The Port of Adventure eBook

The Port of Adventure by Alice Muriel Williamson

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“They weren’t trees, but people, either nymphs or witches”

“The world was a sea, billowing with mountains”

PROLOGUE

On a great ship a woman sailed away from the Old World, wishing to forget. In her mind was the thought of a far-off place toward which she was travelling. There were no figures in this mental picture. She painted it as a mere flowery background; for she was very tired of people.

In the New World, a man lived and worked, and dreamed—when he had time.

Between this woman and this man lay six thousand miles of land and sea. They were two, among many millions, and they did not know of each other’s existence. There was no visible reason why they ever should know, or why they should ever meet. Yet, sometimes when the moon shone on the sea, the woman said to herself that the bright path paving the water with gold seemed to lead on and on beyond the horizon, as if it might go all the way to the Golden Gate. And the Golden Gate is the Port of Adventure, where every unexpected thing can happen.

I

IN A GARDEN

“I wonder what makes Nick so late?” Carmen Gaylor thought, hovering in the doorway between the dim, cool hall and the huge veranda that was like an out-of-doors drawing-room.

Though she spoke English well—almost as well as if she had not been born in Spain and made her greatest successes in the City of Mexico—Carmen thought in Spanish, for her heart was Spanish, and her beauty too.

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She was always handsome, but she was beautiful as she came out into the sunset gold which seemed meant for her, as stage lights are turned on for the heroine of a play; and there was something about Carmen which suggested strong drama. Even the setting in which she framed herself was like an ideal scene for a first act.

The house was not very old, and not really Spanish, but it had been designed by an architect who knew Carmen, with the purpose of giving a Spanish effect. He had known exactly the sort of background to suit her, a background as expensive as picturesque; a millionaire husband had paid for it. There were many verandas and pergolas, but this immense out-of-doors room had wide archways instead of pillars, curtained with white and purple passion flowers; and the creamy stucco of the house-wall, and the ruddy Spanish tiles, which already looked mellow with age, were half hidden with climbing roses and grapevines.

Three shallow steps of pansy-coloured bricks went all the length of the gallery, descending to a terrace floored with the same brick, which held dim tints of purple, old rose, gray and yellow, almost like a faded Persian rug.

When Carmen had looked past the fountain across the lawn, down the path cut between pink oleanders, where the man she expected ought to appear, she trailed her white dress over terrace and grass to peer under the green roof of the bamboo forest. It was like a temple with tall pillars of priceless jade that supported a roof of the same gray-green, starred in a vague pattern with the jewels of sunset. Carmen did not see the beauty of the magic temple, though she was conscious of her own. She hated to think that Nick Hilliard should keep her waiting, and there was cruelty in the clutch she made at a cluster of orange blossoms as she passed a long row of trees in terra-cotta pots on the terrace. Under the bamboos she scattered a handful of creamy petals on the golden brown earth, and rubbed them into the ground with the point of her bronze shoe. Then she held up her hand to her face, to smell the sweetness crushed out of the blossoms.

Why didn’t Nick come?

There was a short cut leading from the land which she had selected off her own immense ranch to sell to Nick Hilliard, and this way he sometimes took if he were in a hurry. But she knew that he loved the path between the pink walls of oleander, and preferred to come by it, though it was longer. He ought to have been with her at least ten minutes ago, for she had asked him to come early. She had said in the letter which she gave old Simeon Harp to take to Nick, “This is your last night. There are a great, great many things I want to talk to you about.” But there was only one thing about which she wished Nick Hilliard to talk to her, and there were two reasons why she expected him to talk of it to-night.

One reason was, because he was going East, and planned to be gone a month, a dreadful plan which she feared and detested. The second reason concerned the anniversary of a certain event. Some people would have called the event a tragedy, but to Carmen it had made life worth living. Other people's tragedies were shadowy affairs to her, if she had not to suffer from them.

