did not think that once; I do now."

"But—you, Lyn? You had reservations to burn."

"I had—too many. That was where the mistake began."

"You—do not regret?"

Lynda came close to him.

"Brace, I regret nothing. I am learning that every step leads to the next—if you don't stumble. If you do—you have to pick yourself up and go back. If John learned from me, I, too, have learned from him. I'm going to try to—love his wife."

"I bet she's a cross, somehow, between a cowboy and an idiot. John protested too much about her charms. She's got a sister—sounds a bit to me as if Morrell had married them both. She's coming to live with them after awhile. When I fall in love, it's going to be with an orphan out of an asylum."

Lynda laughed and gave her brother a hug. Then she said:

“Our circle is widening and, by the way Brace, I’m going to begin to entertain a little.”

“Good Lord, Lyn!”

“Oh! modestly—until I can use my stiff little wings. A dinner now and then and a luncheon occasionally when I know enough nice women to make a decent showing. Clothes and women, when adopted late in life, are difficult. But oh! Brace, it is great—this blessed home life of mine! The coming away from my beloved work to something even better.”

* * * * *

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The pulse of a city throbs faster in the winter. All the vitality of well-nourished men and women is at its fullest, while for them who fall below the normal, the necessity of the struggle for existence keys them to a high pitch. Not so in the deep, far mountain places. There, the inhabitants hide from the elements and withdraw into themselves. For weeks at a time no human being ventures forth from the shelter and comparative comfort of the dull cabins. Families, pressed thus close and debarred from the freedom of the open, suffer mentally and spiritually as one from the wider haunts of men can hardly conceive.

When Nella-Rose turned away from Truedale that golden autumn day, she faced winter and the shut-in terrors of the cold and loneliness. In two weeks the last vestige of autumn would be past, and the girl could not contemplate being imprisoned with Marg and her father while waiting for love to return to her. She paused on the wet, leafy path and considered. She had told Truedale that she would go home, but what did it matter. She would go to Miss Lois Ann's. She would know when Truedale returned; she could go to him. In the meantime no human being would annoy her or question her in that cabin far back in the Hollow. And Lois Ann would while away the long hours by story and song. It seemed to her there was but one thing to do—and Nella-Rose did it! She fled to the woman whose name Truedale had barely heard.

It took her three good hours to make the distance to the Hollow and it was quite dark when she tapped on the door of the little cabin. To all appearances the place was deserted; but after the second knock a shutter to the right of the door was pushed open and a long, lean hand appeared holding a lighted candle, while a deep, rich voice called:

"Who?"

"Jes' Nella-Rose!"

The hand withdrew, the shutter was closed, and in another minute the door was flung wide and the girl drawn into the warm, comfortable room. Supper, of a better sort than most hill-women knew, was spread out on a clean table, and in the cheer and safety Nella-Rose expanded and decided to take the old woman into her confidence at once and so secure present comfort until Truedale came back to claim her.

This Lois Ann, in whose sunken eyes eternal youth burned and glowed, was a mystery in the hills and was never questioned. Long ago she had come, asked no favours, and settled down to fare as best she could. There was but one sure passport to her sanctuary. That was—trouble! Once misfortune overtook one, sex was forgotten, but at other times it was understood that Miss Lois Ann had small liking or sympathy for men, while on the other hand she brooded over women and children with the everlasting strength of maternity.



It was suspected, and with good reason, that many refugees from justice passed through Miss Lois Ann's front door and escaped by other exits. Officers of the law had, more than once, traced their quarry to the dreary cabin and demanded entrance for search. This was always promptly given, but never had a culprit been found on the premises! White understood and admired the old woman; he always halted justice, if possible, outside her domain, but, being a hill-man, Jim had his suspicions which he never voiced.

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"So now, honey, what yo' coming to me fo' this black night?" said Lois Ann to Nella-Rose after the evening meal was cleared away, the fire replenished, and "with four feet on the fender" the two were content. "Trouble?" The wonderful eyes searched the happy, young face and at the glance, Nella-Rose knew that she was compelled to confide! There was no choice. She felt the power closing in about her, she found it not so easy as she had supposed, to explain. She sparred for time.

"Tell me a right, nice story, Miss Lois Ann," she pleaded, "and of course it's no trouble that has brought me here! Trouble! Huh!"

"What then?" And now Nella-Rose sank to the hearthstone and bent her head on the lap of the old woman. It was more possible to speak when she could escape those seeking eyes. She closed her own and tried to call Truedale to the dark space and to her support—but he would not come.

"So it is trouble, then?"

"No, no! it's—oh! it's the—joy, Miss Lois Ann."

"Ha! ha! And you've found out that the young scamp is back—that Lawson?" Lois Ann, for a moment, knew relief.

"It—it isn't Burke," the words came lingeringly. "Yes, I know he's back—is he here?" This affrightedly.

"No—but he's been. He may come again. His maw's always empty, but I will say this for the scoundrel—he gives more than he takes, in the long run. But if it isn't Lawson, who then? Not that snake-in-the-grass, Jed?" Love and trouble were synonymous with Lois Ann when one was young and pretty and a fool.

"Jed? Jed indeed!"

"Child, out with it!"

"I—I am going to tell you, Miss Lois Ann."

Then the knotted old hand fell like a withered leaf upon the soft hair—the woman-heart was ready to bear another burden. Not a word did the closed lips utter while the amazing tale ran on and on in the gentle drawl. Consternation, even doubt of the girl's sanity, held part in the old woman's keen mind, but gradually the truth of the confession established itself, and once the fact was realized that a stranger—and *such* a one—had been hidden in the hills while this thing, that the girl was telling, was going on—the strong, clear mind of the listener interpreted the truth by the knowledge gained through a long, hard life.

“And so, you see, Miss Lois Ann, it’s like he opened heaven for me; and I want to hide here till he comes to take me up, up into heaven with him. And no one else must know.”

Lois Ann had torn the cawl from Nella-Rose’s baby face—had felt, in her superstitious heart, that the child was mysteriously destined to see wide and far; and now, with agony that she struggled to conceal, she knew that to her was given the task of drawing the veil from the soul of the girl at her feet in order that she might indeed see far and wide into the kingdom of suffering women.

For a moment the woman fenced, she would put the cup from her if she could, like all humans who understand.

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"You—are yo' lying to me?" she asked faintly, and oh, but she would have given much to hear the girl's impish laugh of assent. Instead, she saw Nella-Rose's eyes grow deadly serious.

"It's no lie, Miss Lois Ann; it's a right beautiful truth."

"And for days and nights you stayed alone with this man?"

The lean hand, with unrelenting strength, now gripped the drooping face and held it firmly while the firelight played full upon it, meanwhile the keen old eyes bored into Nella-Rose's very soul.

"But he—he is my man! You forget the—marrying on the hill, Miss Lois Ann!"

The voice was raised a bit and the colour left the trembling lips.

"Your man!" And a bitter laugh rang out wildly.

"Stop, Miss Lois Ann! Yo' shall not look at me like that!"

The vision was dulled—Nella-Rose shivered.

"You shall not look at me like that; God would not—why should you?"

"God!"—the cracked voice spoke the word bitterly. "God! What does God care for women? It's the men as God made things for, and us-all has to fend them off—men and God are agin us women!"

"No, no! Let me free. I was so happy until—Oh! Miss Lois Ann, you shall not take my happiness away."

"Yo' came to the right place, yo' po' lil' chile."

The eyes had seen all they needed to see and the hand let drop the pretty, quivering face.

"We'll wait—oh! certainly we-all will wait a week; two weeks; then three. An' we-all will hide close and see what we-all shall see!" A hard, pitiful laugh echoed through the room. "And now to bed! Take the closet back o' my chamber. No one can reach yo' there, chile. Sleep and dream and—forget."

And that night Burke Lawson, after an hour's struggle, determined to come forth among his kind and take his place. Nella-Rose had decided him. He was tired of hiding, tired of playing his game. One look at the face he had loved from its babyhood had turned the tide. Lawson had never before been so long shut away from his guiding star. And

she had said that he might ask again when he dared—and so he came forth from his cave-place. Once outside, he drew a deep, free breath, turned his handsome face to the sky, and *felt* the prayer that another might have voiced.

He thought of Nella-Rose, remembered her love of adventure, her splendid courage and spirit. Nothing so surely could win her as the proposal he was about to make. To ask her to remain at Pine Cone and settle down with him as her hill-billy would hold small temptation, but to take her away to new and wider fields—that was another matter! And go they would—he and she. He would get a horse somewhere, somehow. With Nella-Rose behind him, he would never stop until a parson was reached, and after that—why the world would be theirs from which to choose.

And it was at that point of Lawson's fervid, religious state that Jed Martin had materialized and made it imperative that he be dealt with summarily and definitely.

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After confiding his immediate future to the subjugated Martin—having forced him to cover at the point of a pistol—Burke, with his big, wholesome laugh, crawled again out of the cave. Then, raising himself to his full height, he strode over the sodden trail toward White's cabin with the lightest, purest heart he had carried for many a day. But Fate had an ugly trick in store for him. He was half way to White's when he heard steps. Habit was strong. He promptly climbed a tree. The moon came out just then and disclosed the follower. "Blake's dawg," muttered Lawson and, as the big hound took his stand under the tree, he understood matters. Blake was his worst enemy; he had a score to settle about the revenue men and a term in jail for which Lawson was responsible. While the general hunt was on, Blake had entered in, thinking to square things, while not bringing himself into too much prominence.

"Yo' infernal critter!" murmured Lawson, "in another minute you'll howl, yo' po' brute. I hate ter shoot yo'—yo' being what yo' are—but here goes."

After that White's was impossible for a time and Nella-Rose must wait. In a day or so, probably—so Burke quickly considered—he could make a dash back, get White to help him, and bear off his prize, but for the moment the sooner he reached safety beyond the ridge, the better. Shooting a dog was no light matter.

Lawson reached safety but with a broken leg; for, going down-stream, he had met with misfortune and, during that long, hard winter, unable to fend for himself, he was safely hidden by a timely friend and served by a doctor who was smuggled to the scene and well paid for his help and silence.

And in Lois Ann's cabin Nella-Rose waited, at first with serene hope, and then, with pitiful longing. She and the old woman never referred to the conversation of the first night but the girl was sure she was being watched and shielded and she felt the doubt and scorn in the attitude of Lois Ann.

"I'll—I'll send for my man," at last she desperately decided at the end of the second week. But she dared not risk a journey to the far station in order to send a telegram. So she watched for a chance to send a letter that she had carefully and painfully written.

"I'm to Miss Lois Ann's in Devil-may-come Hollow. I'm trusting and loving you, but Miss Lois Ann—don't believe! So please, Mister Man come and tell her and then go back and I will wait—most truly

Your Nella-Rose."

then she crossed the name out and scribbled "Your doney-gal."

It was early in the third week that Bill Trim came whistling down the trail, on a cold, bitterly cold, November morning. He bore a load of "grateful gifts" to Lois Ann from men

and women whom she had succoured in times of need and who always remembered her, practically, when winter “set.”

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Bill was a half-wit but as strong as an ox; and, once set upon a task, managed it in a way that had given him a secure position in the community. He carried mail into the remotest districts—when there was any to carry. He “toted” heavy loads and gathered gossip and spilled it liberally. He was impersonal, ignorant, and illiterate, but he did his poor best and grovelled at the feet of any one who showed him the least affection. He was horribly afraid of Lois Ann for no reason that he could have given; he was afraid of her eyes—her thin, claw-like hands. As he now delivered the bundles he had for her he accepted the food she gave and then darted away to eat it in comfort beyond the reach of those glances he dreaded.

And there Nella-Rose sought him and sat beside him with a choice morsel she had saved from her finer fare.

“Trim,” she whispered when he was about to start, “here is a letter—Miss Lois Ann wants you to mail.”

The bright eyes looked yearningly into the dull, hopeless face.

“I—hate the ole ’un!” confided Bill.

“But yo’ don’t hate me, Bill?”

“No.”

“Well, then, do it for me, but don’t tell a living soul that you saw me. See, Bill, I have a whole dollar—I earned it by berry-picking. Pay for the letter and then keep the rest. And if you ever see Marg, and she asks about me—and whether you’ve seen me—tell her” (and here Nella-Rose’s white teeth gleamed in the mischievous smile), “tell her you saw me walking in the Hollow with Burke Lawson!”

The dull fellow shook with foolish laughter. “I sho’ will!” he said, and then tucked the letter and dollar bill in the breast of his shirt. “And now, lil’ doney-gal, let me touch yo’ hand,” he pleaded, “this—er—way.” And like a poor frayed, battered knight he pressed his lips to the small, brown hand of the one person who had always been kind to him.

At sunset Bill halted to eat his supper and warm his stiffened body. He tried to build a fire but the wood was wet and in desperation he took, at last, the papers from inside his thin coat, they had helped to shield him from the cold, and utilized them to start the pine cones. He rested and feasted and later went his way. At the post office he searched among his rags for the letter and the money. Then his face went white as ashes:

“Gawd a’mighty!” he whimpered.

“What’s wrong?” Merrivale came from behind the counter.

"I done burn my chest protector. I'll freeze without the papers." Then Bill explained the fire building but, recalling Lois Ann, withheld any further information.

"Here, you fool," Merrivale said not unkindly, "take all the papers you want. And take this old coat, too. And look, lad, in yo' wandering have yo' seen Greyson's lil' gal?"

Bill looked cunning and drawing close whispered:

"Her—and him, I seed 'im, back in the sticks! Her—and him!" Then he laughed his foolish laugh.

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"I thought as much!" Merrivale nodded, with the trouble a good man knows at times in his eyes; but his faith in Burke coming to his aid. "You mean—Lawson?" he asked.

Bill nodded foolishly.

"Then keep yo' mouth shut!" warned Merrivale. "If I hear yo' gabbing—I'll flax the hide o' yo', sure as I keep store."

CHAPTER XIII

A month, then two, passed in the desolate cabin in the Hollow. Winter clutched and held Pine Cone Settlement in a deadly grip. Old people died and little children were born. Lois Ann, when it was physically possible, got to the homes of suffering and eased the women, while she berated the men for bringing poor souls to such dread passes. But always Nella-Rose hid and shrank from sight. No need, now, to warn her. A new and terrible look had come into her eyes, and when Lois Ann saw that creeping terror she knew that her hour had come. To save Nella-Rose, she believed, she must lay low every illusion and, with keen and deliberate force, she pressed the apple of the knowledge of life between the girlish lips. The bitter truth at last ate its way into the girl's soul and gradually hate, such as she had never conceived, grew and consumed her.

"She will not die," thought the old woman watching her day by day.

And Nella-Rose did not die, at least not outwardly, but in her, as in Truedale, the fine, first glow of pure faith and passion, untouched by the world's interpretation, faded and shrivelled forever.

The long winter hid the secret in the dreary cabin. The roads and trails were closed; none drew near for shelter or succour.

By springtime Nella-Rose was afraid of every living creature except the faithful soul who stood guard over her. She ran and trembled at the least sound; she was white and hollow-eyed, but her hate was stronger and fiercer than ever.

Early summer came—the gladdest time of the year. The heat was broken by soft showers; the flowers bloomed riotously, and in July the world-old miracle occurred in Lois Ann's cabin—Nella-Rose's child was born! With its coming the past seemed blotted out; hate gave place to reverent awe and tenderness. In the young mother the woman rose supreme and she would not permit her mind to hold a harmful thought.

Through the hours of her travail, when Lois Ann, desperate and frightened, had implored, threatened, and commanded that she should tell the name of the father of her child, she only moaned and closed her lips the firmer. But when she looked upon her baby she smiled radiantly and whispered to the patient old creature beside her:



“Miss Lois Ann, this lil’ child has no father. It is my baby and God sent it. I shall call her Ann—cuz you’ve been right good to me—you sholy have.”

So it was “lil’ Ann” and, since the strange reticence and misunderstood joyousness remained, Lois Ann, at her wit’s end, believing that death or insanity threatened, went secretly to the Greyson house to confess and get assistance.

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Peter was away with Jed. The two hung together now like burrs. Whatever of relaxation Martin could hope for lay in Greyson; whatever of material comfort Peter could command, must come through Jed, and so they laboured, in slow, primitive fashion, and edged in a little pleasure together. Marg, having achieved her ambition, was content and, for the first time in her life, easy to get along with. And into this comparative Eden Lois Ann came with words that shattered the peace and calm.

In Marg's private thought she had never doubted that her sister had often been with Burke Lawson in the Hollow. When he disappeared, she believed Nella-Rose was with him, but she had supported and embellished her father's story concerning them because it secured her own self-respect and covered the tracks of the degenerate pair with a shield that they in no wise deserved, but which put their defenders in a truly Christian attitude.

Marg was alone in the cabin when Lois Ann entered. She looked up flushed and eager.

"How-de," she said genially. "Set and have a bite."

"I ain't got no time," the old woman returned pantingly. "Nella-Rose is down to my place."

The warm, sunny room grew stifling to Marg.

"What a-doing?" she said, half under her breath.

"She's got a—lil' baby."

The colour faded from Marg's face, leaving it pasty and heavy.

"Burke—thar?"

"He ain't been thar all winter. I hid Nella-Rose and her shame but I dare not any longer. I reckon she's going off."

"Dying?"

"May be; or—" and here Lois Ann tapped her head.

"And he—he went and left her?" groaned Marg—"the devil!"

Lois Ann watched the terrible anger rising in the younger woman and of a sudden she realized how useless it would be to voice the wild tale Nella-Rose held to. So she only nodded.

"I'll come with you," Marg decided at once, "and don't you let on to father or Jed—they'd do some killing this time, sure!"

Together the two made their way to the Hollow and found Nella-Rose in the quiet room with her baby nestling against her tender breast. The look on her face might well stay the reproaches on Marg's lips—she almost reeled back as the deep, true eyes met hers. All the smothered sisterliness came to the surface for an instant as she trembled and drew near to the two in the old chintz-covered rocker.

"See! my baby, Marg. She is lil' Ann."

"Ann—what?" whispered Marg.

"Just lil' Ann for—Miss Lois Ann."

"Nella-Rose" (and now Marg fell on her knees beside her sister), "tell me where he is. Tell me and as sure as God lives I'll bring him back! I'll make him own you and—and the baby or he'll—he'll—"

And then Nella-Rose laughed the laugh that drove Lois Ann to distraction.

"Send Marg away, Miss Lois Ann," Nella-Rose turned to her only friend, "she makes me so—so tired and—I do not want any one but you."

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Marg got upon her feet, all the tenderness and compassion gone.

"You are—" she began, but Lois Ann was between her and Nella-Rose.

"Go!" she commanded with terrible scorn. "Go! You are not fit to touch them. Go! Dying or mad—the girl belongs to me and not to such as has viper blood in their veins. Go!" And Marg went with the sound of Nella-Rose's crooning to her child ringing in her ears.

Things happened dramatically after that in the deep woods. Marg kept the secret of the Hollow cabin in her seething heart. She was frightened, fearing her father or Jed might discover Nella-Rose. But she was, at times, filled with a strange longing to see her sister and touch that wonderful thing that lay on the guilty mother-breast.

Was Nella-Rose forever to have the glory even in her shame, while she, Marg, with all the rights of womanhood, could hold no hope of maternity?

For one reason or another Marg often stole to the woods as near the Hollow as she dared to go. She hoped for news but none came; and it was late August when, one sunny noon, she confronted Burke Lawson!

Lawson's face was strange and awful to look on. Marg drew away from him in fear. She could not know but Burke had had a terrific experience that day and he was on the path for revenge and any one in his way must suffer. Freed at last from his captivity, he had travelled across the range and straight to Jim White. And the sheriff, ready for the recreant, greeted him without mercy, judging him guilty until he proved himself otherwise.

"What you done with Nella-Rose?" he asked, standing before Burke with slow fire in his deep eyes.

Lawson could never have been the man he was if he were not capable of holding his own council and warding off attack.

"What makes you think I've done anything with her?" he asked.

"None o' that, Burke Lawson," Jim warned. "I've been yo' friend, but I swear I'll toss yo' ter the dogs, as is after you, with as little feelin' as I would if yo' were a chunk o' dead meat—if you've harmed that lil' gal."

"Well, I ain't harmed her, Jim. And now let's set down and talk it over. I want to—to bring her home; I want ter live a decent life 'mong yo'-all. Jim, don't shoot 'til yo' make sure yo' ought ter shoot."

Thus brought to reason Jim sat down, shared his meal with his reinstated friend, and gave him the gossip of the hills. Lawson ate because he was well-nigh starved and he knew he had some rough work ahead; he listened because he needed all the guiding possible and he shielded the name and reputation of Nella-Rose with the splendid courage that filled his young heart and mind. And then he set forth upon his quest with these words:

“As Gawd A’mighty hears me, Jim White, I’ll fetch that lil’ Nella-Rose home and live like a man from now on. Wipe off my sins, Jim; make a place for me, old man, and I’ll never shame it—or God blast me!”

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White took the strong young hand and felt his eyes grow misty.

“Yo’ place is here, Burke,” he said, and then Lawson was on his way.

A half hour later he encountered Marg. In his own mind Burke had a pretty clear idea of what had occurred. Not having heard any suggestion of Truedale, he was as ignorant of him as though Truedale had never existed. Jed, then, was the only man to hold guilty. Jed had, in passion and revenge, wronged Nella-Rose and had after, like the sneak and coward he was, sought to secure his own safety by marrying Marg. But what had they done with Nella-Rose? She had, according to White, disappeared the night that Jed had been tied in the cave. Well, Jed must confess and pay!—pay to the uttermost. But between him and Jed Marg now stood!

“You!” cried Marg. “You! What yo’ mean coming brazen to us-all?”

“Get out of my way!” commanded Burke, “Where’s Jed?”

“What’s that to you?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Let me by.”

But Marg held her ground and Lawson waited. The look in his eyes awed Marg, but his presence enraged her.

“What you-all done with Nella-Rose?” Lawson asked.

“You better find out! You’ve left it long enough.”

“Whar is she, I say? And I tell you now, Marg—every one as has wronged that lil’ girl will answer to me. Whar is she?”

“She—she and her young-un are up to Lois Ann’s. They’ve been hid all winter. No one but me knows; you’ve time to make good—before—before father and Jed get yo’.”

Lawson took this like a blow between the eyes. He could not speak—for a moment he could not think; then a lurid fire of conviction burned into his very soul.

“So—that’s it!” he muttered, coming so close to Marg that she shrank back afraid. “So that’s it! Yo’-all have damned and all but killed the po’ lil’ girl—then flung her to—to the devil! You’ve taken the leavings—you! ‘cause yo’ couldn’t get anything else. Yo’ and Jed” (here Lawson laughed a fearless, terrifying laugh), “yo’ and Jed is honourably married, you two, and she—lil’ Nella-Rose—left to—” Emotion choked Lawson; then he plunged on: “He—he wronged her—the brute, and you took him to—to save him and yourself you—! And she?—why, she’s the only holy thing in the hills; you couldn’t damn her—you two!”