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It was one of her pleasures to dress beautifully, in a style that might have seemed exaggerated on a different type of woman, and would have been extravagant for any except the mistress of a fortune. But never had Carmen taken more pains than to-night, when she expected only one guest. Her white chiffon and silver tissue might have been a wedding gown. She adored jewellery, and had been almost a slave to her love for it, until she began to value something else more—something which, unfortunately, her money could not buy, though she hoped and prayed her face might win it. She had quantities of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies—her favourite stones—but instinct had told her that even one would spoil the effect she wished to make to-night. She wore only a long rope of pearls, which would have suited a bride; and as she stood in the shadow of her bamboo temple, the pearls drank iridescent lights: green from the jade-coloured trees, pink from roses trailing over arbours, and gold from the California poppies thick among the grass.

Of course, any one of many reasonable things might have happened to delay Nick. He was busy, busier even than when he had been foreman of the Gaylor ranch a year ago, but Carmen could not bear to think that he would let mere reasonable things keep him away from her, just this night of all others. For exactly a year—a year to-day, a year this morning, so it was already more than a year—she had ceased to be a slave, and she had had everything she wanted, except one thing. Perhaps she had that too, yet she was not sure: and she could hardly wait to be sure. Nobody but Nick could make her so, and he ought to be in joyful haste to do it. He was not cold blooded. One could not look at Nick and think him that, yet to her he sometimes seemed indifferent. Carmen made herself believe that it was his respect which held him back. How desperately she wanted to know! Yet there was a strange pleasure in not knowing, such as she might never feel again, when she was sure.

Suddenly, far off, there was a rustling in the bamboo forest. A figure like a shadow, but darker than other shadows, moved in the distance. Carmen's heart jumped. She took a step forward, then stopped. It was not Nick Hilliard after all, but old Simeon Harp, the squirrel poisoner, coming from the direction of Nick's ranch, bringing her a message, maybe. She felt she could not possibly bear it if Nick were not coming, and she hated him at the bare thought that he might send an excuse at the last moment.

"What is it, Sim?" she called out sharply, as the queer, gnarled figure of the old man hobbled nearer.

"Nothing, my lady," Simeon Harp answered in the husky voice of one who is or has been a drunkard. "Nothing, only I was over at Nick's finishin' up a bit of my work, and he said, would I tell you he was sorry to be late. He's had somebody with him all afternoon, and no time to pack till just now. But he'll be along presently."

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Harp was an Englishman, with some fading signs about him of decent birth, decent education and upbringing, but such signs were blurred and almost obliterated by the habits which had degraded him. He would have been dead or in prison or the poorhouse years ago if Carmen had not chosen to rescue him, more through a whim than from genuine charity. Her mother's people had been English, and somehow she had not cared to see an Englishman thrown to the dogs in this country which was not hers nor his. In days when her word was law for the infatuated and brutal man whose death anniversary it now was, this bit of human driftwood—failure, drunkard, rascal—-had been found trespassing on the ranch. If Carmen had not chosen to show her power over old "Grizzly Gaylor" by protecting the poor wretch, Harp would have met the fate he probably deserved. But she had amused herself, and saved him. Sick and forlorn, he had been nursed back to something like health in the house of one among many gardeners. Since then he had been her slave, her dog. He called her "my lady," and she rather liked the name. She liked the worshipping admiration in the red-lidded eyes which had once been handsome, and she believed, what he often said, that there was nothing on earth he wouldn't do for her. Once or twice the thought had pierced her brain like a sharp needle, that perhaps he had already done a thing for her—a great thing. But it was better not to know, not even to guess. Fortunately the idea had apparently never occurred to any one else, and of course it never could now. Yet there had been a very curious look in Simeon Harp's eyes a year ago when—— ... Not that it proved anything. There was always a more or less curious look in his eyes. He was altogether a curious person, perhaps a little mad, or, at any rate, vague. Especially was he vague about his reasons for leaving his native land to emigrate to America. He said it was so long ago, and he had gone through so much, that he had forgotten. There are some things it is as well to forget. Since Carmen had known him, Simeon Harp had tried his luck as a water diviner, but failing, sometimes when he most wished to succeed, in that profession, he had now definitely settled down as squirrel poisoner to the neighbourhood. Those pests to farmers and ranchmen, ground squirrels, had given the strange old man a chance to build up a reputation of a sort. As a squirrel poisoner he was a brilliant success.