“For the love o’ Gawd!” begged Marg, “keep yo’ tongue still and off us! We ain’t done her any wrong; every one, even Jed, thinks she is with you. Miss Lois Ann hid her—I only knew a week ago. I ain’t told a soul!”

A look of contempt grew upon Burke’s face and hardened there. He was thinking quick and desperately. In a vague way he realized that he had the reins in his hands; his only concern was to know whither he should drive. But, above and beyond all—deep true, and spiritual—were his love and pity for Nella-Rose.

They had all betrayed and deserted her. Not for an instant did Lawson doubt that. Their cowardice and duplicity neither surprised nor daunted him; but his pride—his sense of superiority—bade him pause and reflect before he plunged ahead. Finally he said:

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“So you-all depend upon her safety for your safety! Take it—and be damned! She’s been with me—yo’ followin’ me? She’s been with me, rightful married and happy—happy! From now on I’ll manage lil’ Nella-Rose’s doings, and the first whisper from man or woman agin her will be agin me—and God knows I won’t be blamed for what I do then! Tell that skunk of yours,” Lawson glared at the terrified Marg, “I’m strong enough to outbid him with the devil, but from now on him and you—mind this well, Marg Greyson—him and you are to be our loving brother and sister. See?”

With a wild laugh Burke took to the woods.

CHAPTER XIV

Two years and a half following William Truedale’s death found things much as the old gentleman would have liked. Often Lynda Kendall, sitting beside the long, low, empty chair, longed to tell her old friend all about it. Strange to say, the recluse in life had become very vital in death. He had wrought, in his silent, lonely detachment, better even than he knew. His charities, shorn of the degrading elements of many similar ones, were carried on without a hitch. Dr. McPherson, under his crust of hardness, was an idealist and almost a sentimentalist; but above all he was a man to inspire respect and command obedience. No hospital with which he had to deal was unmarked by his personality. Neglect and indifference were fatal attributes for internes and nurses.

“Give the youngsters sleep enough, food and relaxation enough,” he would say to the superintendents, “but after that expect—and get—faithful, conscientious service with as much humanity as possible thrown in.”

The sanatorium for cases such as William Truedale’s was already attracting wide attention. The finest men to be obtained were on the staff; specially trained nurses were selected; and Lynda had put her best thought and energy into the furnishing of the small rooms and spacious wards.

Conning, becoming used to the demands made upon him, was at last dependable, and grew to see, in each sufferer the representative of the uncle he had never understood; whom he had neglected and, too late, had learned to respect. He was almost ashamed to confess how deeply interested he was in the sanatorium. Recalling at times the loneliness and weariness of William Truedale’s days—picturing the sad night when he had, as Lynda put it, opened the door himself, to release and hope—Conning sought to ease the way for others and so fill the waiting hours that less opportunity was left for melancholy thought. He introduced amusements and pastimes in the hospital, often shared them himself, and still attended to the other business that William Truedale’s affairs involved.



The men who had been appointed to direct and control these interests eventually let the reins fall into the hands eager to grasp them and, in the endless labour and sense of usefulness, Conning learned to know content and comparative peace. He grew to look upon his present life as a kind of belated reparation. He was not depressed; with surprising adaptability he accepted what was inevitable and, while reserving, in the personal sense, his past for private hours, he managed to construct a philosophy and cheerfulness that carried him well on the tide of events.

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It was something of a shock to him one evening, nearly three years after his visit to Pine Cone, to find himself looking at Lynda Kendall as if he had never seen her before.

She was going out with Brace and was in evening dress. Truedale had never seen her gowned so, and he realized that she was extremely handsome and—something more. She came close to him, drawing on her long, loose, white gloves.

“I cannot bear to go and leave you—all alone!” she said, raising her eyes to his.

“You see, John Morrell is showing us his brand-new wife to-night—and I couldn’t resist; but I’ll try to break away early.”

“You are eager to see—Mrs. Morrell?” Truedale asked, and suddenly recalled the relation Lynda had once held to Morrell. He had not thought of it for many a day.

“Very. You see I hope to be great friends with her. I want—”

“What, Lynda?”

“Well, to help her understand—John.”

“Let me button your glove, Lyn”—for Truedale saw her hands were trembling though her eyes were peaceful and happy. And then as the long, slim hand rested in his, he asked:

“And you—have never regretted, Lyn?”

“Regretted? Does a woman regret when she’s saved from a mistake and gets off scot-free as well?”

They looked at each other for a moment and then Lynda drew away her hand.

“Thanks, Con, and please miss us a little, but not too much. What will you do to pass the time until we return?”

“I think”—Truedale pulled himself up sharply—“I think I’ll go up under the eaves and get out—the old play!”

“Oh! how splendid! And you will—let me hear it—some day, soon?”

“Yes. Business is going easier now. I can think of it without neglecting better things. Good-night, Lyn. Tuck your coat up close, the night’s bad.”

And then, alone in the warm, bright room, Truedale had a distinct sense of Lynda having taken something besides herself away. She had left the room hideously lonely; it

became unbearable to remain there and, like a boy, Conning ran up to the small room next the roof.

He took the old play out—he had not unpacked it since he came from Pine Cone! He laid it before him and presently became absorbed in reading it from the beginning. It was after eleven when he raised his tired eyes from the pages and leaned back in his chair.

“I’m like—all men!” he muttered. “All men—and I thought things had gone deeper with me.”

What he was recognizing was that the play and the subtle influence that Nella-Rose had had upon him had both lost their terrific hold. He could contemplate the past without the sickening sense of wrong and shock that had once overpowered him. Realizing the full meaning of all that had gone into his past experience, he found himself thinking of Lynda as she had looked a few hours before. He resented the lesser hold the past still had upon him—he wanted to shake it free. Not bitterly—not with contempt—but, he argued, why should his life be shadowed always by a mistake, cruel and unpardonable as it was, when she, that little ignorant partner in the wrong, had gone her way and had doubtless by now put him forever from her mind?

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How small a part it had played with her, poor child. She had been betrayed by her strange imagination and suddenly awakened passion; she had followed blindly where he had led, but when catastrophe had threatened one who had been part of her former life—familiar with all that was real to her—how readily the untamed instinct had reverted to its own!

And he—Truedale comforted himself—he had come back to *his* own, and his own had made its claim upon him. Why should he not have his second chance? He wanted love—not friendship; he wanted—Lynda! All else faded and Lynda, the new Lynda—Lynda with the hair that had learned to curl, the girl with the pretty white shoulders and sweet, kind eyes—stood pleadingly close in the shabby old room and demanded recognition. “She thinks,” and here Truedale covered his eyes, “that I am—as I was when I began my life—here! What would she say—if she knew? She, God bless her, is not like others. Faithful, pure, she could not forgive the *truth!*”

Truedale, thinking so of Lynda Kendall, owned to his best self that because the woman who now filled his life held to her high ideals—would never lower them—he could honour and reverence her. If she, like him, could change, and accept selfishly that which she would scorn in another, she would not be the splendid creature she was. And yet—without conceit or vanity—Truedale believed that Lynda felt for him what he felt for her.

Never doubting that he could bring to her an unsullied past, she was, delicately, in finest woman-fashion, laying her heart open to him. She knew that he had little to offer and yet—and yet—she was—willing! Truedale knew this to be true. And then he decided he must, even at this late day, tell Lynda of the past. For her sake he dare not venture any further concealment. Once she understood—once she recovered from her surprise and shock—she would be his friend, he felt confident of that; but she would be spared any deeper personal interest. It was Lynda’s magnificent steadfastness that now appealed to Truedale. With the passing of his own season of madness, he looked upon this calm serenity of her character with deepest admiration.

“The best any man should hope for,” he admitted—turning, as he thought, his back upon his yearning—“any man who has played the fool as I have, is the sympathetic friendship of a good woman. What right has a man to fall from what he knows a woman holds highest, and then look to her to change her ideals to fit his pattern?”

Arriving at this conclusion, Truedale wrapped the tattered shreds of his self-respect about him and accepted, as best he could, the prospect of Lynda’s adjustment to the future.

Brace and Lynda did not return in time to see Truedale that night. At twelve, with a resigned sigh, he put away his play and went to his lonely rooms in the tall apartment

farther uptown. His dog was waiting for him with the reproachful look in his faithful eyes that reminded Truedale that the poor beast had not had an outing for twenty-four hours.

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"Come on, old fellow," he said, "better late than never," and the two descended to the street. They walked sedately for an hour. The dog longed to gambol; he was young enough to associate outdoors with license; but being a friend as well as a dog, he felt that this was rather a time for close comradeship, so he pattered along at his master's heels and once in a while pushed his cold nose into the limp hand swinging by Truedale's side. "Thank God!" Conning thought, reaching down to pat the sleek head, "I can keep you without—confession!"

For three days and nights Truedale stayed away from the old home. Business was his excuse—he offered it in the form of a note and a bunch of violets. Lynda telephoned on the second day and asked him if he were quite well. The tone of her voice made him decide to see her at once.

"May I come to dinner to-night, Lyn?" he asked.

"Sorry, Con, but I must dine with some people who have bought a hideous house and want me to get them out of the scrape by remodelling the inside. They're awfully rich and impossible—it's a sort of duty to the public, you know."

"To-morrow then, Lyn?"

"Yes, indeed. Only Brace will be dining with the Morrells; by the way, she's a dear, Con."

The next night was terrifically stormy—one of those spring storms that sweep everything before them. The bubbles danced on the pavements, the gutters ran floods, and fragments of umbrellas and garments floated incongruously on the tide.

Battling against the wind, Conning made his way to Lynda's. As he drew near the house the glow from the windows seemed to meet and touch him with welcome.

"I'll economize somewhere," Lynda often said, "but when darkness comes I'm always going to do my best to get the better of it."

Just for one blank moment Truedale had a sickening thought: "Suppose that welcome was never again for him, after this night?" Then he laughed derisively. Lynda might have her ideals, her eternal reservations, but she also had her superb faithfulness. After she knew *all*, she would still be his friend.

When he went into the library Lynda sat before the fire knitting a long strip of vivid wools. Conning had never seen her so employed and it had the effect of puzzling him; it was like seeing her—well, smoking, as some of her friends did! Nothing wrong in it—but, inharmonious.

"What are you making, Lyn?" he asked, taking the ottoman and drawing close to her.

“It—it isn’t anything, Con. No one wants trash like this. It fulfils its mission when it is ravelled and knitted, then unravelled. You know what Stevenson says: ‘I travel for travel’s sake; the great affair is to move.’ I knit for knitting’s sake; it keeps my hands busy while my—my soul basks.”

She looked up with a smile and Truedale saw that she was ill at ease. It was the one thing that unnerved him. Had she been her old, self-contained self he could have depended upon her to bear her part while he eased his soul by burdening hers; but now he caught in her the appealing tenderness that had always awakened in old William Truedale the effort to save her from herself—from the cares others laid upon her.

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Conning, instead of plunging into his confession, looked at her in such a protecting, yearning way that Lynda's eyes fell, and the soft colour slowly crept in her cheeks.

In the stillness, that neither knew how to break, Truedale noticed the gown Lynda wore. It was blue and clinging. The whiteness of her slim arms showed through the loose sleeves; the round throat was bare and girlish in its drooping curve.

For one mad moment Truedale tried to stifle his conscience. Why should he not have this love and happiness that lay close to him? In what was he different from the majority of men? Then he thought—as others before him had thought—that, since the race must be preserved, the primal impulses should not be denied. They outlived everything; they rallied from shock—even death; they persisted until extinction; and here was this sweet woman with all her gracious loveliness near him. He loved her! Yes, strange as it seemed even then to him, Truedale acknowledged that he loved her with the love, unlike yet like the love that had been too rudely awakened in the lonely woods when he had been still incapable of understanding it.

Then the storm outside reached his consciousness and awakened memories that hurt and stung him.

No. He was not as many men who could take and take and find excuse. The very sincerity of the past and future must prove itself, now, in this throbbing, vital present. Only so could he justify himself and his belief in goodness. He must open his heart and soul to the woman beside him. There was no other alternative.

But first they dined together across the hall. Truedale noted every special dish—the meal was composed of his favourite viands. The intimacy of sitting opposite Lynda, the smiling pleasure of old Thomas who served them, combined to lure him again from his stern sense of duty.

Why? Why? his yearning pleaded. Why should he destroy his own future happiness and that of this sweet, innocent woman for a whim—that was what he tried to term it—of conscience? Why, there were men, thousands of them, who would call him by a harsher name than he cared to own, if he followed such a course; and yet—then Truedale looked across at Lynda.

“A woman should have clear vision and choice,” his reason commanded, and to this his love agreed.

But alone with Lynda, in the library later, the conflict was renewed. Never had she been so sweet, so kind. The storm beat against the house and instead of interfering, seemed to hold them close and—together. It no longer aroused in Truedale recollections that smarted. It was like an old familiar guide leading his thought into ways sacred and



happy. Then suddenly, out of a consciousness that knew neither doubt nor fear, he said:

“You and I, Lyn, were never afraid of truth, were we?”

“Never.”

She was knitting again—knitting feverishly and desperately.

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"Lyn—I want to tell you—all about it! About something you must know."

Very quietly now, Lynda rolled her work together and tossed it, needles and all, upon the glowing logs. She was done, forever, with subterfuge and she knew it. The wool curled, blackened, and gave forth a scorched smell before the red coals subdued it. Then, with a straight, uplifted look:

"I'm ready, Con."

"Just before I broke down and went away, Brace once told me that my life had no background, no colour. Lynda, it is of that background about which you do not know, that I want to speak." He waited a moment, then went on:

"I went away—to the loneliest, the most beautiful place I had ever seen. For a time there seemed to be nobody in the world but the man with whom I lived and me. He liked and trusted me—I betrayed his trust!"

Lynda caught her breath and gave a little exclamation of dissent, wonder.

"You—betrayed him, Con! I cannot believe that. Go on."

"Yes. I betrayed his trust. He left me and went into the deep woods to hunt. He put everything in my care—everything. He was gone nearly three weeks. No one knew of my existence. They are like that down there. If you are an outsider you do not matter. I had arrived at dark; I was sent for a certain purpose; that was all that mattered. I began and ended with the man who was my host and who had been told to—to keep me secret." Truedale was gripping the arms of his chair and his words came punctuated by sharp pauses.

"And then, into that solitude, came a young girl. Remember, she did not know of my existence. We—discovered each other like creatures in a new world. There are no words to describe her—I cannot even attempt it, Lynda. I ruined her life. That's all!"

The bald, crushing truth was out. For a moment the man Lynda Kendall knew and loved seemed hiding behind this monster the confession had called forth. A lesser woman would have shrunk in affright, but not Lynda.

"No. That is not all," she whispered hoarsely, putting her hands out as though pushing something tangible aside until she could reach Conning. "I demand the rest."

"What matters it?" Truedale spoke bitterly. "If I tell how and why, can that alter the—fact? Oh! I have had my hours of explaining and justifying and glossing over; but I've come at last to the point where I see myself as I am and I shall never argue the thing again."



“Con, you have shown me the man as man might see him; I must—I must have him as a woman—as his God—must see him!”

“And you think it possible for me to grant this? You—you, Lynda, would you have me put up a defense for what I did?”

“No. But I would have you throw all the light upon it that you can. I want to see—for myself. I will not accept the hideous skeleton you have hung before me. Con, I have never really known but five men in my life; but women—women have lain heart deep along my way ever since—I learned to know my mother! Not only for yourself, but for that girl who drifted into your solitude, I demand light—all that you can give me!”

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And now Truedale breathed hard and the muscles of his face twitched. He was about to lay bare the inscrutable, the holy thing of his life, fearing that even the woman near him could not be just. He had accepted his own fate, so he thought; he meant not to whine or complain, but how was he to live his life if Lynda failed to agree with him—where Nella-Rose was concerned?

“Will you—can you—do what I ask, Con?”

“Yes—in a minute.”

“You—loved her? She loved you—Con?” Lynda strove to smooth the way, not so much for Truedale as for herself.

“Yes! I found her in my cabin one day when I returned from a long tramp. She had decked herself out in my bathrobe and the old fez. Not knowing anything about me, she was horribly frightened when I came upon her. At first she seemed nothing but a child—she took me by storm. We met in the woods later. I read to her, taught her, played with her—I, who had never played in my life before. Then suddenly she became a woman! She knew no law but her own; she was full of courage and daring and a splendid disregard for conventions as—as we all know them. For her, they simply did not exist. I—I was willing and eager to cast my future hopes of happiness with hers—God knows I was sincere in that!

“Then came a night of storm—such as this. Can you imagine it in the black forests where small streams become rivers in a moment, carrying all before them as they plunge and roar down the mountain sides? Dangers of all sorts threatened and, in the midst of that storm, something occurred that involved me! I had sent Nella-Rose—that was her name—away earlier in the day. I could not trust myself. But she came back to warn me. It meant risking everything, for her people were abroad that night bent on ugly business; she had to betray them in order to save me. To have turned her adrift would have meant death, or worse. She remained with me nearly a week—she and I alone in that cabin and cut off from the world—she and I! There was only myself to depend upon—and, Lynda, I failed again!”

“But, Con—you meant to—to marry her; you meant that—from the first?” Lynda had forgotten herself, her suffering. She was struggling to save something more precious than her love; she was holding to her faith in Truedale.

“Good God! yes. It was the one thing I wanted—the one thing I planned. In my madness it did not seem to matter much except as a safeguard for her—but I had no other thought or intention. We meant to go to a minister as soon as the storm released us. Then came the telegram about Uncle William, and the minister was killed during the storm. Lynda, I wanted to bring Nella-Rose to you just as she was, but she would not come. I left my address and told her to send for me if she needed me—I meant to

return as soon as I could, anyway. I would have left anything for her. She never sent for me—and the very day I left—she—”

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"What, Con? I must know all."

"Lynda, before God I believe something drove the child to it; you must not—you shall not judge her. But she went, the very night I left, to a man—a man of the hills—who had loved her all his life. He was in danger; he escaped, taking her with him!"

"I—I do *not* believe it!" The words rang out sharply, defiantly. Woman was in arms for woman. The loyalty that few men admit confronted Truedale now. It seemed to glorify the darkness about him. He had no further fear for Nella-Rose and he bowed his head before Lynda's blazing eyes.

"God bless you!" he whispered, "but oh! Lyn, I went back to make sure. I had the truth from her own father. And with all—she stands to this day, in my memory, guiltless of the monstrous wrong she seemed to commit; and so she will always stand.

"Since then, Lynda, I have lived a new piece of life; the past lies back there and it is dead, dead. I would not have told you this but for one great and tremendous thing. You will not understand this; no woman could. A man could, but not a woman.

"As I once loved—in another way—that child of the hills, I love you, the one woman of my manhood's clearer vision. Because of that love—I had to speak."

Truedale looked up and met the eyes that searched his soul.

"I believe you," Lynda faltered. "I do not understand, but I believe you. Go away now, Con, I want to think."

He rose at once and bent over her. "God bless you, Lyn," was all he said.

CHAPTER XV

Two days, then three passed. Lynda tried to send for Truedale—tried to believe that she saw clearly at last, but having decided that she was ready she was again lost in doubt and plunged into a new struggle.

She neglected her work and grew pale and listless. Brace was worried and bewildered. He had never seen his sister in like mood and, missing Conning from the house, he drew, finally, his own conclusions.

One day, it was nearly a week after Truedale's call, Brace came upon his sister in the workshop over the extension. She was sitting on the window-ledge looking out into the old garden where a magnolia tree was in full bloom.

“Heigho, boy!” she said, welcoming him with her eyes. “I’ve just discovered that spring is here. I’ve always been ready for it before. This year it has taken me by surprise.”

Brace came close to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“What’s the matter, girl?” he asked in his quick, blunt way.

The tears came to Lynda’s eyes, but she did not shrink.

“Brother,” she said slowly, “I—I want to marry Con and—I do not dare.”

Kendall dropped in the nearest chair, and stared blankly at his sister.

“Would you mind being a bit more—well, more explicit?” he faltered.

“I’m going to ask you—some questions, dear. Will you—tell me true?”

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"I'll do my best." Kendall passed his hand through his hair; it seemed to relieve the tension.

"Brace, can a man truly love many times? Perhaps not many—but twice—truly?"

"Yes—he can!" Brace asserted boldly. "I've been in love a dozen times myself. I always put it to the coffee-urn test—that settles it."

"Brace, I am in earnest. Do not joke."

"Joke? Good Lord! I tell you, Lyn, I am in *deadly* earnest—deadlier than you know. When a man puts his love three hundred and sixty-five times a year, in fancy, behind his coffee-urn, he gets his bearings."

"You've never grown up, Brace, and I feel as old—as old as both your grandmothers. I do not mean—puppy-love; I mean the love that cuts deep in a man's soul. Can it cut twice?"

"If it couldn't, it would be good-bye to the future of the race!" And now Kendall had the world's weary knowledge in his eyes.

"A woman—cannot understand that, Lyn. She must trust if she loves."

"Yes." The universal language of men struck Lynda like a strange tongue. Had she been living all her life, she wondered, like a foreigner—understanding merely by signs? And now that she was close—was confronting a situation that vitally affected her future—must she, like other women, trust, trust?

"But what has all this to do with Con?" Kendall's voice roused Lynda sharply.

"Why—everything," she said in her simple, frank way, "he—he is offering me a second love, Brace."

For a moment Kendall thought his sister was resorting to sarcasm or frivolity. But one look at her unsmiling face and shadow-touched eyes convinced him.

"You hardly are the woman to whom dregs should be offered," he said slowly, and then, "But Con! Good Lord!"

"Brace, now I am speaking the woman's language, perhaps you may not be able to understand me, but I know Con is not offering me dregs—I do not think he has any dregs in his nature; he is offering me the best, the truest love of his life. I know it! I know it! The love that would bring my greatest joy and his best good and—yet I am afraid!"

Kendall went over and stood close beside his sister again.

“You know that?” he asked, “and still are afraid? Why?”

The clear eyes looked up pathetically. “Because Con may not know, and I may not be able to make him know—make him—forget!”

There was a moment's silence. Kendall was never to forget the magnolia tree in its gorgeous, pink bloom; the droop of his strong, fine sister! Sharply he recalled the night long ago when Truedale groaned and threw his letters on the fire.

“Lyn, I hardly dare ask this, knowing you as I do—you are not the sort to compromise with honour selfishly or idiotically—but, Lyn, the—the other love, it was not—an evil thing?”

The tears sprang to Lynda's eyes and she flung her arms around her brother's neck and holding him so whispered:

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"No! no! At least I can understand that. It was the—the most beautiful and tender tragedy. That is the trouble. It was so—wonderful, that I fear no man can ever quite forget and take the new love without a backward look. And oh! Brace, I must have—my own! Men cannot always understand women when they say this. They think, when we say we want our own lives, that it means lives running counter to theirs. This is not so. We want, we must choose—but the best of us want the common life that draws close to the heart of things; we want to go with our men and along their way. Our way and theirs are the *same* way, when love is big enough."

"Lyn—there isn't a man on God's earth worthy of—you!"

"Brace, look at me—answer true. Am I such that a man could really want me?"

He looked long at her. Bravely he strove to forget the blood tie that held them. He regarded her from the viewpoint that another man might have. Then he said:

"Yes. As God hears me, Lyn—yes!"

She dropped her head upon his shoulder and wept as if grief instead of joy were sweeping over her. Presently she raised her tear-wet face and said:

"I'm going to marry Con, dear, as soon as he wants me. I hate to say this, Brace, but it is a little as if Conning had come home to me from an honourable war—a bit mutilated. I must try to get used to him and I will! I will!"

Kendall held her to him close. "Lyn, I never knew until this moment how much I have to humbly thank God for. Oh! if men only could see ahead, young fellows I mean, they would not come to a woman—mutilated. I haven't much to offer, heaven knows, but—well, Lyn, I can offer a clear record to some woman—some day!"

All that day Lynda thought of the future. Sitting in her workshop with the toy-like emblems of her craft at hand she thought and thought. It seemed to her, struggling alone, that men and women, after all, walked through life—largely apart. They had built bridges with love and necessity and over them they crossed to touch each other for a space, but oh! how she longed for a common highway where she and Con could walk always together! She wanted this so much, so much!

At five o'clock she telephoned to Truedale. She knew he generally went to his apartment at that hour.

"I—I want to see you, Con," she said.

"Yes, Lyn. Where?"

She felt the answer meant much, so she paused.

“After dinner, Con, and come right up to—to my workshop.”

“I will be there—early.”

Lynda was never more her merry old self than she was at dinner; but she was genuinely relieved when Brace told her he was going out.

“What are you going to do, Lyn?” he asked.

“Why—go up to my workshop. I’ve neglected things horribly, lately.”

“I thought that night work was taboo?”

“I rarely work at night, Brace. And you—where are you going?”

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"Up to Morrell's."

Lynda raised her eyebrows.

"Mrs. Morrell's sister has come from the West, Lyn. She's very interesting. She's *voted*, and it hasn't hurt her."

"Why should it? And"—Lynda came around the table and paused as she was about to go out of the room "I wonder if she could pass the coffee-urn test, on a pinch?"

Kendall coloured vividly. "I've been thinking more of my end of the table since I saw her than I ever have before in my life. It isn't all coffee-urn, Lyn."

"Indeed it isn't! I must see this little womanly Lochinvar at once. Is she pretty—pretty as Mrs. John?"

"Why—I don't know. I haven't thought. She's so different from—every one. She's little but makes you think big. She's always saying things you remember afterward, but she doesn't talk much. She's—she's got light hair and blue eyes!" This triumphantly.

"And I hope she—dresses well?" This with a twinkle, for Kendall was keen about the details of a woman's dress.

"She must, or I would have noticed." Then, upon reflection, "or perhaps I wouldn't."

"Well, good-night, Brace, and—give Mrs. John my love. Poor dear! she came up to ask me yesterday if I could make a small room *look* spacious! You see, John likes to have everything cluttered—close to his touch. She wants him to have his way and at the same time she wants to breathe, too. Her West is in her blood."

"What are you going to do about it, Lyn?" Kendall lighted a cigar and laughed.

"Oh, I managed to give a prairie-like suggestion of openness to her living-room plan and I told her to make John reach for a few things. It would do him good and save her soul alive."

"And she—what did she say to that?"

"Oh, she laughed. She has such a pretty laugh. Good-night, brother."

And then Lynda went upstairs to her quiet, dim room. It was a warmish night, with a moon that shone through the open space in the rear. The lot had not been built upon and the white path that had seemed to lure old William Truedale away from life now stretched before Lynda Kendall, leading into life. Whatever doubts and fears she had known were put away. In her soft thin dress, standing by the open window, she was the

gladdest creature one could wish to see. And so Truedale found her. He knew that only one reason had caused Lynda to meet him as she was now doing. It was—surrender! Across the moon-lighted room he went to her with opened arms, and when she came to meet him and lifted her face he kissed her reverently.

“I wonder if you have thought?” he whispered.

“I have done nothing else in the ages since I last saw you, Con.”

“And you are not—afraid? You, who should have the best the world has to offer?”

“I am not afraid; and I—have the best—the very best.”

Again Truedale kissed her.



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"And when—may I come home—to stay?" he asked presently, knowing full well that the old home must be theirs.

Lynda looked up and smiled radiantly. "I had hoped," she said, "that I might have the honour of declining the little apartment. I'm so glad, Con, dear, that you want to come home to stay and will not have to be—forced here!" And at that moment Lynda had no thought of the money. Bigger, deeper things held her.

"And—our wedding day, Lyn? Surely it may be soon."

"Let me see. Of course I'm a woman, Con, and therefore I must think of clothes. And I would like—oh! very much—to be married in a certain little church across the river. I found it once on a tramp. There are vines running wild over it—pink roses. And roses come in early June, Con."

"But, dearest, this is only—March."

"I must have—the roses, Con."

And so it was decided.

Late that night, in the stillness of the five little rooms of the big apartment, Truedale thought of his past and his future.

How splendid Lynda had been. Not a word of all that he had told her, and yet full well he realized how she had battled with it! She had accepted it and him! And for such love and faith his life would be only too short to prove his learning of his hard lesson. The man he now was sternly confronted the man he had once been, and then Truedale renounced the former forever—renounced him with pity, not with scorn. His only chance of being worthy of the love that had come into his life now, was to look upon the past as a stepping stone. Unless it could be that, it would be a bottomless pit.

CHAPTER XVI

The roses came early that June. Truedale and Lynda went often on their walks to the little church nestling deep among the trees in the Jersey town. They got acquainted with the old minister and finally they set their wedding day. They, with Brace, went over early on the morning. Lynda was in her travelling gown for, after a luncheon, she and Truedale were going to the New Hampshire mountains. It was such a day as revived the reputation of June, and somehow the minister, steeped in the conventions of his office, could not let things rest entirely in the hands of the very eccentric young people who had won his consent to marry them. An organist, practising, stayed on, and always Lynda was to recall, when she thought of her wedding day, those tender notes that rose and fell like a stream upon which the sacred words of the simple service floated.

“The Voice That Breathed O’er Eden” was what the unseen musician played. He seemed detached, impersonal, and only the repeated strains gave evidence of his sympathy. An old woman had wandered into the church and sat near the door with a rapt, wistful look on her wrinkled face. Near the altar was a little child, a tiny girl with a bunch of wayside flowers in her fat, moist hand.

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Lynda paused and whispered something to the little maid and then, as she went forward, Truedale noticed that the child was beside Lynda, a shabby, wee maid of honour!

It was very quaint, very touchingly pretty, but the scene overawed the baby and when the last words were said and Truedale had kissed his wife they noticed that the little one was in tears. Lynda bent over her full of tenderness.

“What is it, dear?” she whispered.

“I—I want—my mother!”

“So do I, sweetheart; so do I!”

The wet eyes were raised in wonder.

“And where is your mother, baby?”

“Up—up—the hill!”

“Why, so is mine, but you will find yours—first. Don’t cry, sweetheart. See, here is a little ring. It is too large for you now, but let your mother keep it, and when you are big enough, wear it—and remember—me.”

Dazzled by the gift, the child smiled up radiantly. “Good-bye,” she whispered, “I’ll tell mother—and I won’t forget.”

Later that same golden day, when Kendall bade his sister and Truedale good-bye at the station he had the look on his face that he used to have when, as a child, he was wont to wonder why he had to be brave because he was a boy.

It made Lynda laugh, even while a lump came in her throat. Then, as in the old days, she sought to recompense him, without relenting as to the code.

“Of course you’ll miss us, dear old fellow, but we’ll soon be back and”—she put her lips to his ear and whispered—“there’s the little sister of the Morrells; play with her until we come home.”

There are times in life that stand forth as if specially designed, and cause one to wonder, if after all, a personal God isn’t directing affairs for the individual. They surely could not have just happened, those weeks in the mountains. So warm and still and cloudless they were for early June. And then there was a moon for a little while—a calm, wonderful moon that sent its fair light through the tall trees like a benediction. After that there were stars—millions of them—each in its place surrounded by that blue-blackness that is luminous and unearthly. Securing a guide, Truedale and Lynda sought

their own way and slept, at night, in wayside shelters by their own campfires. They had no definite destination; they simply wandered like pilgrims, taking the day's dole with joyous hearts and going to their sleep at night with healthy weariness.

Only once during those weeks did they speak of that past of Truedale's that Lynda had accepted in silence.

"My wife," Truedale said—she was sitting beside him by the outdoor fire—"I want you always to remember that I am more grateful than words can express for your—bigness, your wonderful understanding. I did not expect that even you, Lyn, could be—so!"

She trembled a little—he remembered that afterward—he felt her against his shoulder.

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"I think—I know," she whispered, "that women consider the *effect* of such—things, Con. Had the experience been low, it would have left its mark; as it is I am sure—well, it has not darkened your vision."

"No, Lyn, no!"

"And lately, I have been thinking of her, Con—that little Nella-Rose."

"You—have? You *could*, Lyn?"

"Yes. At first I couldn't possibly comprehend—I do not now, really, but I find myself believing, in spite of my inability to understand, that the experience has cast such a light upon her way, poor child, that—off in some rude mountain home—she has a little fairer space than some. Con, knowing you, I believe you could not have—lowered her. She went back to her natural love—it must have been a strong call—but I shall never believe her depraved."

"Lyn," Truedale's voice was husky, "once you made me reconciled to my uncle's death—it was the way you put it—and now you have made me dare to be—happy."

"Men never grow up!" Lynda pressed her face to his shoulder, "they make a bluff at caring for us and defending us and all the rest—but we understand, we understand! I think women mother men always even when they rely upon them most, as I do upon you! It's so splendid to think, when we go home, of the great things we are going to do—together."

A letter from Brace, eventually, made them turn their faces homeward. It was late July then.

LYN, DEAR:

When you can conveniently give me a thought, do. And when are you coming back? I hope I shall not shock you unduly—but it's that little sister of the Morrells that is the matter, Elizabeth Arnold—Betty we call her. I've got to marry her as soon as I can. I'll never be able to do any serious business again until I get her behind the coffee-urn. She haunts me day and night and then when I see her—she laughs at me! We've been over to look at that church where you and Con were married. Betty likes it, but prefers her own folk to stray old women and lost kids. We think September would be a jolly month to be married in, but Betty refuses to set a day until she finds out if she approves of my people! That's the way *she* puts it. She says she wants to find out if you believe in women's voting, for if you don't, she knows she never could get on with you. She believes that the thing that makes women opposed, does other things to them—rather unpleasant, unfriendly things.

I told her your sentiments and then she asked about Con. She says she wouldn't trust the freest woman in the East if she were married to a slave-believing man.

By all this you will judge what a comical little cuss Betty is, but all the same I am quite serious in urging you to come home before I grow desperate.

BRACE.

Truedale looked at Lynda in blank amazement. "I'd forgotten about the sister," he said, inanely.

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"I think, dear, we'll *have* to go home. I remember once when we were quite little, Brace and I, mother had taken me for a visit and left him at home. He sent a letter to mother—it was in printing—'You better come back,' he said; 'You better come in three days or I'll do something.' We got there on the fourth day and we found that he had broken the rocking chair in which mother used to put him to sleep when he was good!"

"The little rowdy!" Truedale laughed. "I hope he got a wallop."

"No. Mother cried a little, had the chair mended, and always said she was sorry that she had not got home on the third day."

"I see. Well, Lyn, let's go home to him. I don't know what he might break, but perhaps we couldn't mend it, so we'll take no chances."

Truedale and Lynda had walked rather giddily upon the heights; the splendour of stars and the warm touch of the sun had been very near them; but once they descended to the paths of plain duty they were not surprised to find that they lay along a pleasant valley and were warmed by the brightness of the hills.

"It's—home, now!" whispered Truedale as he let himself and Lynda in at the front door, "I wish Uncle William were here to welcome us. How he loved you, Lyn."

Like a flood of joy memory overcame Lynda. This was how William Truedale had loved her—this luxury of home—and then she looked at Truedale and almost told him of the money, the complete assurance of the old man's love and trust. But of a sudden it became impossible, though why, Lynda could not have said. She shrank from what she had once believed would be her crowning joy; she decided to leave the matter entirely with Dr. McPherson.

After all, she concluded, it should be Con's right to bring to her this last touching proof of his uncle's love and desire. How proud he would be! How they would laugh over it all when they both knew the secret!

So the subject was not referred to and a day or so later Betty Arnold entered their lives, and so intense was their interest in her and her affairs that personal matters were, for the moment, overlooked.

Lynda went first to call upon Betty alone. If she were to be disappointed, she wanted time to readjust herself before she encountered other eyes. Betty Arnold, too, was alone in her sister's drawing room when Lynda was announced. The two girls looked long and searchingly at each other, then Lynda put her hands out impulsively:

"It's really too good to be true!" was all she could manage as she looked at the fair, slight girl and cast doubt off forever.

“Isn’t it?” echoed Betty. “Whew! but this is the sort of thing that ages one.”

“Would it have mattered, Betty, whether I was pleased or not?”

“Lynda, it would—awfully! You see, all my life I’ve been independent until I met Brace and now I want everything that belongs to him. His love and mine collided but it didn’t shock us to blindness, it awakened us—body and soul. When that happens, everything matters—everything that belongs to him and me. I knew you liked Mollie, and John is an old friend; they’re all I’ve got, and so you see if you and I hadn’t—liked each other, it would have been—tragic. Now let’s sit down and have tea. Isn’t it great that we won’t have to choke over it?”

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Betty presided at the small table so daintily and graciously that her occasional lapses into slang were like the dartings of a particularly frisky little animal from the beaten track of conventions. She and Lynda grew confidential in a half hour and felt as if they had known each other for years at the close of the call. Just as Lynda was reluctantly leaving, Mrs. Morrell came in. She was darker, more dignified than her sister, but like her in voice and laugh.

"Mollie, I wish I had told you to stay another hour," Betty exclaimed, going to her sister and kissing her. "And oh! Mollie, Lynda likes me! I'll confess to you both now that I have lain awake nights dreading this ordeal."

When Lynda met Brace that evening she was amused at his drawn face and tense voice.

"How did you like her?" he asked feebly and at that moment Lynda realized how futile a subterfuge would have been.

"Brace, I love her!"

"Thank God!"

"Why, Brace!"

"I mean it. It would have gone hard with me if you hadn't."

To Truedale, Betty presented another aspect.

"You can trust women with your emotions about men," she confided to Lynda, "but not men! I wouldn't let Brace know for anything how my love for him hobbles me; and if your Con—by the way, he's a great deal nicer than I expected—should guess my abject state, he'd go to Brace and—put him wise! That's why men have got where they are to-day—standing together. And then Brace might begin at once to bully me. You see, Lynda, when a husband gets the upper hand it's often because he's reinforced by all the knowledge his male friends hand out to him."

Truedale met Betty first at the dinner—the little family dinner Lynda gave for her. Morrell and his wife. Brace and Betty, himself and Lynda.

In a trailing blue gown Betty looked quite stately and she carried her blond head high. She sparkled away through dinner and proved her happy faculty of fitting in, perfectly. It was a very merry meal, and later, by the library fire, Conning found himself tete-a-tete with his future sister-in-law. She amused him hugely.

"I declare," he said teasingly, "I can hardly believe that you believe in the equality of the sexes." They were attacking that problem at the moment.

"I—don't!" Betty looked quaintly demure. "I believe in the superiority of men!"

"Good Lord!"

"I do. That's why I want all women to have the same chance that men have had to get superior. I—I want my sisters to get there, too!"

"There? Just where?" Truedale began to think the girl frivolous; but her charm held.

"Why, where their qualifications best fit them to be. I'm going to tell you a secret—I'm tremendously religious! I believe God knows, better than men, about women; I want—well, I don't want to seem flippant—but truly I'd like to hear God speak for himself!"

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Truedale smiled. "That's a common-sense argument, anyway," he said. "But I suppose we men are afraid to trust any one else; we don't want to—lose you."

"As if you could!" Betty held her small, white hand out to the dog lying at her feet. "As if we didn't know, that whatever we don't want, we do want you. Why, you are our—job."

Truedale threw his head back and laughed. "You're like a whiff of your big mountain air," he said.

"I hope I always will be," Betty replied softly and earnestly, "I must keep—free, no matter what happens. I must keep what I am, or how can I expect to keep—Brace? He loved *this* me. Marriage doesn't perform a miracle, does it—Conning? please let me call you that. Lynda has told me how she and you believe in two lives, not one narrow little life. It's splendid. And now I am going to tell you another secret. I'll have to let Lynda in on this, too, she must help me. I have a little money of my very own—I earned every cent of it. I am going to buy a tiny bit of ground, I've picked it out—it's across the river in the woods. I'm going to build a house, not much of a one, a very small one, and I'm going to call it—The Refuge. When I cannot find myself, when I get lost, after I'm married, and am trying to be everything to Brace, I'm going to run away to—The Refuge!" The blue eyes were shining "And nobody can come there, not even Brace, except by invitation. I think"—very softly—"I think all women should have a—a Refuge."

Truedale found himself impressed. "You're a very wise little woman," he said.

"One has to be, sometimes," came the slow words. And at that moment all doubt of Betty's serious-mindedness departed.

Brace joined them presently. He looked as if he had been straining at a leash since dinner time.

"Con," he said, laying his hand on the light head bending over the dog, "now that you have talked and laughed with Betty, what have you got to say?"

"Congratulations, Ken, with all my heart."

"And now, Betty"—there was a new tone in Kendall's voice—"Mollie has said you may walk back with me. The taxi would stifle us. There's a moon, dear, and a star or two—"

"As if that mattered!" Betty broke in. "I'm very, very happy. Brace, you've got a nice, sensible family. They agree with me in everything."

The weeks passed rapidly. Betty's affairs absorbed them all, though she laughingly urged them to leave her alone.

“It’s quite awful enough to feel yourself being carried along by a deluge,” she jokingly said, “without hearing the cheers from the banks.”

But Mollie Morrell flung herself heart and soul into the arranging of the wardrobe——playing big sister for the first and only time in her life. She was older than Betty, but the younger girl had always swayed the elder.

And Lynda became fascinated with the little bungalow across the river, known as The Refuge.

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The original fancy touched her imagination and she put other work aside while she vied with Betty for expression.

"I've found an old man and woman, near by," Betty said one day, "they were afraid they would have to go to the poor-house, although both are able to do a little. I'm going to put them in my bungalow—the two little upstairs rooms shall be theirs. When I run down to find myself it will be homey to see the two shining, old faces there to greet me. They are not a bit cringing; I think they know how much they will mean to me. They consider me rather immoral, I know, but that doesn't matter."

And then in early October Brace and Betty were married in the church across the river. Red and gold autumn leaves were falling where earlier the roses had clambered; it was a brisk, cool day full of sun and shade and the wedding was more to the old clergyman's taste. The organist was in his place, his music discriminately chosen, there were guests and flowers and discreet costumes.

"More as it should be," thought the serene pastor; but Lynda missed the kindly old woman who had drifted in on her wedding day, and the small, tearful girl who had wanted her mother.

CHAPTER XVII

There are spaces in all lives that seem so surrounded by safety and established conditions that one cannot conceive of change. Those particular spots may know light and shade of passing events but it seems that they cannot, of themselves, be affected. So Truedale and Lynda had considered their lives at that period. They were supremely happy, they were gloriously busy—and that meant that they both recognized limitations. They took each day as it came and let it go at the end with a half-conscious knowledge that it had been too short.

Then one late October afternoon Truedale tapped on the door of Lynda's workshop and to her cheery "come," entered, closed the door after him, and sat down. He was very white and sternly serious. Lynda looked at him questioningly but did not speak.

"I've seen Dr. McPherson," Conning said presently, "he sent for me. He's been away, you know."

"I had not known—but—" Then Lynda remembered!

"Lynda, did you know—of my uncle's—will before his death?"

"Why, yes, Con."

Something cold and death-like clutched Lynda's heart. It was as if an icy wave had swept warmth and safety before it, leaving her aghast and afraid.

"Yes, I knew."

"Will you tell me—I could not go into this with McPherson, somehow; he didn't see it my way, naturally—will you tell me what would have become of the—the fortune had I not married you?"

The deathly whiteness of Lynda's face did not stay Truedale's hard words; he was not thinking of her—even of himself; he was thinking of the irony of fate in the broad sense.

"The money would have—come to me." Then, as if to divert any further misunderstanding. "And when I refused it—it would have reverted to charities."

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"I see. And you did this for me, Lyn! How little even you understood. Now that I have the cursed money I do not know what to do with it—how to get rid of it. Still it was like you, Lynda, to sacrifice yourself in order that I might have what you thought was my due. You always did that, from girlhood. I might have known no other woman could have done what you have done, no such woman as you, Lyn, without a mighty motive; but you did not know me, really!"

And now, looking at Lynda, it was like looking at a dead face—a face from which warmth and light had been stricken.

"I—do not know what you—mean, Con," she said, vaguely.

"Being you, Lyn, you couldn't have taken the money, yourself, particularly if you had declined to marry me. A lesser woman would have done it without a qualm, feeling justified in outwitting so cruel a thing as the bequest; but not you! You saw no other way, so you—you with your high ideals and clear beliefs—you married the man I am—in order to—to give me—my own. Oh, Lyn, what a sacrifice!"

"Stop!" Lynda rose from her chair and, by a wide gesture, swept the marks of her trade far from her. In so doing she seemed to make space to breathe and think.

"Do you think I am the sort of girl who would sell herself for anything—even for the justice I might think was yours?"

"Sell yourself? Thank God, between us, Lynda, that does not enter in."

"It would have, were I the woman your words imply. I had nothing to gain by marrying you, nothing! Nothing—that is—but—but—what you are unable to see." And then, so suddenly that Truedale could not stop her, Lynda almost ran from the room.

For an hour Truedale sat in her empty shop and waited. He dared not seek her and he realized, at last, that she was not coming back to him. His frame of mind was so abject and personal that he could not get Lynda's point of view. He could not, as yet, see the insult he had offered, because he had set her so high and himself so low. He saw her only as the girl and woman who, her life through, had put herself aside and considered others. He saw himself in the light such a woman as he believed Lynda to be would regard him. He might have known, he bitterly acknowledged, that Lynda could not have overlooked in her pure woman soul the lapse of his earlier life. He remembered how, that night of his confession, she had begged to be alone—to think! Later, her silence—oh! he understood it now. It was her only safeguard. And that once, in the woods, when he had blindly believed in his great joy—how she had solemnly made the best of the experience that was too deep in both hearts to be resurrected. What a fool he had been to dream that so wrong a step as he had once taken could lead him to perfect peace. Thinking these thoughts, how could he, as yet, comprehend the wrong he was doing

Lynda? Why, he was grieving over her, almost breaking his heart in his desire to do something—anything—to free her from the results of her useless sacrifice.