"Who gave you permission to call Mr. Hilliard 'Nick'?" Carmen asked, not very sternly, for she was pleased to have news from the other ranch. After all, if Nick had had a visitor he might not be to blame.

"Why, everybody calls him 'Nick'," explained Simeon, huskily. "But I won't, if it isn't your will, my lady."

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“Oh, I don’t care, if *he* doesn’t. Only——” she broke off, slightly confused. Even to this old wretch she could not say, “It isn’t suitable that you should use my future husband’s Christian name as if he were down on the same level with a man like you.” She could not be sure that Nick would be her husband, though it seemed practically certain. Besides, if Hilliard was “Nick” to everybody, it was a token of his popularity; and Nick himself was the last man to forget that he had risen to his present place by climbing up from the lowest rung of the ladder—the ladder of poverty. She could not imagine his “putting on airs,” as he would call it, though she thought it might be better if he were less of the “hail-fellow-well-met,” and more of the master in manner among his own cattlemen, and particularly with the wild riff-raff that had rushed to his land with the oil boom.

“Who was with him—some man, I suppose?” she asked of the squirrel poisoner, who stood quietly adoring her with eyes dimmed by drink and years. He had so settled down on his rheumatic old joints that he had become dwarfish in stature as well as gnarled in shape, and looked a gnomelike thing, gazing up at the tall young woman.

“Oh, yes, it was a man, of course,” Simeon assured her. “There couldn’t be any women for him who knows you, it seems to me, my lady. And you were never as handsome as you are this night. It warms the heart to set eyes on you, like the wine you give me on your birthdays, to drink your health.”

Carmen was pleased with praise, even a squirrel poisoner’s praise. She could never have too much.

“You needn’t wait for my birthday,” she laughed. “I don’t mean to have another for a good long time, Sim! You can have some of that wine to-night.”

“Thank you, my lady. It’s an anniversary, too,” he mumbled, lowering his husky voice for the last words. But Carmen heard them. “You remember that!” she exclaimed, without stopping to think, or perhaps she would not have spoken.

“Oh, yes, my lady, I remember,” he said. “There’s reasons—several good reasons—-why I shan’t forget that as long as I live. You see, things was gettin’ pretty bad for you, and so——”

“Don’t let’s talk of it, Sim!” she broke in sharply.

“No, my lady, we won’t,” he agreed. “I was only goin’ to say, things bein’ so bad made what happened a matter for rejoicin’ and not sorrow, to those who wish you well. That’s all—that’s all, my lady.”

“Thank you, Sim. I know you’re fond of me—and grateful,” Carmen said. “Things *were* bad. I don’t pretend to grieve. I shouldn’t even have worn mourning, if Madame Vestris,

the great palmist in San Francisco, hadn't told me it would bring me ill luck not to. I'm glad the year's up. I hate black! This is a better anniversary than a silly old birthday, Sim!"

"Yes, and that reminds me, my lady," said Simeon, "that I've put together enough perfect skins of the squirrels I've killed without the dope to make the grand automobile coat I've been promisin' you so long. Got the last skin cured to-day, as it happened. Maybe, that'll bring you *good* luck!"

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“Oh, I hope so!” she cried.

“Here’s Nick—Mr. Hilliard,” Harp announced, nodding his gray head in the direction of the oleander path, to which Carmen’s back was turned as she stood.

She wheeled quickly, and saw a tall young man coming toward her, with long strides. Instantly, she forgot Simeon Harp, and did not even see him as he hobbled away, pulling on to his head the moth-eaten cap of squirrel fur which he always wore, summer and winter, as if for a sign of his trade.