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At six o'clock Truedale went downstairs, but the house was empty. Lynda had gone, taking all sense of home with her. He did not wait to see what the dinner hour might bring about; he could not trust himself just then. Indeed—having blasted every familiar landmark—he was utterly and hopelessly lost. He couldn't imagine how he was ever to find his way back to Lynda, and yet they would have to meet—have to consider.

Lynda, after leaving her workshop, had only one desire—she wanted Betty more than she wanted anything else. She put on her hat and coat and started headlong for her brother's apartment farther uptown. She felt she must get there before Brace arrived and lay her trouble before the astoundingly clear, unfaltering mind and heart of the little woman who, so short a time ago, had come into their lives. But after a few blocks, Lynda's steps halted. If this were just her own trouble—but what trouble is just one's own?—she need not hesitate; but how could she reveal what was deepest and most unflinching in her soul to any living person—even to Betty of the unhesitating vision?

Presently Lynda retraced her steps. The calm autumn night soothed and protected her. She looked up at the stars and thought of the old words: "Why so hot, little man, why so hot?" Why, indeed? And then in the still dimness—for she had turned into the side streets—she let Truedale come into her thoughts to the exclusion, for the moment, of her own bitter wrong. She looked back at his strange, lonely boyhood with so little in it that could cause him to view justly his uncle's last deed. She remembered his pride and struggle—his reserve and almost abnormal sensitiveness. Then—the experience in the mountain! How terribly deep that had sunk into Truedale's life; how unable he had been to see in it any wrong but his own. Lynda had always honoured him for that. It had made it possible for her to trust him absolutely. She had respected his fine position and had never blurred it by showing him how she, as a woman, could see the erring on the woman's part. No, she had left Nella-Rose to him as his high-minded chivalry had preserved her—she had dared do all that because she felt so secure in the love and sincerity of the present.

"And now—what?"

The bitterness was past. The shock had left her a bit weak and helpless but she no longer thought of the human need of Betty. She went home and sat down before the fire in the library and waited for light. At ten o'clock she came to a conclusion. Truedale must decide this thing for himself! It was, after all, his great opportunity. She could not, with honour and self-respect, throw herself upon him and so complicate the misunderstanding. If her life with him since June had not convinced him of her simple love and faith—her words, now, could not. He must seek her—must realize everything. And in this decision Lynda left herself so stranded and desolate that she looked up with wet eyes and saw—William Truedale's empty chair! A great longing for her old friend rose in her breast—a longing that not even death had taken from her. The clock struck the half-hour and Lynda got up and with no faltering went toward the bedroom door behind which the old man had started forth on his journey to find peace.

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And just as she went, with blinded eyes and aching heart, to shut herself away from the dreariness of the present, Truedale entered the house and, from the hall, watched her. He believed that she had heard him enter, he hoped she was going to turn toward him—but no! she went straight to the never-used room, shut the door, and—locked it!

Truedale stood rooted to the spot. What he had hoped—what trusted—he could hardly have told. But manlike he was the true conservative and with the turning of that key his traditions and established position crumbled around him.

Lynda and he were married and, unless they decided upon an open break, they must live their lives. But the turning of the key seemed to proclaim to the whole city a new dispensation. A declaration of independence that spurned—tradition.

For a moment Truedale was angry, unsettled, and outraged. He strode into the room with stern eyes; he walked half way to the closed—and locked—door; he gazed upon it as if it were a tangible foe which he might overcome and, by so doing, reestablish the old ideals. Then—and it was the saving grace—Truedale smiled grimly. “To be sure,” he muttered. “Of course!” and turned to his room under the eaves.

But the following day had to be faced. There were several things that had to be dealt with besides the condition arising from the locking of the door of William Truedale’s room.

Conning battled with this fact nearly all night, little realizing that Lynda was feeling her way to the same conclusion in the quiet room below.

“I’m not beaten, Uncle William,” she whispered, kneeling beside the bed. “If I could only see how to meet to-morrow I would be all right.”

And then a queer sort of comfort came to her. The humour with which her old friend would have viewed the situation pervaded the room, bringing strength with it.

“I know,” she confided to the darkness in which the old man seemed present, in a marvellously real way, “I know I love Conning. A make-believe love couldn’t stand this—but the true thing can. And he loves *me*! I know it through and through. The other love of his wasn’t—what this is. But he must find this out for himself. I’ve always been close when he needed me; he must come to me now—for his sake even more than for mine. I am deserving of that, am I not, Uncle William?”

The understanding friendship did not fail the girl kneeling by the empty bed. It seemed to come through the rays of moonlight and rest like a helpful touch upon her.

“Little mother!”—and in her soul Lynda believed William Truedale and her mother had come together—“little mother, you did your best without love; I will do mine—with it! And now I am going to bed and I am going to sleep.”

The next morning Truedale and Lynda were both so precipitate about attacking the situation that they nearly ran into each other at the dining-room door. They both had the grace to laugh. Then they talked of the work at hand for the morning.

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"I have a studio to evolve," Lynda said, passing a slice of toast to Truedale from the electric contrivance before her, "a woman wants a studio, she feels it will be an inspiration. She's a nice little society woman who is bored to death. She's written an article or two for a fashion paper and she believes she has discovered herself. I wish I knew what to put in the place. She'd scorn the real thing and I hate to compromise when it comes to such things. And you, Con, what have you that must be done?"

Truedale looked at her earnestly. "I must meet the lawyer and McPherson," he said, "but may I come—for a talk, Lyn, afterward?"

"I shall be in my workshop all day, Con, until dinner time to-night."

The day was a hard one for them both, but womanlike Lynda accepted it and came to its close with less show of wear and tear than did Truedale. She was restless and nervous. She worked conscientiously until three and accomplished something in the difficult task the society woman had entrusted her with; then she went to her bedroom and, removing every sign of her craft, donned a pretty house dress and went back to her shop. She meant to give Truedale every legitimate assistance, but she was never prouder or firmer in her life. She called the dogs and the cats in; she set the small tea table by the hearth and lighted just fire enough to take the chill from the room and yet leave it sweet and fresh.

At five there was a tap on the door.

"Just in time, Con, for the tea," she called and welcomed him in.

To find her so calm, cheerful, and lovely, was something of a shock to Truedale. Had she been in tears, or, had she shown any trace of the suffering he had endured, he would have taken her in his arms and relegated the unfortunate money to the scrap-heap of non-essentials. But the scene upon which he entered had the effect of chilling him and bringing back the displeasing thought of Lynda's sacrifice.

"Have you had a hard day, Con?"

"Yes."

"Drink the tea, and—let me see, you like bread and butter, don't you, instead of cakes?"

They were silent for a moment while they sipped the hot tea. Then, raising their eyes, they looked suddenly at each other.

"Lyn, I cannot do without you!"

She coloured deeply. She knew he did not mean to be selfish—but he was.

“You would be willing even to—accept my sacrifice?” she asked so softly that he did not note the yearning in the tones—the beseeching of him to abdicate the position that, for her, was untenable.

“Anything—anything, Lynda. The day without you has been—hell. We’ll get rid of the money somehow. Now that we both know how little it means, we’ll begin again and—free from Uncle William’s wrong conceptions—Lyn—” He put his cup down and rose quickly.

“Wait!” she whispered, shrinking back into her low armchair and holding him off by her smile of detachment more than by her word of command.

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"I—I cannot face life without you," Truedale spoke hoarsely, "I never really had to contemplate it before. I need you—must have you."

He came a step nearer, but Lynda shook her head.

"Something has happened to us, Con. Something rather tremendous. We must not bungle."

"One thing looms high. Only one, Lyn."

"Many things do, Con. They have been crowding thick around me all day. There are worse things than losing each other!"

"No!" Truedale denied, vehemently.

"Yes. We could lose ourselves! This thing that makes you fling aside what went before, this thing that makes me long—oh! how I long, Con—to come to you and forget, this thing—what is it? It is the holiest thing we know, and unless we guard it sacredly we shall hurt and kill it and then, by and by, Con, we shall look at each other with frightened eyes—over a dead, dead love."

"Lynda, how—can you? How dare you say these things when you confess—Oh! my—wife!"

"Because"—and she seemed withdrawing from Truedale as he advanced—"because I have confessed! You and I, Con, have reached to-day, by different routes, the most important and vital problem. All my life I have been pushing doors open as I came along. Sometimes I have only peered in and hurried on; sometimes I have stayed and learned a lesson. It will always be so with me. I must know. I think you are willing not to know unless you are forced."

Truedale winced and went back slowly to his chair.

"Con, dear, unless you wish it otherwise, I want, as far as possible, to begin from to-day and find out just how much we do mean to each other. Let us push open the doors ahead until we make sure we both want the same abiding place. Should you find a spot better, safer for you than this that we thought we knew, I will never hold you by a look or word, dear."

"And you—Lyn?" Truedale's voice shook.

"For myself I ask the same privilege."

"You mean that we—live together, yet apart?"



"Unless you will it otherwise, dear. In that case, we will close this door and say—good-bye, now."

Her strength, her tenderness, unmanned Truedale. Again he felt that call upon him which she had inspired the night of his confession. Again he rallied to defend her—from her own pitiless sense of honour.

"By heaven!" he cried. "It shall not be good-bye. I will accept your terms, live up to them, and dare the future."

"Good, old Con! And now, please, dear, go. I think—I think I am going to cry—a little and"—she looked up quiveringly—"I mustn't have red eyes at dinner time. Brace and Betty are coming. Thank heaven, Con, Betty will make us laugh."

CHAPTER XVIII

Having agreed upon this period of probation both Lynda and Truedale entered upon it with characteristic determination. There were times when Conning dejectedly believed that no woman could act as Lynda was doing, if she loved a man. No, it was not in woman's power to forego all Lynda was foregoing if she loved deeply. Not that Lynda could be said to be cold or indifferent; she had never been sweeter, truer; but she was so amazingly serene!

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Perhaps she was content, having secured his rights for him, to go on and be thankful that so little was actually exacted from her.

But such reasoning eventually shamed Truedale, and he acknowledged that there was something superb in a woman who, while still loving a man, was able to withhold herself from him until both he and she had sounded the depths of their natures.

In this state of mind Truedale devoted himself to business, and Lynda, with a fresh power that surprised even herself, resumed her own tasks.

"And this is *love*," she often thought to herself, "it is the real thing. Some women think they have love when *love has them*. This beautiful, tangible something that is making even these days sacred has proved itself. I can rely upon it—lean heavily upon it."

Sometimes she wondered what she was waiting for. Often she feared, in her sad moments, that it might last forever—be accepted this poor counterfeit for the real—and the full glory escape her and Truedale.

But at her best she knew what she was waiting for—what was coming. It was something that, driving all else away, would carry her and Conning together without reservations or doubts. They would *know*! He would know the master passion of his life; she, that she could count all lost unless she made his life complete and so crown her own.

The money was never mentioned. In good and safe investments it lay, awaiting a day, so Truedale told McPherson, when it could be got rid of without dishonour or disgrace.

"But, good heavens! haven't you any personal ambitions—you and Lynda?" McPherson had learned to admire Conning, and Lynda had always been one of his private inspirations.

"None that Lynda and I cannot supply ourselves," Truedale replied. "To have our work, and the necessity for our work, taken from us would be no advantage."

"But haven't you a duty to the money?"

"Yes, we have, and I'm trying to find out just what it is."

And living this strange, abnormal life—often wondering why, and fearing much—three, then four years, passed them by.

It is one thing for two proud, sensitive natures to enter upon a deliberate course, and quite another for them to abandon it when the supposed need is past. There was now no doubt in Truedale's heart concerning Lynda's motive for marrying him; nor did Lynda for one moment question Truedale's deep affection for her. Yet they waited—quite

subconsciously at first, then with tragic stubbornness—for something to sweep obstacles aside without either surrendering his position.

“He must want me so that nothing can sway him again,” thought Lynda.

“She must know that my love for her can endure anything—even this!” argued Conning, and his stand was better taken than hers as she was to find out one day.

It seemed enough, in the beginning, to live their lives close and confidentially—to feel the tie of dependence that held them; but the knot cut in deep at times and they suffered in foolish but proud silence.

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Many things occurred during those years that widened the horizon for them all. Betty's first child came and went, almost taking the life of the young mother with it. Before the possible calamity Brace stood appalled, and both Conning and Lynda realized how true a note the girl was in their lives. She seemed to belong to them in a sense stronger than blood could have made her. They could not imagine life without her sunny companionship. Never were they to forget the grim dreariness of the once cheerful apartment during those days and nights when Death hovered near, weighing the chances. But Betty recovered and came back with a yearning look in her eyes that had never been there before.

"You see," she confided to Lynda, "there will always be moments when I must listen to hear if my baby is calling. At times, Lyn, it seems as if he were just on ahead—keeping me from forgetting. It doesn't make me sad, dear, it's really beautiful that he didn't quite escape me."

"And do you go to The Refuge to think and look and listen?" Lynda asked. For they all worried now when Betty betook herself to the little house.

"Not much!" And here Betty twinkled. "I go there to meet Betty Arnold face to face, and ask her if she would rather trade back. And then I come trotting home, almost out of breath, to precious old Brace; I'm so afraid he won't know he's still the one big thing in the world for me."

This little child of Betty's and Brace's had made a deep impression upon them all. It had lived only three days and while it stayed the black shadow hanging over the mother had made the baby seem of less account; but later, they all recalled the pretty, soft mite with the strange, old look in its wide eyes. He had been beautiful as babies who are not going to stay often are. There were to be no years for him to change and grow and so loveliness came with him.

"I reckon the little chap thought we didn't want him," Brace choked as he spoke over the small, cold body of his first-born, "so he turned back home before he forgot the way."

"Don't, brother!" Lynda pleaded as she stood with Truedale beside him. "You know the way home might have been longer and harder, by and by."

"I wish Betty and I might have helped to make it easier; for a time, anyway." The eternal revolt against seemingly useless suffering rang in the words.

And that night Truedale had kissed Lynda lingeringly.

"Such things," he said, referring to the day's sad duties, "such things do drag people together."

After that something new throbbed in their lives—something that had not held sway before. If Betty looked and listened for the little creature who had gone on ahead, Lynda listened and looked into what had been a void in her life before.

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She had always loved children in a kindly, detached way, but she had never appropriated them. But now she could not forget the feeling of that small, downy head that for a day or so nestled on her breast while the young mother's feet all but slipped over the brink. She remembered the strange look in the child's deep eyes the night it died. The lonely, aged look that, in passing, seemed trying to fix one familiar object. And when the dim light went out in the little face and only a dead baby lay in her arms, maternity had been called forth from its slumber and in following Betty's child, became vitalized and definite.

"I—I think I shall adopt a child." So she had thought while the cold little head yet lay in the hollow of her arm. She never let go this thought and only hesitated before voicing it to Truedale because she feared he could not understand and might cruelly misunderstand. Life was hard enough and difficult enough for them both just then, and often, coming into the quiet home at the day's end, Lynda would say, to cheer her faint heart:

"Oh, well, it's really like coming to a hearth upon which the fire is not yet kindled. But, thank heaven! it is a clean hearth, not cluttered with ashes—it is ready for the fire."

But was it? More and more as the time went on and Truedale kept his faith and walked his way near hers—oh! they were thankful for that—but still apart, Lynda wondered. It was all so futile, so utterly selfish and childish—yet neither spoke. Then suddenly came the big thing that drove them together and swept aside all the barrier of rubbish they had erected. Like many great and portentous things it seemed very like the still, small voice in the burning bush—the tiny star in the black night.

Truedale had had an enlightening conversation with McPherson in the afternoon. The old doctor was really a soft-hearted sentimentalist and occasionally he laid himself bare to the eye of some trustworthy friend. This time it was Truedale.

Up and down the plain, businesslike office McPherson was tramping when Conning was announced.

"Oh! come in, come in!" called McPherson. "You can better understand this than some. I've had a devil of a day. One confounded thing after another to take the soul out of me. And now this letter from old Jim White!"

Conning started. It had now been years since Pine Cone had touched his thought sharply.

"What's the matter with White?" he asked.

"Look out of the window!"

Truedale did so, and into the wall-like snow which had been falling all day.

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"They've been having that in the mountains for weeks. Trails blotted out, folk hiding like beasts, and that good old chap, White, took this time to break his leg. There he lay for a whole week, damn it all! Two of his dogs died—he, himself, almost starved. Managed to crawl to the food while there was any, and then some one ploughed through to get Jim to organize a hanging or some other trifling thing, and found him! Good Lord, Truedale, what they need down there is roads! roads! Roads over which folk can travel to one another and become human. That's all the world needs anyway!" Here McPherson stopped in front of Truedale and glared as if about to put the blame of impeded traffic up to him. "Roads over which folk can travel to one another. See here, you're looking for some excuse to get rid of your damned money. Why don't you build roads?"

"Roads?" Truedale did not know whether to laugh or take his man seriously.

"Yes, roads. I'm going down to Jim. I haven't much money; I've made a good deal, but somehow I never seem able to be caught with the goods on me. But what little I've got now goes to Jim for the purpose of forging a connecting link between him and the Centre. But here's a job for you. You can grasp this need. I've got a boy in the hospital; he caved in from over-study. Trying to get an education while starving himself to death and doing without underclothes. You ought to know how to hew a short cut to him, Truedale; you did some hacking through underbrush yourself. If I didn't believe folk would travel to one another over roads, if there *were* roads, I'd go out and cut my throat."

The big man, troubled and as full of sympathy as a tender woman, paused in his strides and ejaculated:

"Damn it all, Truedale!" Had he been a woman he would have dissolved in tears.

Truedale at last caught his meaning. Here was a possible chance to set the accumulating money free. For two hours, while the sun travelled down to the west, the men talked over plans and projects.

"Of course I'll look after the boy in the hospital, Dr. McPherson. I know the short cut to him and he probably can lead me to others, but I want"—and here Truedale's eyes grew gloomy—"I want you to take with you down to Pine Cone some checks signed in blank. I know the need of roads down there," did he not? and for an instant his brows grew furrowed as he reflected how different his own life might have been, had travelling been easy, back in the time when he was at the mercy of the storm.

"I'd like to do something for Pine Cone. Make the roads, of course, but back up those men and women who are doing God's work down there with little help or money. They know the people—Jim has explained them to me. They're not 'extry polite,' Jim says, but they understand the needs. I don't care to have my name known—I'm rather poor

stuff for a philanthropist—but I want to do something as a starter, and this seems an inspiration.”

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McPherson had been listening, and gradually his long strides became less nervous.

“Until to-day, I haven’t wished your uncle back, Truedale, since he went. He was a poor, inarticulate fellow, but I’ve learned to realize that he had a wide vision.”

“Thank you, Dr. McPherson, but I have often wished him back.”

Once outside McPherson’s house, Truedale raised his head and sniffed the clear, winter air with keen enjoyment. A sense of achievement possessed him; the joy of feeling he had solved a knotty problem. He found he could think of Pine Cone—and, yes, of Nella-Rose—without a hurting smart. He was going to do something for her—for her people! He was going to make life easier—happier—for them, so he prayed in his silent, wordless way. He had a new and strange impulse to go to Lynda and tell her that at last he was released from any hold of the past. He was going to do what he could and there was no longer any dragging of the anchors. He wanted her to help him—to work out some questions from the woman’s point of view. So he hurried on and entered the house with a light, boyish step.

Thomas, bent but stately, was laying the table in the cheerful dining room. There were flowers in a deep green bowl, pale golden asters.

Long afterward Truedale recalled everything as if it had been burned in his mind.

“Is Miss Lynda in?” he asked, for they all clung to the titles of the old days.

“Not yet, Mister Con. She went out in a deal of a hurry long about three o’clock. She didn’t say a word—and that’s agin her pleasant fashion—so I took it that she had business that fretted her. She’s been in the workshop all day.” Thomas put the plates in place. They were white china, with delicate gold edges. “Hum! hum! Mister Con, your uncle used to say, when he felt talkative, that Miss Lynda ought to have some one to hold her back when she took to running.”

“I’ll look her up, Thomas!”

Conning went up to the workshop and turned on the electricity. A desolate sensation overcame the exhilaration of the afternoon. Lynda seemed strangely, ominously distant—as if she had gone upon a long, long journey.

There was a dying fire on the hearth and the room was in order except for the wide table upon which still lay the work Lynda had been engaged with before she left the house.

Truedale sat down before it and gradually became absorbed, while not really taking in the meaning of what he saw. He had often studied and appreciated Lynda’s original way of solving her problems. It was not enough for her to place upon paper the designs

her trained talent evolved; she always, as she put it, lived in the rooms she conceived. Here were real furniture—diminutive, but perfect, and real hangings—colour and form ideal, and arranged so that they could be shifted in order that light effects might be tested.

It was no wonder Truedale had often remarked that Lynda's work was so individual and personal—she breathed the breath of life in it before she let it go from her. Truedale had always been thankful that marriage had not taken from Lynda her joy in her profession. He would have hated to know that he interfered with so real and vital a gift.

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But this room upon which he was now looking was different from anything he had ever before seen in the workshop. It interested and puzzled him.

Lynda's specialties were libraries and living rooms; there were two or three things she never attempted—and this? Truedale looked closer. How pretty it was—like a child's playroom—and how fanciful! There was a fireplace off in a corner, before which stood a screen with a most benign goblin warning away, with spread claws, any heedless, toddling feet. The broad window-seats might serve as boxes for childish treasure. There were delectable, wee chairs and conveniently low stools; there was a tiny bed set in a dim corner over which, on a protecting shield, angels with folded wings and rapt faces were outlined.

"Why, this must be a—nursery!" Truedale exclaimed half aloud; "and she said she would never design one."

Clearly he recalled Lynda's reason. "If a father and a mother cannot conceive and carry out the needs of a nursery, they do not deserve one. I could never bring myself to intrude there."

"What does this mean?" Truedale bent closer. The table had been painted white to serve as a floor for the dainty setting, and now, as he looked he saw stains—dark, tell-tale stains on the shining surface.

They were tear-stains; Lynda, who so joyously put her heart and soul in the ideals for other homes, had wept over the nursery of another woman's child!

For some reason Truedale was that day particularly open to impression. As he sat with the toy-like emblems before him, the holiest and strongest things of life seized upon him with terrific meaning. He drew out his watch and saw that it was the dinner hour and the still house proved that the mistress was yet absent.

"There is only one person to whom she would go," he murmured. "I'll go to Betty's and bring Lynda home."

He made an explanation to Thomas that covered the situation.

"I found what the trouble was, Thomas," he said. "It will be all right when we get back. But don't keep dinner."

He took a cab to Brace's. He was too distraught to put himself on exhibition in a public conveyance. Brace sat in lonely but apparently contented state at the head of his table.

"Bully for you, old man," he greeted. "You were never more welcome. I'll have a plate put on for you at once. What's the matter? You look—"



"Ken, where's Betty?"

"Run away to herself, Con. Went yesterday. Goes less and less often, but she cut yesterday."

"Has—has Lynda been here to-day?"

"Yes. About three. When she found Betty gone, she wouldn't stay. Sit down, old man. You'll learn, as I have, to appreciate Lyn more if she isn't always where we men have thought women ought to be."

Truedale sat down opposite Kendall but said he would take only a cup of coffee. When it was finished he rose, more steadily, and said quietly:

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"I know it's unwritten law, Ken, that we shouldn't follow Betty up without an invitation; but I've got to go over there to-night."

"It's dangerous, old man. I advise against it. What's up?"

"I must see Lyn. I believe she is there."

"Rather a large-sized misunderstanding?"

"I hope, Ken, God helping me, it's going to be the biggest *understanding* Lynda and I have ever had."

Kendall was impressed—and, consequently, silent.

"I'm sure Betty will forgive me. Good-night."

"Good-night, old chap, and—and whatever it is, I fancy it will come out all right."

And then, into the night Truedale plunged—determined to master the absurd situation that both he and Lynda had permitted to exist. He felt like a man who had been suffering in a nightmare and had just awakened and shaken off the effect of the unholy dream.

CHAPTER XIX

Lynda, that winter day, had undertaken her task with unwonted energy. She had never done a similar piece of work before. In her early beginning she had rather despised the inadequacy of women who, no matter what might be said in defense of their ignorance regarding the rest of their homes, did not know how to design and plan their own nurseries. Later she had eliminated designing of this kind because so few asked for it, and it did not pay to put much time on study in preparation for the rare occasions when nurseries were included in the orders. But this was an exception. A woman who had lost three children was expecting the fourth, and she had come to Lynda with a touching appeal.

"You helped make a home of my house, Mrs. Truedale, but I always managed the nursery—myself before; now I cannot. I want you to put joy and welcome in it for me. If I were to undertake it I should fail miserably, and evolve only gloom and fear. It will be different—afterward. But you understand and—you will?"

Lynda had understood and had set herself to her work with the new, happy insight that Betty's little baby had made possible. It had all gone well until the "sleeping corner" was reached, and then—something happened. A memory of one of Betty's confessions started it. "Lyn," she had said, just before her baby came, "I kneel by this small, waiting

crib and pray—as only mothers know how to pray—and God teaches them afresh every time! I do so want to be worthy of the confidence of—God.”

“And I—am never to know!” Lynda bowed her head. “I with my love—with my desire to hear God speak—am never to hear. Why?”

Then it was that Lynda wept. Wept first from a desolate sense of defeat; then—and God sometimes speaks to women kneeling beside the beds of children not their own—she raised her head and trembled at the flood of joy that overcame her. It was like a mirage, seen in another woman’s world, of her own blessed heritage.

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Filled with this vision she had fled to Betty's, only to find that Betty had fled on her own account!

There was no moment of indecision; welcome or not, Lynda had to reach Betty—and at once!

She had tarried, after setting her face to the river. She even stopped at a quiet little tea room and ate a light meal. Then she waited until the throng of business men had crossed the ferry to their homes. It was quite dark when she reached the wooded spot where, hidden deep among the trees, was Betty's retreat.

There was a light in the house—the living room faced the path—and through the uncurtained window Lynda saw Betty sitting before the fire with her little dog upon her lap.

“Oh, Betty,” she whispered, stretching her arms out to the lonely little figure in the low, deep chair. “Betty! Betty!” She waited a moment, then she tapped lightly upon the glass. The dog sprang to the floor, its sharp ears twitching, but he did not bark. Betty came to the door and stood in the warm, lighted space with arms extended. She knew no fear, there was only doubt upon her face.

“Lyn, is it you?”

“Yes! How did you guess?”

“All day I've been thinking about you—wanting you. Sometimes I can bring people that way.”

“And I have wanted you! Betty, may I stay—to-night?”

“Why, yes, dear. Stay until you want to go home. I've been pulling myself together; I'm almost ready to go back to Brace. Come in! Why—what is it, dear? Come, let me take off your things! There! Now lie back in the chair and tell Betty all about it.”

“No, no! Betty, I want to sit so—at your feet. I want to learn all that you can teach me. You have never had your eyes blinded—or you would know how the light hurts.”

“Well, then. Put your blessed, tired head on my knee. You're my little girl to-night, Lyn, and I am your—mother.”

For a moment Lynda cried as a child might who had reached safety at last. Betty did not check or soothe the heavy sobs—she waited. She knew Lynda was saved from whatever had troubled her. It was only the telling of it now. And presently the dark head was lifted.

“Betty, it is Con and I!”

“Yes, dear.”

“I’ve loved him all my life; and I believe—I *know*—he loved me! Women do not make mistakes about the real thing.”

“Never, Lyn, never.”

“Betty, once when I thought Con had wronged me, I wanted to come to you—I almost did—but I couldn’t then! Now that I am sure I have wronged him, it is easy to come to you—you are so understanding!” The radiance of Lynda’s face rather startled Betty. Abandon, relief, glorified it until it seemed a new—a far more beautiful face.

“All my life, Betty, I’ve been controlling myself—conquering myself. I got started that way and—and I’ve kept on. I’ve never done anything without considering and weighing; but now I’m going to fling myself into love and life and—pay whatever there is to pay.”

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"Why, Lyn, dear, please go slower." Betty pressed her face to the head at her knee.

"Betty, there was another love in Con's life—one that should never have been there."

This almost took Betty's breath. She was thankful Lynda's eyes were turned away; but by some strange magic the words raised Truedale in Betty's very human imagination.

"I sometimes think the—the thing that happened—was the working out of an old inheritance; Con has overcome much, but that caught him in its snare. He was ready to let it ruin his whole future. He would never have flinched—never have known, or admitted if he had known—what he had foregone. But the thing was taken out of his control altogether—the girl married another man!

"When Con came to himself again, he told me, Betty—told me so simply, so tragically, that I saw what a deep cut the experience had made in his life—how it had humbled him. Never once did he blame any one else. I loved him for the way he looked upon it; so many men could not have done so. That made the difference with me. It was what the thing had done to Con that made it possible for me to love him the more!

"He wanted the best things in life but didn't think he was worthy! And I? Well, I thought I saw enough for us both, and so I married him! Then something happened—it doesn't matter what it was—it was a foolish, ugly thing, but it had to be something. And Con thought I had never forgiven the—the first love—that I had sacrificed myself for him—in marriage! And no woman could bear that."

"My poor, dear Lyn."

"Can't you see, Betty, it all comes from the idiotic idea that men—some men—have about women. They put us on a toppling pedestal; when we fall they are surprised, and when we don't they—are afraid of us! And all the time—you know this, Betty—we ought not to be on pedestals at all; we don't—we *don't* belong on them! We want to be close and go along together."

"Yes, Lyn; we do! we do!"

"Well—after Con misunderstood, I just let him go along thinking I was—well, the kind of woman who could sacrifice herself. I thought he would want me so that he would—find out. And so we've been eating our hearts out—for ages!"

"Why, Lyn! you cruel, foolish girl."

"Yes—and because I knew you would say that—I could come to you. You—do not blame Con?"

“Blame *him*! Why, Lyn, a gentleman doesn’t take a woman off her beastly pedestal; she comes down herself—if she isn’t a fool.”

“Well, Betty, I’m down! I’m down, and I’m going to crawl to Con, if necessary, and then—I think he’ll lift me up.”

“He’ll never pull you down, that’s one sure thing!”

“Oh! thank you, Betty. Thank you.”

“But, Lyn—what has so suddenly brought you to your senses?”

“Your little baby, Betty!”

“My—baby!” The words came in a hard, gasping breath.

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"I held him when he died, Betty. I had never been close to a baby before—never! A strange thing happened to me as I looked at him. It was like knowing what a flower would be while holding only the bud. The baby's eyes had the same expression I have seen in Con's eyes—in Brace's; I know now it is the whole world's look. It was full of wonder—full of questions as to what it all meant. I am sure that it comes and goes but never really is answered—here, Betty."

"Oh! Lyn. And I have been bitter—miserable—because I felt that it wasn't fair to take my baby until he had done some little work in the world! And now—why, he did a great thing. My little, little baby!" Betty was clinging to Lynda, crying as if all the agony were swept away forever.

"Sometimes"—Lynda pressed against Betty—"sometimes, lately, in Con's eyes I have seen the look! It was as if he were asking me whether he had yet been punished enough! And I've been thinking of myself—thinking what Con owed *me*; what *I* wanted; *when* I should have it! I hate and despise myself for my littleness and prudery; why, he's a thousand times finer than I! That's what pedestals have done for women. But now, Betty, I'm down; and I'm down to stay. I'm—"

"Wait, Lyn, dear." Betty mopped her wet face and started up. She had seen a tall form pass the window, and she felt as if something tremendous were at stake. "Just a minute, Lyn. I must speak to Mrs. Waters if you are to stay over night. She's old, you know, and goes early to bed."

Lynda still sat on the floor—her face turned to the red glow of the fire that was growing duller and duller. Presently the door opened, and her words flowed on as if there had been no interruption.

"I'm going to Con to-morrow. I had to make sure—first; but I know now, I know! I'm going to tell him all about it—and ask him to let me walk beside him. I'm going to tell him how lonely I've been in the place he put me—how I've hated it! And some time—I feel as sure as sure can be—there will be something I can do that will prove it."

"My—darling!"

Arms stronger than Betty's held her close—held her with a very human, understanding strength.

"You've done the one big thing, Lyn!"

"Not yet, not yet, Con, dear."

"You have made me realize what a wrong—a bitter wrong—I did you, when I thought you could be less than a loving woman."

“Oh, Con! And have you been lonely, too?”

“Sweet, I should have died of loneliness had something not told me I was still travelling up toward you. That has made it possible.”

“Instead”—Lynda drew his face down to hers—“instead, I’ve been struggling up toward *you*!! Dear, dear Con, it isn’t men and women; it’s *the* man—*the* woman. Can’t you see? It’s the sort of thing life makes of us that counts; not the steps we take on the way. You—you know this, Con?”

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"I know it, now, from the bottom of my soul."

* * * * *

It was one of Betty's quaint sayings that some lives were guided by flashlights, others by a steady gleam. Hers had always been by the former method. She made her passage from one illumination to another with great faith, high courage, and much joyousness. After the night when Lynda made her see what her dear, dead baby had accomplished in his brief stay, she rose triumphant from her sorrow. She was her old, bright self again; she sang in her home, transfigured Brace by her happiness, and undertook her old interests and duties with genuine delight.

But for Lynda and Truedale the steady gleam was necessary. They never questioned—never doubted—after the night when they came home from the little house in the woods. To them both happiness was no new thing; it was a precious old thing given back after a dark period of testing. The days were all too short, and when night brought Conning running and whistling to the door, Lynda smiled and realized that at last the fire was burning briskly on her nice, clean hearth. They had so much in common—so much that demanded them both in the doing of it.

"No bridges for us, here and there, over which to reach each other," thought Lynda; "it's the one path for us both." Then her eyes grew tenderly brooding as she remembered how 'twas a little child that had led them—not theirs, but another's.

The business involved in setting old William Truedale's money in circulation was absorbing Conning at this time. Once he set his feet upon the way, he did not intend to turn back; but he sometimes wondered if the day would ever come when he could, with a clear conscience, feel poor enough to enjoy himself, selfishly, once more.

From McPherson he heard constantly of the work in the southern hills. Truedale was, indeed, a strong if silent and unsuspected force there. As once he had been an unknown quantity, so he remained; but the work went on, supervised by Jim White, who used with sagacity and cleverness the power placed in his hands.

Truedale's own particular interests were nearly all educational. Even here, he held himself in reserve—placed in more competent hands the power they could wield better than he. Still, he was personally known and gratefully regarded by many young men and women who were struggling—as he once had struggled—for what to them was dearer than all else. He always contrived to leave them their independence and self-respect. Naturally all this was gratifying and vital to Lynda. Achievement was dear to her temperament, and the successes of others, especially those nearest to her, were more precious to her than her own. She saw Truedale drop his old hesitating, bewildered manner like a discarded mantle. She grew to rely upon his calm strength

that developed with the demands made upon it. She approved of him so! And that realization brought out the best in her.

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One November evening she and Con were sitting in the library, Truedale at his desk, Lynda idly and luxuriously rocking to and fro, her hands clasped over her head. She had learned, at last, the joy of absolute relaxation.

"There's a big snow-storm setting in," she said, smiling softly. Then, apropos of nothing: "Con, we've been married four years and over!"

"Only that, Lyn? It seems to me like my whole life."

"Oh, Con—so long as that?"

"Blessedly long."

After another pause Lynda spoke merrily: "Con, I want some of Uncle William's money. A lot of it."

Truedale tossed her a new check book. "Now that you see there is no string tied to it," he said, "may I ask what for? Just sympathetic interest, you know."

"Of course. Well, it's this way. Betty and I are broke. It's fine for you to make roads and build schools and equip the youth of America for getting all the learning they can carry, but Betty and I are after the babies. We've been agonizing over the Saxe Home—Betty's on the Board—and before Christmas we are going to undress all those poor standardized infants and start their cropped hair to growing."

Truedale laughed heartily. "Intimacy with Betty," he said, "has coloured your descriptive powers, Lyn, dear."

"Oh, all happy women talk one tongue."

"And you *are* happy, Lyn?"

"Happy? Yes—happy, Con!"

They smiled at each other across the broad table.

"Betty has told the superintendent that if there is a blue stripe or a cropped head on December twenty-fourth, she's going to recommend the dismissal of the present staff."

"Good Lord! Does any one ever take Betty seriously? I should think one of those board meetings would bear a strong family resemblance to an afternoon tea—rather a frivolous one."

"They don't. And, honestly, people are tremendously afraid of Betty. She makes them laugh, but they know she gets what she wants—and with a joke she drives her truths home."

"There's something in that." Truedale looked earnest. "She's a great Betty."

"So it's up to Betty and me, now," Lynda went on. "We can take off the shabby, faded little duds, but we've got to have something to put on at once, or the kiddies will take cold."

"Surely."

"We think that to start a child out in stripes is almost as bad as finishing him in them. To make a child feel—different—is sure to damn him."

"And so you are going to make the Saxe Home an example and set the ball rolling."

"Exactly, Con. And we're going to slam the door in the faces of the dramatic rich this Christmas. The lambies at the Saxe are going to have a nice, old-fashioned tree. They are going to dress it themselves the night before, and whisper up the chimney what they want—and there is not going to be a speech on Christmas Day within a mile of that Home!"

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"That's great. I'd like to come in on that myself."

"You can, Con, we'll need you."

"Christmas always does set the children in one's thoughts, doesn't it? I suppose Betty is particularly keen—having had her baby for a day or so." Truedale's eyes were tender. Betty's baby and its fulfilled mission were sacred to him and Lynda.

"Betty is going to adopt a child, Con."

"Really?"

"Yes. She says she cannot stand Christmas without one. It's a rebuke to—to her boy."

"Poor little Bet!"

"Oh! it makes me so—so humble when I see her courage. She says if she has a dozen children of her own it will make no difference; she must have her first child's representative. She's about decided upon the one—he's the most awful of them all. She's only hesitating to see if anything awfuller will turn up. She says she's going to take a baby no one else will have—she's going to do the biggest thing she can for her own dead boy. As if her baby ever could be dead! Sometimes I think he is more alive than if he had stayed here and got all snarled up in earthly things—as so many do!"

Conning came close to Lynda and drew her head back against his breast.

"You are—crying, darling!" he said.

"It's—it's Betty. Con, what is it about her that sort of brightens the way for us all, yet dims our eyes?"

"She's very illuminating. It's a big thing—this of adopting a child. What does Brace think of it?"

"He adores everything Betty does. He says"—Lynda smiled up into the face above her—"he says he wishes Betty had chosen one with hair a little less crimson, but that doubtless he'll grow to like that tint better than any other."

"Lyn, have you ever thought of adopting a child?"

"Oh!—sometimes. Yes, Con."

"Well, if you ever feel that you ought—that you want to—I will be glad to—to help you. I see the risk—the chance, and I think I would like a handsome one. But it is Christmas time, and a man and woman, if they have their hearts in the right places, do think of

children and trees and all the rest at this season. Still”—and with that Truedale pressed his lips to Lynda’s hair—“I’m selfish, you seem already to fill every chink of my life.”

“Con, that’s a blessed thing to say to a woman—even though the woman knows you ought not to say it. And now, I’m going to tell you something else, Con. It’s foolish and trifling, perhaps, but I’ve set my heart upon it ever since the Saxe Home got me to thinking.”

“Anything in the world, Lyn! Can I help?”

“I should say you could. You’ll have to be about the whole of it. Starting this Christmas, I’m going to have a tree—right here in this room—close to Uncle William’s chair!”

“By Jove! and for—for whom?”

“Why, Con, how unimaginative you are! For you, for me, for Uncle William, for any one—any really right person, young or old—who needs a Christmas tree. Somehow, I have a rigid belief that some one will always be waiting. It may not be an empty-handed baby. Perhaps you and I may have to care for some dear *old* soul that others have forgotten. We could do this for Uncle William, couldn’t we, Con?”

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"Yes, my darling."

"The children cannot always know what they are missing, but the old can, and my heart aches for them often—aches until it really hurts."

"My dear girl!"

"They are so alike, Con, the babies and the very aged. They need the same things—the coddling, the play, the pretty toys to amuse them—until they fall asleep."

"Lynda, you are all nerves and fancies. Pretty ones—but dangerous. We'll have our tree—we'll call it Uncle William's. We'll take any one—every one who is sent to us—and be grateful. And that makes me think, we must have a particularly giddy celebration up at the Sanatorium. McPherson and I were speaking of it to-day."

"Con, I wonder how many secret interests you have of which I do not know?"

"Not many."

"I wonder!"

Truedale laughed, a bit embarrassed. "Well," he said, suddenly changing the subject, "talking about nerves reminds me that when the holidays are over you and I are going away on a honeymoon. After this we are to have one a year. We'll drop everything and indulge in the heaven-given luxury of loafing. You need it. Your eyes are too big and your face too pale. I don't see what has ailed me not to notice before. But right after Christmas, dear, I'm going to run away with you.... What are you thinking about, Lyn?"

"Oh, only the blessedness of being taken care of! It's strange, but I know now that all my life—before this—I was gazing at things through closed windows. Alone in my cell I looked out—sometimes through beautiful stained glass, to be sure—at trees waving and people passing. Now and then some one paused and spoke to me, but always with the barrier between. Now—I touch people—there is nothing to keep us apart. I'm just like everybody else; and your love and care, Con, have set the windows wide!"

"This will never do, Lyn. Such fancies! I may have to take you away *before* Christmas." Truedale spoke lightly but his look was anxious.

"In the meantime, let us go out for a walk in the snow. There's enough wind to make it a tussle. Come, dear!"

CHAPTER XX

Two days later Lynda came down from her workshop by the back stairs, and passed through William Truedale's bedchamber on the way to the library. It was only ten o'clock in the morning but Truedale had a habit, if he happened to be in the neighbourhood, of dropping in for a moment at this hour. If he should to-day Lynda wanted to confer with him about some details concerning the disrobing of the Saxe infants. She was particularly light hearted and merry. A telephone call from Betty had put her in the sunniest humour.

To her surprise, as she entered the library, she saw a small, most peculiar-looking woman sitting quite straight on the edge of a chair in the middle of the room.

It was a cast-iron rule that Lynda must not be disturbed at her morning work. Thomas generally disposed of visitors without mercy.

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"Good morning!" Lynda said kindly. "Can I do anything for you? I am sorry you had to wait."

She concluded it was some one connected with the Saxe Home. That was largely in her mind at the moment.

"I want to see"—and here the strange little figure came to Lynda and held out a very dirty, crumpled piece of paper on which was written Truedale's name and address.

"Mr. Truedale may not be home until evening," Lynda said. And now she thought that this must be one of the private and pet dependents of Con's with whom she would deal very gently and tactfully. "I wonder if you won't tell me all about it and I will either tell Mr. Truedale or set a time for you to see him."

Glad of any help in this hour of extremity, the stranger said:

"I'm—I'm Nella-Rose. Do you know about me?"

Know about her? Why, after the first stunning shock, she seemed to be the *only* thing Lynda did know about—ever had known! She stared at the little figure before her for what seemed an hour. She noted the worried, pitiful child face that, screened behind the worn and care-lined features, looked forth like a pretty flower. Then Lynda said, weakly:

"Yes, I know about you—all about you, Nella-Rose."

The pitiful eyes brightened. What Nella-Rose had been through since leaving her hills only God understood.

"I'm right glad! And you—you are—"

"I'm Conning Truedale's—wife."

Somehow Lynda expected this to be a devastating shock, but it was not. Nella-Rose was past reservations or new impressions.

"I—I reckoned so," was all she said.

"You must sit down. You look very tired." Lynda had forgotten Truedale's possible appearance.

"I *am* right tired. It's a mighty long way from Pine Cone. And I was so—so frightened, but folks was certainly good and just helped me—to here! One old lady came to the door with me."



“Why—have you come, Nella-Rose?” Lynda drew her own chair close to the stranger’s and as she did so, she could but wonder, now that she was herself again, how exactly Nella-Rose seemed to fit into the scene. She was like a recurrence—like some one who had played her part before—or were the scene and Nella-Rose but the materialization of something Lynda had always expected, always dreaded, but which she had always known must come some day? She was prepared now—terribly prepared! Everything depended upon her management of the crucial moments. Her kindness did not desert her, nor her merciful justice, but she meant to shield Truedale with her life—hers and Nella-Rose’s, if necessary. “Why—have you—come?” she asked again, and Nella-Rose, taking for granted that this pale, strange woman did know all about her—knew everything and every one pertaining to her—fixed her sweet eyes, tear-filled but not overflowing, upon her face.

“I want—to tell him that I’m right sorry I hated him. I—I didn’t know until Bill Trim died. I want to ask him to—to forgive me, and—then I can go back.”

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"What—did—Bill Trim tell you?" Lynda tried with all her strength to keep her mind cool, her thoughts steady. She wanted to lead Nella-Rose on and on, without losing the way herself.

"That he burned—he didn't mean to—he burned the letter I sent—asking—"

"I see! You wrote—a letter, then?"

"Yes. He told me, if I wanted him—and I did—Goddamighty! how I wanted him then!" Nella-Rose clasped her poor little work-hardened hands close, and her small white teeth showed through the parted lips while she struggled to regain her calm.

"You see—when I gave the letter to Bill Trim, I—I told him—I had to—that it was Miss Lois Ann's, so he didn't think it mattered to me; but when he was dying—he was hurt on the big road they are making in the hills—he was brought to us-all, and Miss Lois Ann and I took care of him, and he grew right sorry for hating her and not telling about the letter—and then—he spoke it out!"

"I see. I see. And that was—how long ago—that you wrote the letter?"

Nella-Rose looked back over the weary way she had travelled, to this moment in the warm, sun-filled room.

"It was befo' lil' Ann came that I sent the letter," she faltered.

"Little Ann?" Lynda repeated the name and something terrible rose within her—something that would kill her unless she conquered it. So she asked quickly, desperately:

"Your—your child? I see. Go on—Nella-Rose."