II

NICK

Nick Hilliard snatched off his sombrero as he came swinging along the oleander path. He was tall, fully six feet in height, and looked taller than he was, being lean and hard, with long straight legs which could carry him very fast over great stretches of country. Also he had a way of holding his head high, a way which a man gets if he is in the habit of gazing toward far horizons. He had a well-cut nose, a good chin, and a mouth that meant strength of purpose, though some of his friends laughed at him for a “womanish” curve of the upper lip. Luckily Nick did not mind being laughed at by his friends. His face was almost as brown as his hair, for the sun had darkened the one and bleached the other; but the hair was nice hair, with a glow of auburn in it, which contrasted not uninterestingly with his black, straight brows. It was, however, the brilliance of the brook-brown eyes which made Nick a handsome man, and not merely a “good-looking fellow.” It was because of his eyes that women turned in the street for another glance when he went into Bakersfield or Fresno; but Nick never knew that they turned. He liked pretty girls, and enjoyed their society, but was too busy to seek it, and had had little of it in his life. It did not occur to him that he had qualities to attract women. Indeed, he wasted few thoughts upon himself as an individual; not enough, perhaps; for he gave his whole attention to his work. Work was what he liked best, even without the ultimate success it brought, but lately he had begun to long for a change. He had a strong wish to go East, and a reason for the wish.

Carmen held out both hands, and enjoyed seeing how white they looked in Nick’s sunburned, slightly freckled ones. He shook hers, frankly, warmly, and apologized for his “rig,” which was certainly far from conventional. “I’m ashamed of myself for blowin’ in on you this way,” he said, “especially as you’re so mighty fine. I hope you’ll excuse me, for you know I pull out to-night, and Jim Beach is bringin’ the buggy along here for me, with my grip in it. If I’d piked back home afterward, my visit with you’d have been a cut game.”

“Ah, I’m glad you arranged not to go back,” said Carmen. “I want you to stay with me as long as you can. I like you in those clothes.” She smiled at him as if she would like him in anything; but Nick was thinking about Jim Beach, wondering if the boy would have trouble with the flea-bitten gray, which he himself had newly broken to harness.

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“All the same,” Carmen went on, “though I like them, you haven’t got much vanity if you mean to wear those things to travel East, and land in New York.”

“Why, what’s the matter with ’em, Mrs. Gaylor?” Nick asked. He spoke carelessly, in the matter of accent as well as of his feeling about the clothes. He cut off his words in a slipshod way, as if he had never had time to think much about the value or beauty of the English language. Still, though his speech was not that of a cultivated man, it did not grate on the ear. His voice was singularly pleasant, even sweet, with something of boyish gaiety in it.

“The things are all right, Nick, and you’re all right in them. You needn’t worry,” said Carmen. “Only—well, I don’t believe there’ll be anything else like them—or like you either—in New York.”

Nick looked himself over indifferently. He wore a “soft” white shirt, with a low collar turned over a black scarf tied anyhow. There was a leather belt round his waist, which obviated the need of a waistcoat or suspenders. His short coat and trousers were of navy blue serge. Everything he had on was neat and of good material, but Carmen smiled when she thought of this tall, belted figure, hatted with a gray sombrero on the back of its head, arriving at one of the best hotels in New York. Nick was pretty sure to go to one of the best hotels. He wanted to see life, no doubt, and get his money’s worth. Her smile was as tender as Carmen’s smile could be, however, and she was pleased that he was not “dressing up” to make an impression on pretty women in the East.

“I don’t care what anybody thinks about me in New York,” said he. “As long as *you* excuse me for not having on my Sunday-go-to-meeting rags to dine with you, I don’t mind the rest.”

“I thought you were never coming,” she said, changing the subject.

“So did I, by George! I thought the fellow’d never go.”

“Was it a deputation to say good-bye?”

“Lord, no, Mrs. Gaylor! It was a chap you don’t know, I guess. I only ran up against him lately, since I sold my gusher to the United Oil Company. He’s their lawyer—and does some work for the railroad too. Smart sort of man he seems to be, though kind of stiff when you first know him: between forty and forty-five, maybe: name’s Henry Morehouse, a brother of a bank manager in San Francisco.”