"I wrote the letter and—sent it. I was hid in Miss Lois Ann's cabin—it was winter—and no one found out! Miss Lois Ann wouldn't believe what I told; she said when him and me was married under the trees and God understood, it didn't make me—right! She—helped me, but she hated—him! And then when he—didn't come, she taught me to—to hate, and it was right *black* hate until lil' Ann came. When God let her down to me—He took the hate away."

Lynda was blinded by her tears. She could hardly see the small figure crouching in the low chair by the fire.

"And then—Miss Lois Ann went and told my folks—told Marg, my sister. Marg was married to Jed and she was mighty scornful of me and lil' Ann. She wouldn't tell Jed and my father—she came alone to me. She told me what folks thought. They-all thought I'd gone away with Burke Lawson and Marg felt sorry to see me alive—with lil'



Ann. But Miss Lois Ann wouldn't let her sting me with her tongue—she drove her away. Then—Burke came! He'd been a right long way off—he'd broken his leg; he came as soon as he could, and Marg told him and—and laid lil' Ann to him!"

"And you—never spoke? You never told?" Lynda had drawn very close—her words were barely above a whisper.

"No. It was this-er-way. First, love for him held my tongue mighty still; then hate; and afterwards I couldn't!"

"But now, Nella-Rose, *now*—why have you spoken—now?"

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"I haven't yet. Not to them-all. I had to come here—to him first. I reckon you don't know about Burke and me?"

Lynda shook her head. She had thought she knew—but she had wandered sadly.

"When Marg laid my trouble to Burke he just took it! First I couldn't understand. But he took my trouble—and me! He took lil' Ann and me out of Miss Lois Ann's cabin into—peace and safety. He tied every one's tongue—it seemed like he drove all the—the wrong away by his big, strong love—and set me free, like he was God! He didn't ask nothing for a right long time, not 'til I grew to—believe him and trust him. Then we went—when no one knew—and was married. Now he's my man and he's always been lil' Ann's father till—till—"

A log fell upon the hearth and both women started guiltily and affrightedly.

"Go on! go on!" breathed Lynda. "Go on!"

"Till the twins came—Burke's and mine! Then he knew the difference—even his love for me couldn't help him—it hindered; and while I—I feared, I understood!"

"Oh! oh! oh!" Lynda covered her aching eyes with her cold hands. She dared not look at Nella-Rose. That childish yet old face was crowding everything but pity from the world. Truedale, herself—what did they matter?

"He—he couldn't bear to have lil' Ann touch—the babies. I could see him—shiver! And lil' Ann—she's like a flower—she fades if you don't love her. She grew afraid and—and hid, and it seemed like the soul of me would die; for, don't you see, Burke thinks that Marg's man is—is the father, and Marg and Jed lays the trouble to Burke and they think her—his! And—and it has grown more since the big road brought us-all closer. The big road brought trouble as well as good. Once"—and here the haggard face whitened—"once Burke and Jed fought—and a fight in the hills means more fights! Just then Bill Trim was hurt and told me before he died; it was like opening a grave! I 'most died 'long with Bill Trim—'til I studied about lil' Ann! And then—I saw wide, and right far, like I hadn't since—since before I hated. I saw how I must come and—tell you-all, and how maybe you'd take lil' Ann, and then I could go back to—to my man and—there'll be peace when he knows—at last! Will you—oh! will you be with me, kind lady, when I—tell your—your—man?" Nella-Rose dropped at Lynda's feet and was pleading like a distraught child. "I've been so afraid. I did not know his world was so full of noise and—and right many things. And he will be—different—and I may not be able to make him understand. But you will—you will! I must get back to the hills. I done told Burke I—I was going to prove myself to his goodness—by putting lil' Ann with them as would be mighty kind to her. I seemed to know how it would turn out—and I dared to say it; but now—now I am mighty—'fraid!"

The tears were falling from the pain-racked eyes—falling upon Lynda's cold, rigid hands—and they seemed to warm her heart and clear her vision.

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"Nella-Rose," she said, "where is little Ann?"

"Lil' Ann? Why, there's lil' Ann sleeping her tire off under your pillows. She was cold and mighty wore out." Nella-Rose turned toward the deep couch under the broad window across the room.

Silently, like haunted creatures, both women stole toward the couch and the mother drew away the sheltering screen of cushions. As she did so, the little child opened her eyes, and for a moment endeavoured to find her place in the strangeness. She looked at her mother and smiled a slow, peculiar smile. Then she fixed her gaze upon Lynda. It was an old, old look—but young, too—pleading, wonder-filled. The child was so like Truedale—so unmercifully, cruelly like him—that, for a moment, reason deserted Lynda and she covered her face with both hands and swayed with silent laughter.

Nella-Rose bent over her child as if to protect her. "Lil' Ann," she whispered, "the lady is a right kind lady—right kind!" She felt she must explain and justify.

After a moment or two Lynda gained control of her shaken nerves. She suddenly found herself calm, and ready to undertake the hardest, the most perilous thing that had ever come into her life. "Bring little Ann to the fire;" she said, "I'm going to order some lunch, and then—we can decide, Nella-Rose."

Nella-Rose obeyed, dumbly. She was completely under the control of the only person, who, in this perplexed and care-filled hour, seemed able to guide and guard her.

Lynda watched the two eat of the food Thomas brought in. There was no fear of Truedale coming now. There was safety ahead for some hours. Lynda herself made a pretext of eating, but she hardly took her eyes from little Ann's face. She wanted familiarity to take the place of shock. She must grow accustomed to that terrible resemblance, for she knew, beyond all doubt, that it was to hold a place in all her future life.

When the last drop of milk went gurgling down the little girl's throat, when Nella-Rose pushed her plate aside, when Thomas had taken away the tray, Lynda spoke:

"And now, Nella-Rose, what are you going to—to do with us all?"

The tired head of little Ann was pressed against her mother's breast. The food, the heat, were lulling her weary senses into oblivion again. Lynda gave a swift thought of gratitude for the momentary respite as she watched the small, dark face sink from her direct view.

"We are all in your hands," she continued.

"In *my* hands—*mine*?"



"Yes. Yours."

"I—I must—tell him—and then go home."

"Must you, Nella-Rose?"

"What else is there for me?"

"You must decide. You, alone."

"You"—the lips quivered—"you will not go with me?"

"I—cannot, Nella-Rose."

"Why?"

"Because"—and with all her might Lynda sought words that would lay low the difference between her and the simple, primitive woman close to her—felt she *must* use ideas and terms that would convey her meaning and not drive her and Nella-Rose apart—

"because, while he is my man now, he was first yours. Because you were first, you must go alone—if go you must. Then he shall decide."

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Nella-Rose grasped the deep meaning after a moment and sank back shivering. The courage and endurance that had borne her to this hour deserted her. The help, that for a time had seemed to rise up in Lynda, crumbled. Alone, drifting she knew not where, Nella-Rose waited.

"I'm—afraid!" she repeated over and over. "I'm right afraid. He's not the same; it's all, all gone—that other life—and yet I cannot let him think—!"

The two women looked at each other over all that separated them—and each comprehended! The soul of Nella-Rose demanded justification—vindication—and Lynda knew that it should have it, if the future were to be lived purely. There was just one thing Lynda had to make clear in this vital moment, one truth that must be understood without trespassing on the sacred rights of others. Surely Nella-Rose should know all that there was to know before coming to her final decision. So Lynda spoke:

"You think he"—she could not bring herself, for all her bravery and sense of justice, to speak her husband's name—"you think he remembers you as something less than you were, than you are? Nella-Rose, he never has! He did not understand, but always he has held you sacred. Whatever blame there may have been—he took it all. It was because he could; because it was possible for him to do so, that I loved him—honoured him. Had it been otherwise, as truly as God hears me, I could not have trusted him with my life. That—that marriage of yours and his was as holy to him as, I now see, it was to you; and he, in his heart, has always remembered you as he might a dear, dead—wife!"

Having spoken the words that wrung her heart, Lynda sank back exhausted. Then she made her first—her only claim for herself.

"It was when everything was past and his new life began—his man's life—that I entered in. He—he told me everything."

Nella-Rose bent over her sleeping child, and a wave of compassion overflowed her thought.

"I—I must think!" she whispered, and closed her lovely eyes. What she saw in the black space behind the burning lids no one could know, but her tangled little life must have been part of it. She must have seen it all—the bright, sunlit dream fading first into shadow, then into the dun colour of the deserted hills. Burke Lawson must have stood boldly forth, in his supreme unselfishness and Godlike power, as her redeemer—her man! The gray eyes suddenly opened and they were calm and still.

"I—I only wanted him—to remember me—like he once did," she faltered. She was taking her last look at Truedale. "So long as he—he didn't think me—less; I reckon I don't want him—to think of me as I am—now."

“Suppose”—the desperate demand for full justice to Nella-Rose drove Lynda on—
“suppose it were in your power and mine to sweep everything aside; suppose I—I went
away. What would you do, Nella-Rose?”

Again the eyes closed. After a moment:

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"I—would go back to—my man!"

"You mean that—as truly as God hears you?—you mean that, Nella-Rose?"

"Yes. But lil' Ann?"

Now that she had made the great decision about Truedale, there was still "lil' Ann."

Lynda fought for mastery over the dread thing that was forcing its way into her consciousness. Then something Nella-Rose was saying caught her fevered thought.

"When I was a lil' child I used to dream that some day I would do a mighty big thing—maybe this is it. I don't want to hurt his life and—yours; I couldn't hurt my man and—and—the babies waiting back there for me. But—lil' Ann!"

The name came like a sob. And somehow Lynda thought of Burke Lawson! Burke, who had done his strong best, and still could not keep himself in control because of—lil' Ann! The helpless baby was—oh! yes, yes—it was Truedale's responsibility. If she, Lynda, were to keep her life—her sacred love—she, too, must do a "big thing"—perhaps the biggest a woman is ever called upon to do—to prove her faith.

For another moment she struggled; then, like a blind woman, she stretched out her hands and laid them upon the child.

"Nella-Rose, will you give—*me* little Ann?"

"Give her—to—you?" There was anguish, doubt, but hope, in the words.

"I want—the child! She shall have her father—her father's home—his love, God willing! And I, Nella-Rose, as I hope for God's mercy, I will do my duty by little Ann."

And now Lynda was on the floor beside the shabby pair, shielding them as best she could from the last wrench and renunciation.

"Are you doing this for—for your man?" whispered Nella-Rose.

"Yes. For my—man!" They looked long into each other's eyes. Then solemnly, slowly, Nella-Rose relinquished her hold of the child.

"I—give you—lil' Ann." So might she have spoken if, in religious fervour, she had been resigning her child to death. "I—I—give you lil' Ann." Gently she kissed the sleeping face and laid her burden in the aching, strained arms that had still to learn their tender lesson of bearing. Ann opened her eyes, her lips quivered, and she turned to her mother.

“Take—lil’ Ann!” she pleaded. Then Nella-Rose drank deep of the bitter cup, but she smiled—and spoke one of the lies over which angels have wept forgivingly since the world began.

“Lil’ Ann, the kind lady is going to keep yo’ right safe and happy ’til mother makes things straight back there with—with yo’—father, in the hills. Jes’ yo’ show the lady how sweet and pretty yo’ can be ’til mother comes fo’ yo’! Will yo’—lil’ Ann?”

“How long?”

“A mighty lil’ while.”

All her life the child had given up—shrunk from that which she feared but did not understand; and now she accepted it all in the dull, hopeless way in which timid children do. She received her mother’s kiss—gave a kiss in return; then she looked gloomily, distrustingly, at Lynda. After that she seemed complacent and obeyed, almost stupidly, whatever she was told to do.

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Lynda took Nella-Rose to the station, saw to her every comfort, put a sum of money in her hand with the words:

“You must take it, Nella-Rose—to prove your trust in me; and it will buy some—some things for—the other babies. But”—and here she went close to Nella-Rose, realizing for the first time that the most difficult part, for her, was yet to come—“how will it be with—with your man—when he knows?”

Nella-Rose looked up bravely and something crept into her eyes—the look of power that only a woman who recognizes her hold on a man ever shows.

“He’ll bear it—right grateful—and it’ll wipe away the hate for Jed Martin. He’ll do the forgiving—since I’ve given up lil’ Ann; and if he doubts—there’s Miss Lois Ann. She’s mighty powerful with men—when it’s women that matters.”

“It’s very wonderful!” murmured Lynda. “More wonderful than I can understand.” And yet as she spoke she knew that she *did* understand. Between her and Burke Lawson, a man she was never to know, there was a common tie—a deep comprehension.

Late that afternoon Lynda drove to Betty’s with little Ann sitting rigidly on the seat beside her. The child had not spoken since she had seen the train move out of the station bearing her mother away. She had not cried or murmured. She had gone afterward, holding Lynda’s hand, through amazing experiences. She had seen her shabby garments discarded in dazzling shops, and fine apparel replace them. Once she had caught a glimpse of her small, transformed self in a long mirror and her dark eyes had widened. That was all. Lynda had watched her feverishly. She had hoped that with the change of clothing the startling likeness would lessen, but it did not. Robed in the trappings of her father’s world, little Ann seemed to become more wholly his.

“Do you like yourself, little Ann?” Lynda had asked when, at last, a charming hat was placed upon the dark curls.

There was no word of reply—only the wide, helpless stare—and, to cover her confusion, Lynda hurried away to Betty.

The maid who admitted her said that “Mrs. Kendall was upstairs in the nursery with the baby.”

Lynda paused on the stairs and asked blankly: “The baby? What baby?”

The maid was a trusted one and close to Betty.

“The little boy from the Home, Mrs. Truedale,” she replied, “and already the house is cheerfuller.”

Lynda felt a distinct disappointment. She had hoped that Betty would care for little Ann for a few days, but how could she ask it of her now?

In the sunny room upstairs Betty sat in a low rocker, crooning away to a restless bundle in her arms.

"You, Lyn?" Lynda stood in the doorway; Betty's back was to her.

"Yes, Betty."

"Come and see my red-headed boy—my Bobilink! He's going to be Robert Kendall."

Then Lynda drew near with Ann. Betty stopped rocking and confronted the two with her far-reaching, strangely penetrating gaze.

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"What a beautiful little girl," she whispered.

"Is she beautiful, Betty?"

"She's—lovely. Come here, dear, and see my baby." Betty put forth a welcoming hand to the child, but Ann shrank away and her long silence was broken.

"I jes' naturally hate babies!" she whispered, in the soft drawl that betrayed her.

"Lyn, who is she? Why—what is the matter?"

Lynda came close and her words did not reach past Betty's strained hearing. "I—I'm going to—adopt her. I—I must prepare, Con. I hoped you'd keep her for a few days."

"Of course I will, Lyn. I'm ready—but Lyn, tell me!"

"Betty, look at her! She has come out of—of Con's past. He doesn't know, he mustn't know—not now! She belongs to—to the future. Can you—can you understand? I never suspected until to-day. I've got to get used to it!" Then, fiercely: "But I'm going to do it, Betty! Con's road is my road; his duty my duty; it's all right—only just at first—I've got to—steady my nerves!"

Without a word Betty rose and laid the now-sleeping baby in a crib; then she came back to the low chair and opened her arms to little Ann with the heaven-given gesture that no child resists—especially a suffering, lonely child.

"Come here, little girl, to—to Aunt Betty," she said.

Fascinated, Ann walked to the shelter offered.

"Will you kiss me?" Betty asked. The kiss was given mutely.

"Will you tell Aunt Betty your name?"

"Ann."

"Ann what?"

"Jes' lil' Ann."

Then Betty raised her eyes to Lynda's face and smiled at its tragic suffering.

"Poor, old Lyn!" she said, "run home to Con. You need him and God knows he needs you. It will take the big love, Lyn, dear, the big love; but you have it—you have it!"

Without a word Lynda turned and left Betty with the children.

CHAPTER XXI

Potential motherhood can endure throes of travail other than physical; and for the next week Lynda passed through all the phases of spiritual readjustment that enabled her, with blessed certainty of success, to accept what she had undertaken.

She did not speak to Truedale at once, but she went daily to Betty's and with amazement watched the miracle Betty was performing. She never forgot the hour, when, going softly up the stairs, she heard little Ann laugh gleefully and clap her hands.

Betty was playing with the baby and telling Ann a story at the same time. Lynda paused to listen.

"And now come here, little Ann, and kiss Bobilink. Isn't he smelly-sweet and wonderful?"

"Yes."

"That's right. Kiss him again. And you once said you just naturally didn't like babies! Little Ann, you are a humbug. And now tell me how much you like Bobilink."

"Heaps and lickwigs."

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"Now kiss me, you darling, and come close—so we will not waken Bobbie. Let me see, this is going to be the story of the little girl who adopted a—mother! Yesterday it was Bobbie's story of how a mother adopted a little boy. You remember, the mother had to have a baby to fill a big empty space, so she went to a house where some lost kiddies were and found just the one that fitted in and—and—but this is Ann's story to-day!

"Once there was a little girl—a very dear and good little girl—who knew all about a mother, and how dear a mother was; because she had one who was obliged to go away —"

"For a right lil' time?" Ann broke in.

"Of course," Betty agreed, "a right little time; but the small girl thought, while she waited, that she would adopt a mother and not tell her about the other one, for fear she might not understand, and she'd teach the adopted mother how to be a real mother. And now one must remember all the things little girls do to—to adopted mothers. First—"

At this point Lynda entered the room, but Betty went on calmly:

"First, what do little girls do, Ann?"

"Teach them how to hold lil' girls."

"Splendid! What next?"

"Kiss them and cuddle them right close."

"Exactly! Next?"

"They make mothers glad and they make them laugh—by being mighty good."

Then both Betty and Ann looked at Lynda. The sharp, outer air had brought colour to her cheeks, life to her eyes. She was very handsome in her rich furs and dark, feathered hat.

"Now, little Ann, trot along and do the lesson, don't forget!" Betty pushed the child gently toward Lynda.

With a laugh, lately learned and a bit doubtful, Ann ran to the opened arms.

"Snuggle!" commanded Betty.

"I'm learning, little Ann," Lynda whispered, "you're a dear teacher. And now I have something to tell you."

Ann leaned back and looked with suspicion at Lynda. Her recent past had been so crowded with events that she was wary and overburdened.

“What?” she asked, with more dread than interest.

“Ann, I’m going to take you to a big house that is waiting for a—little girl.”

The child turned to Betty.

“I don’t want to go,” she said, and her pretty mouth quivered. Was she always to be sent away?—always to have to go when she did not want to go?

Betty smiled into the worried little face. “Oh! we’ll see each other every day,” she comforted; “and besides, this is the only way you can truly adopt a mother and play fair. It will be another dear place for Bobilink to go for a visit, and best of all—there’s a perfectly splendid man in the big house—for a—for—a father!”

Real fear came into Ann’s eyes at this—fear that lay at the root of all her trouble.

“No!” she cried. “I can’t play father!”

Lynda drew her to her closely. “Ann, little Ann, don’t say that!” she pleaded passionately: “I’ll help you, and together we’ll make it come true. We must, we must!”

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Her vehemence stilled the child. She put her hands on either side of Lynda's face and timidly faltered: "I'll—I'll try."

"Thank you, dear. And now I want to tell you something else—we're going to have a Christmas tree."

This meant nothing to the little hill-child, so she only stared.

"And you must come and help."

"You have something to teach her, Lyn," Betty broke in. There were tears in her eyes. "Just think of a baby-thing like that not knowing the thrills of Christmas."

Then she turned to Ann: "Go, sweetheart," she said, "and make a nest for Bobbie on the bed across the hall." And then when Ann trotted off to do the bidding, Betty asked: "What did he say, Lyn, when you told him?"

"He said he was glad, very glad. He has been willing, for a long time, that I should take a child—when I saw one I wanted. He naturally connects Ann with the Saxe Home; her being with you has strengthened this belief. I shall let it go at that—for a time, Betty."

"Yes. It is better so. After he learns to know and love the child," Betty mused, "the way will be opened. And oh! Lyn, Ann is so wonderful. She has the most remarkable character—so deep and tenderly true for such a mite."

"Suppose, Betty—suppose Con notices the likeness!"

At this Betty smiled reassuringly.

"He won't. Men are so stupidly humble. A pretty little girl would escape them every time."

"But her Southern accent, Betty. It is so pronounced."

"My dear Lyn, it is! She sometimes talks like a little darkey; but to my certain knowledge there are ten small Southerners at the Saxe, of assorted ages and sexes, waiting for adoption."

"And she may speak out, Betty. Her silence as to the past will disappear when she has got over her fear and longing."

Betty looked more serious. "I doubt it. Not a word has passed her lips here—of her mother or home. It has amazed me. She's the most unusual, the most fascinating creature I ever saw, for her age. Brace is wild about her—he wants me to keep her. But, Lyn, if she does break her strange silence, it will be your big hour! Whatever Con is

or isn't—and sometimes I feel like hugging him, and again, like shaking him—he's the tenderest man with women—not even excepting Brace—that I have ever seen. It never has occurred to him to reason out how much you love him—he's too busy loving you. But when he finds this out! Well, Lyn, it makes me bow my head and speak low."

"Don't, Betty! Don't suggest pedestals again," Lynda pleaded.

"No pedestal, Lyn; no pedestal—but the real, splendid *you* revealed at last! And now—forget it, dear. Here comes lil' Ann."

The child tiptoed in with outstretched arms.

"The nest is made right soft," she whispered, "and now let me carry Bobilink to—to the sleepy dreams."

"Where did you learn to carry babies?" Betty hazarded, testing the silence. The small, dark face clouded; the fear-look crept to the large eyes.

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"I—I don't know," was the only reply, and Ann turned away—this time toward Lynda!

"And suppose he never knows?" Lynda spoke with her lips pressed to Ann's soft hair—the child was in her arms.

"Then you and Con will have something to begin heaven with." Betty's eyes were wet. "We all have something we don't talk about much on earth—we do not dare. Brace and I have our—baby!"

Two days later Lynda took Ann home. They went shopping first and the child was dazzlingly excited. She forgot her restraint and shyness in the fascinating delirium of telling what she wanted with a pretty sure belief that she would get it. No wonder that she was taken out of herself and broke upon Truedale's astonished gaze as quite a different child from the one Lynda had described.

The brilliant little thing came into the hall with Lynda, her arms filled with packages too precious to be consigned to other hands; her eyes were dancing and her voice thrilling with happiness.

"And now I'll call you *muvver-Lyn* 'cause you're mighty kind and this is your house! It's a right fine house."

Truedale had well timed his return home. He was ready to greet the two in the library. The prattling voice charmed him with its delightful mellowness and he went forward gladly to meet Lynda and the new little child. Ann was ahead; Lynda fell back and, with fast-throbbing heart waited by the doorway.

Ann had had a week and more of Brace Kendall to wipe away the impression Burke Lawson had imprinted upon her mind. But she was shy of men and weighed them carefully before showing favours. She stood still when she saw Truedale; she dropped, unheeded, a package; she stared at him, while he waited with extended hands. Then slowly—as if drawn against her will—Ann advanced and laid her hands in his.