“James Morehouse the banker is a very rich, important man,” said Carmen, somewhat impressed by the idea of Nick’s new friend who had stayed too long. “I’ve never met his family myself. You know how close I was kept till a year ago. But I’ve heard of them.

They’re in with the Falconer set and that lot, so it shows they’re smart. What does Henry Morehouse want, making up to you, Nick?”

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“It was oil business brought us together and he seemed to take a sort of likin’ to me. We care about some o’ the same things—books and that. Now he’s going East—-maybe on more oil business. Anyhow, he proposes we share a stateroom on the Limited, and he’s been recommendin’ his hotel in New York. I was kind of plannin’ to be a swell, and hang out at the Waldorf-Astoria, to see the nobs at home. But his place sounds nice, and I like bein’ with him pretty well. He’s lit up with bright ideas and maybe he’ll pass on some to me. His business won’t keep him long, he thinks; and he’s promised his brother James to look after a lady who’s landing from Europe about the time we’re due in New York. He’ll meet her ship; and if she doesn’t want to stay East any length of time, he’ll bring her back to California. She means to settle out here.”

Carmen’s face hardened into anxious lines, though she kept up a smile of interest. She looked older than she had looked when she held out her hands to Nick. She had been about twenty-six then. Now she was over thirty.

“Is the lady young or old?” she asked.

“I don’t know anything about her,” Nick answered with a ring of truthfulness in his voice which Carmen’s keen ears accepted. “All I can tell you is, that she’s a Mrs. May, a relation or friend of Franklin Merriam the big California millionaire who died East about ten years ago—about the time I was first cowpunching on your ranch.”

“Oh, the Franklin Merriam who made such stacks of money irrigating desert land he owned somewhere in the southern part of the State!” Carmen sighed with relief. “I’ve heard of him of course. He must have been middle-aged when he died, so probably this woman’s old or oldish.”

“I suppose so,” Nick readily agreed. “Great king, isn’t it mighty sweet here to-night? It looks like heaven, I guess, and you’re like—like——”

“If this is heaven, am I an angel? *Do* I seem like that to you?”

“Well, no—not exactly my idea of an angel, somehow: though I don’t know,” he reflected aloud. “You’re sure handsome enough—for anything, Mrs. Gaylor. But I’ve always thought of angels lily white, with moonlight hair and starry eyes.”

“You’re quite poetical!” retorted Carmen, piqued. “But other men have told me my eyes are stars.”

He looked straight into them, and at the hot pomegranate colour which blazed up in her olive cheeks, like a reflection of the sunset. And Carmen looked back at him with her big, splendid eyes.

It was a man’s look he gave her, a man’s look at a woman; but not a man’s look at the woman he wants.

“No,” he answered. “They’re not stars. They’re more like the sun at noon in midsummer, when so many flowers are pourin’ out perfume you can hardly keep your senses.”

Carmen was no longer hurt. “That’s the best compliment I ever had, and I’ve had a good many,” she laughed. “Besides—coming from you, Nick! I believe it’s the first you ever paid me right out in so many words.”

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“Was it a compliment?” Nick asked doubtfully and boyishly. “Well, I’m real glad I was smart enough to bring one off. I spoke out just what came into my mind, and I’d have felt mighty bad if you’d been cross.”

“I’m not cross!” she assured him. “I’d rather be a woman—for you—than an angel. Angels are cold, far-off, impossible things that men can’t grasp. Besides, their wings would probably moult.”

Nick laughed, a pleasant, soft laugh, half under his breath. “Say, I don’t picture angels with wings! The sort that flits into my mind when I’m tired out after a right hard day and feel kind of lonesome for something beautiful, I don’t know hardly what—only something I’ve never had—that sort of angel is a woman, too, and not cold, though far above me, of course. She has starry eyes and moonlight hair—lots of it, hanging down in waves that could almost drown her. But I guess, after all—as you say—that sort’s not my line. I’ll never come in the light she makes with her shining, and if I should by accident, she wouldn’t go shooting any of her starry glances my way.”