"So this is the little girl who has come to help us make Christmas?"

"Yes." Still that fixed look. It seemed to Lynda the most unnatural thing she had ever seen. And oh! how alike the two were, now that they were together!

"You are little Ann and you are going to play with"—Truedale looked toward Lynda and drew her to him by the love in his eyes—"You are going to play with us, and you will call us mother and father, won't you, little Ann?" He meant to do his part in full. He would withhold nothing, now that Lynda had decided to take this step.

"Yes."

“And do you suppose you could kiss me—to begin with?”

Quaintly the child lifted herself on her toes—Truedale was half kneeling before her—and gave him a lingering kiss.

“We’re going to be great friends, eh, little Ann?” Truedale was pleased, Lynda saw that. The little girl was making a deep impression.

“Yes.” Then—deliberately: “Shall I have to teach you to be a father?”

“What does she mean?” Truedale looked at Lynda who explained Betty’s charming foolery.

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"I see. Well, yes, Ann, you must teach me to be a father."

And so they began their lives together. And after a few days Lynda saw that during the child's stay with Betty the crust of sullen reserve had departed—the little creature was the merriest, sweetest thing imaginable, once she could forget herself. Protected, cared for, and considered, she developed marvellously and soon seemed to have been with them years instead of days. The impression was almost startling and both Lynda and Truedale remarked upon it.

"There are certain things she does that appear always to have been waiting for her to do," Conning said, "it makes her very charming. She brushes the dogs and cats regularly, and she's begun to pick up books and papers in my den in a most alarming way—but she always manages to know where they belong."

"That's uncanny," Lynda ventured; "but she certainly has fitted in, bless her heart!"

There had been moments at first when Lynda feared that Thomas would remember the child, but the old eyes could hardly be expected to recognize, in the dainty little girl, the small, patched, and soiled stranger of the annoying visit. Many times had Thomas explained and apologized for the admittance of the two "forlornities," as he called them.

No, everything seemed mercifully blurred; and Ann, in her new home, apparently forgot everything that lay behind her. She never even asked to go back to Betty's though she welcomed Betty, Brace, and Bobbie with flattering joy whenever they came to visit. She learned to be very fond of Lynda—was often sweetly affectionate with her; but in the wonderful home, her very own, waited upon and cared for, it was Conning who most appealed to her. For him she watched and waited at the close of day, and if she were out with Lynda she became nervous and worried if they were delayed as darkness crept on.

"I want father to see me waiting," she would urge; "I like to see his gladness."

"And so do I!" Lynda would say, struggling to overcome the unworthy resentment that occasionally got the better of her when the child too fervently appropriated Conning.

But this trait of Ann's flattered and delighted Truedale; often he was amused, but he knew that it was the one thing above all else in the little girl that endeared her to him.

"What a darling she is!" he often said to Lynda when they were alone together. "Is she ever naughty?"

"Yes, often—the monkey!"

"I'm glad to hear it. I hate a flabby youngster. Does she ever speak of her little past, Lyn?"

“Never.”

“Isn’t that strange?”

“Yes, but I’m glad she doesn’t. I want her to forget. She’s very happy with us—but she’s far from perfect.” “To what form of cussedness does she tend, Lyn? With me she’s as lamblike as can be.”

“Oh! she has a fiery temper and, now that I think of it, she generally shows it in reference to you.”

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"To me?" Truedale smiled.

"Yes. Thomas found her blacking your shoes the other day. She was making an awful mess of it and he tried to take them from her. She gave him a real vicious whack with the brush. What she said was actually comical: 'He's mine; if I want to take the dirt from his shoes, I can. He *shan't* walk on dirt—and he's mine!'"

"The little rascal. And what did Thomas do?"

"Oh! he let her. People always let her. I do myself."

"She's a fascinating kid," Truedale said with a laugh. Then, very earnestly: "I'm rather glad we do not know her antecedents, Lyn; it's safer to take her as we find her and build on that. But I'd be willing to risk a good deal that much love and goodness are back of little Ann, no matter how much else got twisted in. And the love and goodness must be her passport through life."

"Yes, Con, and they are all that are worth while."

But every change was a period of struggle to Ann and those who dealt with her. She had a passionate power of attachment to places and people, and readjustment caused her pain and unrest.

When school was considered, it almost made her ill. She clung to Truedale and implored him not to make her go away.

"But it's only for the day time, Ann," he explained, "and you will have children to play with—little girls like yourself."

"No; no! I don't want children—only Bobbie! I only want my folks!"

Lynda came to her defense.

"Con, we'll have a governess for a year or so."

"Is it wise, Lyn, to give way to her?"

"Yes, it is!" Ann burst in; "it is wise, I'd die if I had to go."

So she had a governess and made gratifying strides in learning. The trait that was noticeable in the child was that she developed and thrived most when not opposed. She wilted mentally and physically when forced. She had a most unusual power of winning and holding love, and under a shy and gentle exterior there were passion and strength that at times were pathetic. While not a robust child she was generally well and as time passed she gained in vigour. Once, and once only, was she seriously ill,

and that was when she had been with Truedale and Lynda about two years. During all that time, as far as they knew, she had never referred to the past and both believed that, for her, it was dead; but when weakness and fever loosened the unchildlike control, something occurred that alarmed Lynda, but broke down forever the thin barrier that, for all her effort, had existed between her and Ann. She was sitting alone with the child during a spell of delirium, when suddenly the little hot hands reached up passionately, and the name “mother” quivered on the dry lips in a tone unfamiliar to Lynda’s ears. She bent close.

“What, little Ann?” she whispered.

The big, burning eyes looked puzzled. Then: “Take me to—to the Hollow—to Miss Lois Ann!”

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"Sh!" panted Lynda, every nerve tingling. "See, little Ann—don't you know me?"

The child seemed to half understand and moaned plaintively:

"I'm lost! I'm lost!"

Lynda took her in her arms and the sick fancy passed, but from that hour there was a new tie between the two—a deeper dependence.

There was one day when they all felt little Ann was slipping from them. Dr. McPherson had come as near giving up hope as he ever, outwardly, permitted himself to do.

"You had better stay at home," he said to Conning; "children are skittish little craft. The best of them haul up anchor sometimes when you least expect it."

So Truedale remained at home and, wandering through the quiet house, wondered at the intensity of his suffering as he contemplated the time on ahead without the child who had so recently come into his life from he knew not where. He attributed it all to Ann's remarkable characteristics.

Late in the afternoon of the anxious day he went into the sick room and leaned over the bed. Ann opened her eyes and smiled up at him, weakly.

"Make a light, father," she whispered, and with a fear-filled heart Truedale touched the electric button. The room was already filled with sunlight, for it faced the west; but for Ann it was cold and dark.

Then, as if setting the last pitiful scene for her own departure, she turned to Lynda: "Make a mother-lap for Ann," she said. Lynda tenderly lifted the thin form from the bed and held it close.

"I—I taught you how to be a mother, didn't I, mommy-Lyn?" she had never called Lynda simply "mother," while "father" had fallen naturally from her lips.

"Yes, yes, little Ann." Lynda's eyes were filled with tears and in that moment she realized how much the child meant to her. She had done her duty, had exceeded it at times, in her determination not to fall short. She had humoured Ann, often taking sides against Conning in her fear of being unjust. But oh! there had always been something lacking; and now, too late, she felt that, for all her struggle, she had not been true to the vow she had made to Nella-Rose!

But Ann was gazing up at her with a strange, penetrating look.

"It's the comfiest lap in the world," she faltered, "for little, tired girls."



"I—I love her!" Lynda gazed up at Truedale as if confessing and, at the end, seeking forgiveness.

"Of course you do!" he comforted, "but—be brave, Lyn!" He feared to excite Ann. Then the weary eyes of the child turned to him.

"Mommy-Lyn does love me!" the weak voice was barely audible; "she does, father, she does!"

It was like a confirmation—a recognition of something beautiful and sacred.

"I felt," Lynda said afterward to Betty, "as if she were not only telling Con, but God, too. I had not deserved it—but it made up for all the hard struggle, and swept everything before it."

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But Ann did not die. Slowly, almost hesitatingly, she turned back to them and brought a new power with her. She, apparently, left her baby looks and nature in the shadowy place from which she had escaped. Once health came to her, she was the merriest of merry children—almost noisy at times—in the rollicking fashion of Betty's irrepressible Bobilink. And the haunting likeness to Truedale was gone. For a year or two the lean, thready little girl looked like no one but her own elfish self; and then—it was like a revealment—she grew to be like Nella-Rose!

Lynda, at times, was breathless as she looked and remembered. She had seen the mother only once; but that hour had burned the image of face, form, and action into her soul. She recalled, too, Conning's graphic description of his first meeting with Nella-Rose. The quaint, dramatic power that had marked Ann's mother, now developed in the little daughter. She had almost entirely lost the lingering manner of speech—the Southern expressions and words—but she was as different from the children with whom she mingled as she had ever been.

When she was strong enough she resumed her studies with the governess and also began music. This she enjoyed with the passion that marked her attitude toward any person or thing she loved.

"Oh, it lets something in me, free!" she confided to Truedale. "I shall never be naughty or unkind again—I wouldn't dare!"

"Why?" Conning was no devotee of music and was puzzled by Ann's intensity.

"Why," she replied, puckering her brows in the effort to make herself clear, "I—I wouldn't be worthy of—of the beautiful music, if I were horrid."

Truedale laughed and patted her pretty cropped head, over which the new little curls were clustering.

Life in the old house was full and rich at that time. Conning was, as he often said, respectably busy and important enough in the affairs of men to be content; he would never be one who enjoyed personal power.

Lynda, during Ann's first years, had taken a partner who attended to interviews, conferences, and contracts; but in the room over the extension the creative work went on with unabated interest. Little Ann soon learned to love the place and had her tiny chair beside the hearth or table. There she learned the lessons of consideration for others, and self-control.

"If the day comes," Lynda told Betty, "when my work interferes with my duty to Con and Ann, it will go! But more and more I am inclined to think that the interference is a matter of choice. I prefer my profession to—well, other things."

“Of course,” Betty agreed; “women should not be forever coddling their offspring, and when they learn to call things by their right names and develop some initiative, they won’t whine so much.”

Lynda and Truedale had sadly abandoned the hope of children of their own. It was harder for Lynda than for Con, but she accepted what seemed her fate and thanked heaven anew for little Ann and the sure sense that she could love her without reserve.

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And then, after the years of change and readjustment, Lynda's boy was born! He seemed to crown everything with a sacred meaning. Not without great fear and doubt did Lynda go down into the shadow; not without an agony of apprehension did Truedale go with her to the boundary over which she must pass alone to accept what God had in store for her. They remembered with sudden and sharp anxiety the peril that Betty had endured, though neither spoke of it; and always they smiled courageously when most their hearts failed.

Then came the black hours of suffering and doubt. A wild storm was beating outside and Truedale, hearing it, wondered whether all the great events of his life were to be attended by those outbursts of nature. He walked the floor of his room or hung over Lynda's bed, and at midnight, when she no longer knew him or could soothe him by her brave smile, he went wretchedly away and upon the dim landing of the stairs came upon Ann, crouching white and haggard.

His nerves were at the breaking point and he spoke sharply.

"Why are you not in bed?" he asked.

"While—mommy-Lyn is—in—there?" gasped the girl, turning reproachful eyes up to him. "How—could I?"

"How long have you been here?"

"Always; always!"

"Ann, you must go to your room at once! Come, I will go with you." She rose and took his hand. There was fear in her eyes.

"Is—is mommy-Lyn—" she faltered, and Truedale understood.

"Good God!—no!" he replied; "not that!"

"I was to—to stay close to you." Ann was trembling as she walked beside him. "She gave you—to me! She gave you to me—to keep for her!"

Truedale stopped short and looked at Ann. Confusedly he grasped the meaning of the tie that held this child to Lynda—that held them all to the strong, loving woman who was making her fight with death, for a life.

"Little Ann," was all he could say, but he bent and kissed the child solemnly.

When morning dawned, Lynda came back—bringing her little son with her. God had spoken!

Truedale, sitting beside her, one hand upon the downy head that had nearly cost so much, saw the mother-lips move.

“You—want—the baby?” he asked.

“I—I want little Ann.” Then the white lids fell, shutting away the weak tears.

“Lyn, the darling has been waiting outside your door all night—I imagine she is there now.”

“Yes, I know. I want her.”

“Are you able—just now, dear?”

“I—must have little Ann.”

So Ann came. She was white—very much awed; but she smiled. Lynda did not open her eyes at once; she was trying to get back some of the old self-control that had been so mercilessly shattered during the hours of her struggle, but presently she looked up.

“You—kept your word, Ann,” she said. Then: “You—you made a place for my baby. Little Ann—kiss your—brother.”

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They named the baby for William Truedale and they called him Billy, in deference to his pretty baby ways.

"He must be Uncle William's representative," said Lynda, "as Bobbie is the representative of Betty's little dead boy."

"I often think of—the money, Lyn." Truedale spoke slowly and seriously. "How I hated it; how I tried to get rid of it! But when it is used rightly it seems to secure dignity for itself. I've learned to respect it, and I want our boy to respect it also. I want to put it on a firm foundation and make it part of Billy's equipment—a big trust for which he must be trained."

"I think I would like his training to precede his knowledge of the money as far as possible," Lynda replied. "I'd like him to put up a bit of a fight—as his father did before him."

"As his father did *not*!" Truedale's eyes grew gloomy. "I'm afraid, Lyn, I'm constructed on the modelling plan—added to, built up. Some fellows are chiselled out. I wonder—about little Billy."

"Somehow"—Lynda gave a little contented smile—"I am not afraid for Billy. But I would not take the glory of conflict from him—no! not for all Uncle William's money! He must do his part in the world and find his place—not the place others may choose for him."

"You're going to be sterner with him than you are with Ann, aren't you, Lyn?" Truedale meant this lightly, but Lynda looked serious.

"I shall be able to, Con, for Billy brought something with him that Ann had to find."

"I see—I see! That's where a mother comes in strong, my dear."

"Oh! Con, it's where she comes in with fear and trembling—but with an awful comprehension."

This "comprehension" of the responsibilities of maternity worked forward and backward with Lynda much to Truedale's secret amusement. Confident of her duty to her son, she interpreted her duty to Ann. While Billy, red-faced and roving-eyed, gurgled or howled in his extreme youth, Lynda retraced her steps and commandingly repaired some damages in her treatment of Ann.

"Ann," she said one day, "you must go to school."

"Why?" Ann naturally asked. She was a conscientious little student and extremely happy with the governess who came daily to instruct her.

"You study and learn splendidly, Ann, but you must have—have children in your life. You'll be queer."

"I've got Bobbie, and now Billy."

"Ann, do not argue. When Billy is old enough to go to school he is going, without a word! I've been too weak with you, Ann—you'll understand by and by."

The new tone quelled any desire on Ann's part to insist further; she was rather awed by this attitude. So, with a lofty, detached air Miss Ann went to school. At first she imbibed knowledge under protest, much as she might have eaten food she disliked but which she believed was good for her. Then certain aspects of the new experience attracted and awakened her. From the mass of things she ought to know, she clutched at things she wanted to know. From the girls who shared her school hours, she selected congenial spirits and worshipped them, while the others, for her, did not exist.

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"She's so intense," sighed Lynda; "she's just courting suffering. She lavishes everything on them she loves and grieves like one without hope when things go against her."

"She's the most dramatic little imp." Truedale laughed reminiscently as he spoke—he had seen Ann in two or three school performances. "I shouldn't wonder if she had genius."

Betty looked serious when she heard this. "I hope not!" was all she said, and from then on she watched Ann with brooding eyes; she urged Lynda to keep her much out of doors in the companionship of Bobbie and Billy who were normal to a relieving extent. Ann played and enjoyed the babies—she adored Billy and permitted him to rule over her with no light hand—but when she could, she read poetry and talked of strange, imaginative things with the few girls in whose presence she became rapt and reverent.

Brace was the only one who took Ann as a joke.

"She's working out her fool ideas, young," he comforted; "let her alone. A boy would go behind some barn and smoke and revel in the idea that he was a devil of a fellow. Annie"—he, alone, called her that—"Annie is smoking her tobacco behind her little barns. She'll get good and sick of it. Let her learn her lesson."

"That's right," Betty admitted, "girls ought to learn, just as boys do—but if I ever find *Bobbie* smoking—"

"What will you do to him, Betty?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but I *do* know I'd insist upon his coming from behind barns."

And that led them all to consider Ann from the barn standpoint. If she wanted the tragic and sombre she should have it—in the sunlight and surrounded with love. So she no longer was obliged to depend on the queer little girls who fluttered like blind bats in the crude of their adolescent years. Lynda, Betty, Truedale, and Brace read bloodcurdling horrors to her and took her to plays—the best. And they wedged in a deal of wholesome, commonplace fun that presently awoke a response and developed a sense of humour that gave them all a belief that the worst was past.

"She has forgotten everything that lies back of her sickness," Lynda once said to Betty; "it's strange, but she appears to have begun from that."

Then Betty made a remark that Lynda recalled afterward:

"I don't believe she has, Lyn. I'm not worried about Ann as you and Con are. Her Lady Macbeth pose is just plain girl; but she has depths we have never sounded. Sometimes I think she hides them to prove her gratitude and affection, and because she is so

helpless. She was nearly five when she came to you, Lyn, and I believe she does remember the hills and her mother!"

"Why, Betty, what makes you think this?" Lynda was appalled.

"It is her eyes. There are moments when she is looking back—far back. She is trying to hold to something that is escaping her. Love her, Lyn, love her as you never have before."

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"If I thought that, Betty!" Lynda was aghast. "Oh! Betty—the poor darling! I cannot believe she could be so strong—so—terrible."

"It's more or less subconscious—such things always are—but I think Ann will some day prove what I say. In a way, it's like the feeling I have for—for my own baby, Lyn. I see him in Bobbie; I feel him in Bobbie's dearness and naughtiness. Ann holds what went before in what is around her now. Sometimes it puzzles her as Bobbie puzzles me."

About this time—probably because he was happier than he had ever been before, possibly because he had more time that he could conscientiously call his own than he had had for many a well-spent year—Truedale repaired to his room under the eaves, sneaking away, with a half-guilty longing, to his old play! So many times had he resurrected it, then cast it aside; so many hopes and fears had been born and killed by the interruption to his work, that he feared whatever strength it might once have had must be gone now forever.

Still he retreated to his attic room once more—and Lynda asked no questions. With strange understanding Ann guarded that door like a veritable dragon. When Billy's toddling steps followed his father Ann waylaid him; and many were the swift, silent struggles near the portal before the rampant Billy was carried away kicking with Ann's firm hand stifling his outraged cries.

"What Daddy doing there?" Billy would demand when once conquered.

"That's nobody's business but Daddy's," Ann unrelentingly insisted.

"I—I want to know!" Billy pleaded.

"Wait until Daddy wants you to know."

Under the eaves, hope grew in Truedale's heart. The old play had certainly the subtle human interest that is always vital. He was sure of that. Once, he almost decided to take Ann into his confidence. The child had such a dramatic sense. Then he laughed. It was absurd, of course!

No! if the thing ever amounted to anything—if, by putting flesh upon the dry bones and blood into the veins, he could get it over—it was to be his gift to Lynda! And the only thing that encouraged him as he worked, rather stiffly after all the years, was the certainty that at times he heard the heart beat in the shrunken and shrivelled thing! And so—he reverently worked on.

CHAPTER XXII

Among the notes and suggestions sprinkled through the old manuscript were lines that once had aroused the sick and bitter resentment of Truedale in the past:

“Thy story hath been written long since.
Thy part is to read and interpret.”

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Over and over again he read the words and pondered upon his own change of mind. Youth, no matter how lean and beggared it may be, craves and insists upon conflict—upon the personal loss and gain. But as time takes one into its secrets, the soul gets the wider—Truedale now was sure it was the wider—outlook. Having fought—because the fight was part of the written story—the craving for victory, of the lesser sort, dwindled, while the higher call made its appeal. To be part of the universal; to look back upon the steps that led up, or even down, and hold the firm belief that here, or elsewhere—what mattered in the mighty chain of many links—the “interpretation” told!

Truedale came to the conclusion that fatalism was no weak and spineless philosophy, but one for the making of strong souls.

Failure, even wrong, might they not, if unfettered by the narrow limitations of here and now, prove miracle-working elements?

Then the effect upon others entered into Truedale’s musings as it had in the beginning. The “stories” of others! He leaned his head at this juncture upon his clasped hands and thought of Nella-Rose! Thought of her as he always did—tenderly, gently, but as holding no actual part in his real life. She was like something that had gained power over an errant and unbridled phase of his past existence. He could not make her real in the sense of the reality of the men, women, and affairs that now sternly moulded and commanded him. She was—she always would be to him—a memory of something lovely, dear, but elusive. He could no longer place and fix her. She belonged to that strange period of his life when, in the process of finding himself, he had blindly plunged forward without stopping to count the cost or waiting for clear-sightedness.

“What has she become?” he thought, sitting apart with his secret work. And then most fervently he hoped that what Lynda had once suggested might indeed be true. He prayed, as such men do pray, that the experience which had enabled him to understand himself and life better might also have given Nella-Rose a wider, freer space in which to play her chosen part.

He recalled his knowledge of the hill-women as Jim White had described them—women to whom love, in its brightest aspect, is denied. Surely Nella-Rose had caught a glimpse more radiant than they. Had it pointed her to the heaven of good women—or—?

And eventually this theme held and swayed the play—this effect of a deep love upon such a nature as Nella-Rose’s, the propelling power—the redeeming and strengthening influence. In the end Truedale called his work “The Interpretation.”

And while this was going on behind the attic door, a seemingly slight incident had the effect of reinforcing Truedale’s growing belief in his philosophy.

He and Lynda went one day to the studio of a sculptor who had suddenly come into fame because of a wonderful figure, half human, half divine, that had startled the sophisticated critics out of their usual calm.

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The man had done much good work before, but nothing remarkable; he had taken his years of labour with patient courage, insisting that they were but preparation. He had half starved in the beginning—had gradually made his way to what every one believed was a mediocre standstill; but he kept his faith and his cheerful outlook, and then—he quietly presented the remarkable figure that demanded recognition and appreciation.

The artist had sold his masterpiece for a sum that might reasonably have caused some excitement in his life—but it had not!

“I’m sorry I let the thing go,” he confided to a chosen few; “come and help me bid it good-bye.”

Lynda and Conning were among the chosen, and upon the afternoon of their call they happened to be alone with him in the studio.

All other pieces of work had been put away; the figure, in the best possible light, stood alone; and the master, in the most impersonal way, stood guard over it with reverent touch and hushed voice.

Had his attitude been a pose it would have been ridiculous; but it was so detached, so sincere, so absolutely humble, that it rose to the height of dignified simplicity.

“Thornton, where did you get your inspiration—your model?” Truedale asked, after the beauty of the thing had sunk into his heart.