Carmen was vexed again. “I didn’t know you were so sentimental, Nick!”

He looked half ashamed.

“Well, I didn’t know I was, either, till it popped out,” he grinned. “But I suppose ’most every man has sentimental spells. Maybe, even, he wouldn’t be worth his salt if he hadn’t. Sometimes I think that way. But my spells don’t come on often. When they do, it’s generally nights in spring—like this, when special kinds of night-thoughts come flyin’ along like moths—thoughts about past and future. But lately, since that blessed little oil town has been croppin’ up like a bed of mushrooms round my big gusher—or rather, the company’s gusher, as it is now—I’ve had my mind on that more than anything else, unless it’s been my ditches. Gee! there’s as much romance about irrigation in this country, I guess, as there is about angels which you can see only in dreams; for you see every day, when you’re wide awake, the miracle of your ditches. You just watch your desert stretches or your meanest grazin’ meadows turn into fairyland. I say, Mrs. Gaylor, have you ever read a mighty fine book—old but good and fresh as to-morrow’s bread—called *The Arabian Nights?*”

“I don’t know. I dare say I read some of it when I was a little girl,” replied Carmen, wondering what Nick was leading up to. “It’s for children, isn’t it?”

“I reckon it’s for every one with the right stuff in ’em,” said Nick. “Anyhow, I haven’t grown up enough to get beyond it. I don’t mean ever to turn the boy that lives inside of me out-of-doors. If I ever do anything to make him so mad that he quits, I’ll be finished—dried up. That book, *The Arabian Nights*, has got a dead clinch on me. You know, when I run into Bakersfield, I like to have a browse in the bookstores. It sort of rests

me, and seein' the pictures in that book made me buy it—a birthday present for my affectionate self——"

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“Your birthday!” Carmen broke in, tired of this book talk, but not tired of anything that concerned him. “You never told me. That was bad of you. How old, Nick? I’m not sure to a year or so.”

“Twenty-nine. Quite some age, isn’t it? But there’s lots I want to do before I’m old. I don’t know, though, as I mean ever to be old.”

“Of course, you never will be.” Carmen agreed with him aloud, but she was thinking in an undertone: “Only twenty-nine, and I’m thirty-three. He won’t be old ever, or for a long time, but I will. I’m that kind, I’m afraid. My mother was. I’ve got no time to lose; but to-day’s mine. Nick must love me really, though maybe he’s too used to me to know it, without being stirred up by something unusual. But I’ll try my hardest to make him know it to-night.”

“Go on about your ‘Arabian Nights,’” she said, to give herself time for the arranging of her tactics.

“Oh, well, all I really began to say was this: I was reading the story of Aladdin and an enchanted cave of jewels he dropped into. There was a magic ring and a lamp in the story too, that you could rub and get pretty near anything you wanted; so I was thinking this irrigation business of ours in California is like rubbing that lamp. It throws open doors of dark caves in deserts, and gives up enchanted gardens full of jewelled fruit and flowers. Then rub the smoky old lamp again and you get a spout of oil—another gift, which makes you feel as if a genie’d chucked it to you. Look at my gusher, for instance! Just think, Mrs. Gaylor, if you don’t mind my talking this way about, myself—-you sold me my land, sliced it right off your own ranch—let me have it darn cheap, too, when the boss died——”

“I wanted to keep you as near as possible, Nick, when people began to be silly and say I oughtn’t to have a young man like you on the place as foreman, with me alone, and Eld gone. I needed you badly, and I’d have been glad to give you land for nothing if you’d have taken it. Gracious! I’ve got so much left I don’t know what to do with it, or wouldn’t if you weren’t where you can advise me.”

“That’s your generous way of puttin’ things,” said Nick. “And it was walkin’ along toward you, brought up these fairy-book thoughts so strong. My land’s all right, though my house is a shack and I haven’t got any flower-garden except in my head. But over here is another world; and I was sayin’ to myself, how I owe the biggest things of my life to you. True, I was taking out my wages in calves while the boss was alive, and he was lettin’ me put my brand on ’em by the hundred. But square as he was with me, he’d never have sold the land for the price you did. Not only that, but when I struck oil, a month or so after he went, look what happened. I hadn’t the capital to do any good. ’Twas you put the money in my hand for the well-sinking and——”

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“But you insisted on mortgaging every acre you bought—your cattle and everything you had, to me; so that took away the credit,” cried Carmen, touched by his gratitude, and happy in the renewed assurance that this man was hers. “Besides, all you did and spent seemed likely to harm more than help, when everybody said you wouldn’t get enough oil to pay for sinking your wells. It was only when the gusher burst out by accident and took every one by surprise that your troubles were over.”

“If there’s any such thing as accident,” Nick mumbled, his eyes far away from Carmen. “The longer I live, the more I think there isn’t. It’s all arranged by Something Big up there beyond where the sun’s sinking and the moon’s rising. But maybe you’ll say that’s sentimental, like the angel-thought. I don’t mean it that way, though I’ve got an almighty lot to thank the Something for—as well as to thank you.”

“It wasn’t I who took the gusher off your hands, anyhow, and saved you the expense of coping with it,” said Carmen. “So I suppose you think it was Heaven sent you those men to buy what oil land you wanted to sell, and start Lucky Star City.”

“I guess that’s Who it was. Not that I deserve any special kindness from that quarter,” Nick laughed. “My mother used to talk a lot about those things, you know, and though I was only a little shaver when she died, I’ve remembered most all that was connected with her.”

Carmen did not speak. She knew the history of Nick’s terrible childhood and early youth. Long ago he had told her how his grandfather, a California pioneer of good Southern family, a successful judge, had turned an only son away, penniless, because the boy of twenty chose to take for a wife a pretty little dressmaker, of no family at all; how the couple had gone East, to live on a few hundred dollars left to the boy by an aunt; how he had hoped and expected to succeed in New York as a journalist and writer; how he had failed and starved with his bride; how he had faded out of life while Nick was a baby; how the girl-widow had taken in sewing to support her child, and when she couldn’t get that, had washed or scrubbed; and how, as Nick became a wise, worried old man of four or five years, he had been able to help earn the family living by selling the newspapers which had refused his dead father’s contributions. Nick had not enlarged upon his adventures after this stage of his youthful career, merely sketching them in the baldest manner, when it had been necessary to present his credentials to the “boss”—“old Grizzly Gaylor.” But in one way or other it had leaked out that the boy had learned to read and write and cipher at a night school in New York, not having time for such “frills” as schooling by day. And Carmen could not help knowing that he had gone on studying, and thinking out his own rather queer ideas about heaven and earth, ever since, in spite of the most strenuous interruptions—for she had been ashamed occasionally by happening to discover how much Nick knew. He had read everybody and everything from Plato to Schopenhauer, whereas it bored Carmen unspeakably to read anything except novels, and verses which she liked sometimes in magazines, because their pathos or passion might have been written round her.

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She knew how Nick, as a little boy, had swept shops and found all sorts of odd jobs; how he had been errand boy, and district messenger in a uniform of which he had been proud because it made him feel “almost like a soldier”; how after his mother’s death he had got his long-cherished wish to “go West,” by working on the railway and eventually becoming a brakesman. After that short experience “cowpunching” days had come, and after several years in a subordinate position on Eldridge Gaylor’s ranch he had at twenty-five been made foreman. But by this time he was already a familiar figure in her life—the life which she had chosen, and hated after it was chosen, except for Nick Hilliard, who had always loomed large in it, though she saw little of him until a year ago.