“In the clay. Such things are always in the clay,” was the quiet reply.

Lynda was deeply moved, not only by the statue, but by its creator. “Tell us, please,” she said earnestly, “just what you mean. I think it will help us to understand.”

Thornton gave a nervous laugh. He was a shy, retiring man but he thought now only of this thing he had been permitted to portray.

“I always”—he began hesitatingly—“take my plaster in big lumps, squeeze it haphazard, and then sit and look at it. After that, it is a mere matter of choice and labour and—determination. When this”—he raised his calm eyes to the figure—“came to me—in the clay—I saw it as plainly as I see it now. I couldn’t forget, or, if I did, I began again. Sometimes, I confess, I got weird results as I worked; once, after three days of toil, a—a devil was evolved. It wasn’t bad, either, I almost decided to—to keep it; but soon again I caught a glimpse of the vision, always lurking close. So I pinched and smoothed off and added to, and, in the end, the vision stayed. It was in the clay—everything is, with me. If I cannot see it there, I might as well give up.”

“Thornton, that’s why you never lost courage!” Truedale exclaimed.

“Yes, that’s the reason, old man.”

Lynda came close. “Thank you,” she said with deep feeling in her voice, “I do understand; I thought I would if you explained, and—I think your method is—Godlike!”

Thornton flushed and laughed. “Hardly that,” he returned, “it’s merely my way and I have to take it.”

It was late summer when Truedale completed the play. Lynda and the children were away; the city was hot and comparatively empty. It was a time when no manager wanted to look at manuscripts, but if one was forced upon him, he would have more leisure to examine it than he would have later on.

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Taking advantage of this, Truedale—anxious but strangely insistent—fought his way past the men hired to defeat such a course, and got into the presence of a manager whose opinion he could trust.

After much argument—and the heat was terrific—the great man promised, in order to rid himself of Truedale's presence, to read the stuff. He hadn't the slightest intention of doing so, and meant to start it on its downward way back to the author as soon as the proper person—in short his private secretary—came home from his vacation.

But that evening an actress who was fine enough and charmingly temperamental enough to compel attention, bore down through the heat upon the manager, with the appalling declaration that she was tired to death of the part selected for her in her play, and would have none of it!

"But good Lord!" cried the manager, fanning himself with his panama—they were at a roof garden restaurant—"this is August—and you go on in October."

"Not as a depraved and sensual woman, Mr. Camden; I want to be for once in my life a character that women can remember without blushing."

"But, my poor child, that's your splendid art. You are a—an angel-woman, but you can play a she-devil like an inspired creature. You don't mean that you seriously contemplate ruining *my* reputation and your own—by—"

"I mean," said the angel-woman, sipping her sauterne, "that I don't care a flip for your reputation or mine—the weather's too hot—but I'm not going to trail through another slimy play! No; I'll go into the movies first!"

Camden twisted his collar; he felt as if he were choking. "Heaven forbid!" was all he could manage.

"I want woods and the open! I want a character with a little, twisted, unawakened soul to be unsnarled and made to behave itself. I don't mind being a bit naughty—if I can be spanked into decorum. But when the curtain goes down on my next play, Camden, the women are going out of the theatre with a kind thought of me, not throbbing with disapproval—good women, I mean!"

And then, because Camden was a bit of a sentimentalist with a good deal of superstition tangled in his make-up, he took Truedale's play out of his pocket—it had been spoiling the set of his coat all the evening—and spread it out on the table that was cleared now of all but the coffee and the cigarettes which the angel-woman—Camden did not smoke—was puffing luxuriously.

"Here's some rot that a fellow managed to drop on me to-day. I didn't mean to undo it, but if it has an out-of-door setting, I'll give it a glance!"

“Has it?” asked the angel, watching the perspiring face of Camden.

“It has! Big open. Hills—expensive open.”

“Is it rot?”

“Umph—listen to this!” Camden’s sharp eye lighted on a vivid sentence or two. “Not the usual type of villain—and the girl is rather unique. Up to tricks with her eyes shut. I wonder how she’ll pan out?” Camden turned the pages rapidly, overlooking some of Con’s best work, but getting what he, himself, was after.

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"By Jove! she doesn't do it!"

"What—push those matches this way—what doesn't she do?" asked the angel.

"Eternally damn the man and claim her sex privilege of unwarranted righteousness!"

"Does she damn herself—like an idiot?" The angel was interested.

"She does not! She plays her own little role by the music of the experience she lived through. It's not bad, by the lord Harry! It's got to be tinkered—and painted up—but it's original. Just look it over."

Truedale's play was pushed across the table and the angel-woman seized upon it. The taste Camden had given her—like caviar—sharpened her appetite. She read on in the swift, skipping fashion that would have crushed an author's hopes, but which grasped the high lights and caught the deep tones. Then the woman looked up and there were genuine tears in her eyes.

"The little brick!" said the voice of loveliness and thrills, "the splendid little trump! Why, Camden, she had her ideals—real, fresh, woman-ideals—not the ideals plastered on us women by men, who would loathe them for themselves! She just picked up the scraps of her damaged little affairs and went, without a whimper, to the doing of the only job she could ever hope to succeed in. And she let the man-who-learned go! Gee! but that was a big decision. She might so easily have muddled the whole scheme of things, but she didn't! The dear, little, scrumpy, patched darling.

"Oh! Camden, I want to be that girl for as long a run as you can force. After the first few weeks you won't have to bribe folks to come—it'll take hold, after they have got rid of bad tastes in their mouths and have found out what we're up to! Don't count the cost, Camden. This is a chance for civic virtue."

"Do you want more cigarettes, my dear?"

"No. I've smoked enough."

Camden drew the manuscript toward him. "It's a damned rough diamond," he murmured.

"But you and I know it is a diamond, don't we, Camby?"

"Well, it sparkles—here and there."

"And it mustn't be ruined in the cutting and setting, must it?" The angel was wearing her most devout and flattering expression. She was handling her man with inspired touch.

“Umph! Well, no. The thing needs a master hand; no doubt of that. But good Lord! think of the cost. This out-of-door stuff costs like all creation. Your gowns will let you out easy—you can economize on *this* engagement—but have a heart and think of me!”

“I—I do think of you, Camby. You know as well as I that New York is at your beck and call. What you say—goes! Call them now to see something that will make them sure the world isn’t going to the devil, Camden. In this scene”—and here the woman pulled the manuscript back—“when that little queen totes her heavy but sanctified heart up the trail, men and women will shed tears that will do them good—tears that will make them see plain duty clearer. Men and—yes, women, too, Camby—*want* to be decent, only they’ve lost the way. This will help them to find it!”

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"We've got to have two strong men." Camden dared not look at the pleading face opposite. But something was already making him agree with it.

"And, by heavens, I don't know of but one who isn't taken."

"There's a boy—he's only had minor parts so far—but I want him for the man-who-learned-his-lesson. You can give the big wood-giant to John Harrington—I heard to-day that he was drifting, up to date—but I want Timmy Nichols for the other part."

"Nichols? Thunder! He's only done—what in the dickens has he done? I remember him, but I can't recall his parts."

"That's it! That's it! Now I want him to drive his part home—with himself!"

Camden looked across at the vivid young face that a brief but brilliant career had not ruined.

"I begin to understand," he muttered.

"Do you, Camden? Well, I'm only beginning to understand myself!"

"Together, you'll be corking!" Camden suddenly grew enthusiastic.

"Won't we? And he did so hate to have me slimy. No one but Timmy and my mother ever cared!"

"We'll have this—this fellow who wrote the play—what's his name?"

"Truedale." The woman referred to the manuscript.

"Yes. Truedale. We'll have him to dinner to-morrow. I'll get Harrington and Nichols. Where shall we go?"

"There's a love of a place over on the East Side. They give you such good things to eat—and leave you alone."

"We'll go there!"

It was November before the rush and hurry of preparation were over and Truedale's play announced. His name did not appear on it so his people were not nerve-torn and desperate. Truedale often was, but he managed to hide the worst and suffer in silence. He had outlived the anguish of seeing his offspring amputated, ripped open, and stuffed. He had come to the point where he could hear his sacredest expressions denounced as rot and supplanted by others that made him mentally ill. But in the end he acknowledged, nerve-racked as he was, that the thing of which he had dreamed—

the thing he had tried to do—remained intact. His eyes were moist when the curtain fell upon his “Interpretation” at the final rehearsal.

Then he turned his attention to his personal drama. He chose his box; there were to be Lynda and Ann, Brace and Betty, McPherson and himself in it. Betty, Brace, and the doctor were to have the three front chairs—not because of undue humility on the author’s part, but because there would, of course, be a big moment of revelation—a moment when Lynda would know! When that came it would be better to be where curious eyes could not behold them. Perhaps—Truedale was a bit anxious over this—perhaps he might have to take Lynda away after the first act, and before the second began, in order to give her time and opportunity to rally her splendid serenity.

And after the play was over—after he knew how the audience had taken it—there was to be a small supper—just the six of them—and during that he would confess, for better or worse. He would revel in their joy, if success were his, or lean upon their sympathy if Fate proved unkind.

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Truedale selected the restaurant, arranged for the flowers, and then grew so rigidly quiet and pale that Lynda declared that the summer in town had all but killed him and insisted that he take a vacation.

"We haven't had our annual honeymoon trip, Con," she pleaded; "let's take it now."

"We'll—we'll go, Lyn, just before Christmas."

"Not much!" Lynda tossed her head. "It will take our united efforts from December first until after Christmas to meet the demands of Billy and Ann."

"But, Lyn, the theatre season has just opened—and—"

"Don't be a silly, Con. What do we care for that? Besides, we can go to some place where there are theatres. It's too cold to go into the wilds."

"But New York is *the* place, Lyn."

"Con, I never saw you so obstinate and frivolous. Why, you're thin and pale, and you worry me. I will never leave you again during the summer. Ann was edgy about it this year. She told me once that she felt all the hotness you were suffering. I believe she did! Now will you come away for a month?"

"I—I cannot, Lyn."

"For two weeks, then? One?"

"Darling, after next week, yes! For a week or ten days."

"Good old Con! Always so reasonable and—kind," Lynda lifted her happy face to his....

But things did not happen as Truedale arranged—not all of them. There was a brief tussle, the opening night of the play, with McPherson. He didn't see why he should be obliged to sit in the front row.

"I'm too tall and fat!" he protested; "it's like putting me on exhibition. Besides, my dress suit is too small for me and my shirt-front bulges and—and I'm not pretty. Put the women in front, Truedale. What ails you, anyway?"

Conning was desperate. For a moment it looked as if the burly doctor were going to defeat everything.

"I hate plays, you know!" McPherson was mumbling; "why didn't you bring us to a musical comedy or vaudeville? Lord! but it's hot here."

Betty, watching Truedale's exasperated face, came to his assistance.

"When at a party you're asked whether you will have tea or coffee, Dr. McPherson," she said, tugging at his huge arm, "you mustn't say 'chocolate,' it isn't polite. If Con wants to mix up the sexes he has a perfect right to, after he's ruined himself buying this box. Do sit down beside me, doctor. When the audience looks at my perfectly beautiful new gown they'll forget your reputation and shirt-front."

So, muttering and frowning, McPherson sat down beside Betty, and Brace in lamblike mood dropped beside him.

"It's wicked," McPherson turned once more; "I don't believe Ann can see a thing."

"Yes, I can, Dr. McPherson—if you keep put! I want to sit between father and mommy-Lyn. When I thrill, I have to have near me some one particular, to hold on to."

"You ought to be in bed!"

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Little Ann leaned against his shoulder. “Don’t be grumpy,” she whispered, “I like you best of all—when you’re not the doctor.”

“Umph!” grunted McPherson, but he stayed “put” after that, until the curtain went down on the first act. Then he turned to Truedale. He had been laughing until the tears stood in his eyes.

“Did that big woodsman make you think of any one?” he asked.

“Did he remind *you* of any one?” Truedale returned. He was weak with excitement. Lynda, sitting beside him, was almost as white as the gown she wore—for she had remembered the old play!

“He’s enough like old Jim White to be his twin! I haven’t laughed so much in a month. I feel as if I’d had a vacation in the hills.”

Then the curtain went up on the big scene! Camden had spared no expense. That was his way. The audience broke into appreciative applause as it gazed at the realistic reproduction of deep woods, dim trails, and a sky of gold. It was an empty stage—a waiting moment!

In the first act the characters had been more or less subservient to the big honest sheriff, with his knowledge of the people and his amazing interpretation of justice. He had been so wise—so deliciously anarchistic—that the real motive of the play had only begun to appear. But now into the beautiful, lonely woods the woman came! The shabby, radiant little creature with her tremendous problem yet to solve. Through the act she rose higher, clearer; she won sympathy, she revealed herself; and, at the end, she faced her audience with an appeal that was successful to the last degree.

In short, she had got Truedale’s play over the footlights! He knew it; every one knew it. And when the climax came and the decision was made—leaving the man-who-had-learned-his-lesson unaware of the divine renunciation but strong enough to take up his life clear-sightedly; when the little heroine lifted her eyes and her empty arms to the trail leading up and into the mysterious woods—and to all that she knew they held—something happened to Truedale! He felt the clutch of a small cold hand on his. He looked around, and into the wide eyes of Ann! The child seemed hypnotized and, as if touched by a magic power, her resemblance to her mother fairly radiated from her face. She was struggling for expression. Seeking to find words that would convey what she was experiencing. It was like remembering indistinctly another country and scene, whose language had been forgotten. Then—and only Lynda and Truedale heard—little Ann said:

“It’s Nella-Rose! Father, it’s Nella-Rose!”

Betty had been right. The shock had, for a moment, drawn the veil aside, the child was looking back—back; she heard what others had called the one she now remembered—the sacred name had escaped her!

“Father, it’s Nella-Rose!”

Truedale continued to look at Ann. Like a dying man—or one suddenly born into full life—he gradually understood! As Ann looked at that moment, so had Nella-Rose looked when, in Truedale’s cabin, she turned her eyes to the window and saw his face!

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This was Nella-Rose's child, but why had Lynda—? And with this thought such a wave of emotion swept over Truedale that he feared, strong as he was, that he was going to lose consciousness. For a moment he struggled with sheer physical sensation, but he kept his eyes upon the small, dark face turned trustingly to his. Then he realized that people were moving about; the body of the house was nearly empty; McPherson, while helping Betty on with her cloak, was commenting upon the play.

"Good stuff!" he admitted. "Some muscle in that. Not the usual appeal to the uglier side of life. But come, come, Mrs. Kendall, stop crying. It's only a play, after all."

"Oh! I know," Betty quiveringly replied, "but it's so human, Dr. McPherson. That dear little woman has almost broken my heart; but she'd have broken it utterly if she had acted differently. I don't believe the author ever *guessed* her! Somewhere she *lived* and played her part. I just know it!"

Truedale heard all this while he watched the strained look fading from Ann's face. The past was releasing her, giving her back to the safe, normal present. Presently she laughed and said: "Father, I feel so queer. Just as if I'd been—dreaming."

Then she turned with a deep, relieving sigh to Lynda. "Thank you for bringing me, mommy-Lyn," she said, "it was the best play I've ever seen in all my life. Only I wish that nice actress-lady had gone with the man who didn't know. I—I feel real sorry for him. And why didn't she go?—I'd have gone as quick as anything."

The door had closed between Ann's past and her future! Truedale got upon his feet, but he was still dazed and uncertain as to what he should do next. Then he heard Lynda say, and it almost seemed as if she spoke from a distance she could not cross, "Little Ann, bring father."

He looked at Lynda and her white face startled him, but she smiled the kind, true smile that called upon him to play his part.

Somehow the rest of the plan ran as if no cruel jar had preceded it. The supper was perfect—the guests merry—and, when he could command himself, Truedale—keeping his eyes on Lynda's face—confessed.

For a moment every one was quiet. Surprise, delight, stayed speech. Then Ann asked: "And did you do it behind the locked door, father?"

"Yes, Ann."

"Well, I'm glad I kept Billy out!"

"And Lyn—did you know?" Betty said, her pretty face aglow.

“I—I guessed.”

But the men kept still after the cordial handshakes. McPherson was recalling something Jim White had said to him recently while he was with the sheriff in the hills.

“Doc, that thar chap yo’ once sent down here—thar war a lot to him us-all didn’t catch onter.”

And Brace was thinking of the night, long, long ago, when Conning threw some letters upon the glowing coals and groaned!

CHAPTER XXIII

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They were home at last in old William Truedale's quiet house. Conning went upstairs with Ann. Generally Lynda went with him to kiss Ann good-night before they bent over Billy's crib beside their own bed. But now, Lynda did not join them and Ann, starry-eyed, prattled on about the play and her joy in her father's achievement. She was very quaint and droll. She ran behind a screen and dropped her pretty dress, and issued forth, like a white-robed angel, in her long gown, her short brown curls falling like a beautiful frame around her gravely sweet face.

Truedale, sitting by the shaded lamp, looked at her as if, in her true character, she stood revealed.

"Little Ann," he said huskily, "come, let me hold you while we wait for mommy-Lyn."

Ann came gladly and nestled against his breast.

"To think it's my daddy that made the splendid play!" she whispered, cuddling closer. "I can tell the girls and be so proud." Then she yawned softly.

"Mommy-Lyn, I suppose, had to go and whisper the secret to Billy," she went on, finding as usual an excuse instead of a rebuke. "Billy's missed the glory of his life because he's so young!"

Another—a longer yawn. Then the head lay very still and Truedale saw that she was asleep. Reverently he kissed her. Then he bore her to the little bed behind the white screen, with its tall angels with brooding eyes. As he laid her down she looked up dreamily:

"I'm a pretty big girl to be carried," she whispered, "but my daddy is strong and—and great!"

Again Truedale kissed her, then went noiselessly to find Lynda.

He went to their bedchamber, but Lynda was not there. Billy, rosy and with fat arms raised above his pretty blond head, was sleeping—unconscious of what was passing near. Truedale went and looked yearningly down at him.

"My boy!" he murmured over and over again; "my boy." But he did not kiss Billy just then.

There was no doubt in Truedale's mind, now, as to where he would find Lynda. Quietly he went downstairs and into the dim library. The fire was out upon the hearth. The gray ashes gave no sign of life. The ticking of the clock was cruelly loud; and there, beside the low, empty chair, knelt Lynda—her white dress falling about her in motionless folds.

Truedale, without premeditation, crossed the room and, sitting in his uncle's chair—the long-empty chair, lifted Lynda's face and held it in his hand.

"Lyn," he said, fixing his dark, troubled eyes upon hers, "Lyn, who is Ann's father?"

Lynda had not been crying; her eyes were dry and—faithful!

"You, Con," she said, quietly.

During the past years had Lynda ever permitted herself to imagine how Conning would meet this hour she could not have asked more than now he gave. He was ready, she saw that, to assume whatever was his to bear. His face whitened; his mouth twitched as the truth of what he heard sunk into his soul; but his gaze never fell from that which was raised to his.

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"Can you—tell me all about it, Lyn?" he asked.

For an instant Lynda hesitated. Misunderstanding, Truedale added:

"Perhaps you'd rather not to-night! I can wait. I trust you absolutely. I am sure you acted wisely."

"Oh! Con, it was not I—not I. It was Nella-Rose who acted wisely. I left it all to her! It was she who decided. I have always wanted, at least for years, to have you know; but it was Nella-Rose's wish that you should not. And now, little Ann has made it possible."

And then Lynda told him. He had relinquished his hold upon her and sat with tightly clenched hands gazing at the ashes on the hearth. Lynda pressed against him, watching—watching the effect of every word.

"And, Con, at first, when I knew, every fibre of my being claimed you! I wanted to push her and—and Ann away, but I could not! Then I tried to act for you. I saw that since Nella-Rose had been first in your life she should have whatever belonged to her; I knew that you would have it so. When I could bring myself to—to stand aside, I put us all into her keeping. She was very frightened, very pitiable, but she closed her eyes and I knew that she saw truth—the big truth that stood guard over all our lives and had to be dealt with honestly—or it would crush everything. I could see, as I watched her quiet face, that she was feeling her way back, back. Then she realized what it all meant. Out of the struggle—the doubt—that big, splendid husband of hers rose supreme—her man! He had saved her when she had been most hopelessly lost. Whatever now threatened him had to go! Her girlhood dream faded and the safe reality of what he stood for remained. Then she opened her eyes and made her great decision. Since you had never dishonoured her in your thought, she would not have you know her as she then was! But—there remained little Ann! Oh! Con, I never knew, until Billy came, what Nella-Rose's sacrifice meant! I thought I did—but afterward, I knew! One has to go down into the Valley to find the meaning of motherhood. I had done, or tried to do, my duty before, but Billy taught me to love Ann and understand—the rest!"

There was silence for a moment. Among the white ashes a tiny red spark was showing. It glowed and throbbed; it was trying hard to find something upon which to live.

"And, Lyn, after she went back to the hills—how was it with her?"

"She laid everything but your name upon the soul of her man. He never exacted more. His love was big enough—divine enough—to accept. Oh! Con, through all the years when I have tried to—to do my part, the husband of Nella-Rose has helped me to do it! Nella-Rose never looked back—to Ann and me. Having laid the child upon the altar, she—trusted."

“Yes, that would be her way.” Truedale’s voice broke a bit.

“But, Con, I kept in touch with her through that wonderful old woman—Lois Ann. I—oh! Con, I made life easier, brighter for them all; just as—as you would have done. Lois Ann has told me of the happiness of the little cabin home, of the children—there are three—”

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A sharp pause caused Truedale to turn and look at Lynda.

“And—now?” he asked.

“Con, Nella-Rose died last year!”

The stillness in the room pressed close; even the clock’s ticking was unnoticed. The spark upon the hearth had become a flame; it had found something upon which to feed. Like a radiant hope it rose, faded, then leaped higher among the white ashes.

“She went, Con, like a child tired of its play. She was with Lois Ann; it was the hill-fever, and she was mercifully spared the knowledge of suffering or—renunciation. She kept repeating that she saw beautiful things; she was glad—glad to the last minute. Her children and husband have gone to Nella-Rose’s old home. Lois Ann says they are saving everybody! That’s all, Con—all.”

Then Truedale, his eyes dim but undaunted, leaned and drew Lynda up until, kneeling before him, her hands upon his shoulders, they faced each other.

“And this is the way women—save men!” he said.

“It is the way they try to save—themselves,” Lynda replied.

“Oh, Con, Con, when will our men learn that it is the one life, the one great love that we women want?—the full knowledge and—responsibility?”

“My darling!” Truedale kissed the tender mouth. Then drawing her close, he asked:

“Do you remember that day in Thornton’s studio—and his words? Looking back at my life, I cannot understand—I may never understand—what the Creator meant, but I do know that it was all in the clay!”

Lynda drew away—her hands still holding him. Her brave smile was softening her pale face.

“Oh! the dear, dear clay!” she whispered. “The clay that has been pressed and moulded—how I love it. I also do not understand, Con, but this I know: the Master never lost the vision in the clay.”

THE END