Except perhaps with the old man she had married for his money and hated for his brutality, Carmen believed that Nick Hilliard’s “ways” and good looks had helped, even more than his courage and cleverness, to win him success and recognition. With Eldridge Gaylor it had been different. He thought of no man’s pleasant looks or ways, though even upon the corrugated iron of his nature, a woman’s beauty had had influence, and he had married Carmen off the comic opera stage, in the City of Mexico, where he had gone to see a great bullfight ten years ago. When he had brought her home to his famous ranch, willing for a while to be her slave and give her everything she wanted, she had found Nick a cowpuncher among other cowpunchers. And she had seen how he made “old Grizzly” respect him. But his promotion had come through a row and an attempt at murdering the “boss” by a drunken foreman driven mad by a blow from the short whip Gaylor carried about the ranch. Nick had saved his employer’s life, risking his own—for he was unarmed at the moment; and to his surprise the reward had been the discharged foreman’s place. Carmen shivered a little even now, remembering that night, and how she had worshipped Nick for his bravery. She had never since ceased to worship him, though he had done a great many things which irritated her extremely, such as saving “old Grizzly’s” life once again: but those years were past.

As she wondered whether Nick would like her to talk with him about his mother, or whether that subject was too delicate to pursue, a musical Japanese gong sounded from a side gallery.

“Oh, it must be half-past seven,” she said. “I ordered dinner early, so we could talk afterward by moonlight (I love talking in moonlight!) before the time for you to go. You can give me your arm, if you like, Nick.”

Of course, Nick “liked,” though he had never taken a lady to dinner in that way before, and he felt proud, if a little awkward, as a bare, creamy arm laid itself on his coat-sleeve.

Slowly and without speaking, they walked along a flower-bordered path that skirted the lawn on one side, and on the other a canal full to the brim of glittering water, which reflected the sky and the two figures.

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It was a place and an hour made for love.

III

THE ANNIVERSARY

They did not dine in the house, though one of the show rooms was a huge dining-hall like a glorified refectory in an old Spanish mission. After the beginning of April, and sometimes long before, Carmen seldom took a meal indoors, unless she was attacked by one of her fierce fits of depression, and had a whim to hate the sun.

She and Nick mounted the steps, passed the fountain which spouted diamond spray through a round head made of some flowering water-plant, went on round a corner, Carmen's dress brushing fallen camellia petals or pink shells of broken roses, and so came to another veranda. This was pergola as well. It had no roof but beams of old Spanish chestnut, so draped with wistaria and roses that the whole out-of-doors room was canopied with leaves and hanging clusters of flowers. Only a faint filtering of sun or moonshine could steal through, and such rays as penetrated seemed to be dyed pink and purple by draining through the flowers.

Suspended from the beams were big iridescent pearl-shells, known in southern California as "abalone," and in the rainbow-tinted half-globes gleamed electric lights, subdued by dull gold glass; but neither these nor the tall shaded lamps on the low wall of the terrace, nor the hidden electric bulbs in the fountain basin, were allowed to shine out yet. As Carmen said, she liked to talk by moonlight; and now, over in the east, behind magnolia and palm trees, the moon had been born while the sun died in the west.

If it had been her wedding-night dinner Carmen could not have been more careful in ordering the different dishes and planning the decorations of the table. Usually whether she were alone or had guests (as she had sometimes, though "society" had never taken her up), she left everything to her Chinese head-cook, who was a worthy rival of any Parisian *chef*; and the beautifying of her table to the artistic Japanese youth whose one business in life was to think out new flower-combinations. This, however, was not only the anniversary of the day which had given her freedom, but she hoped it might be one to remember for a sweeter reason. Besides, Nick Hilliard was to be enchanted, to be made conscious of himself and her, as the only man, the only woman, worth thinking of in the world.

The air was sweet with the fragrance of orange-blossoms, and the deep-red velvet roses which were Carmen's own flowers. Nick was a water drinker by preference and because he was an open-air man, also because it had been necessary for him to set an

example; but to-night Carmen made him sip a little iced champagne, and she drank to the success of his first visit East since boyhood—to his safe and speedy home-coming.

“Because this is home, Nick; your home,” she said. “It would kill me if you saw any place you liked better, and if you made up your mind that you wanted to sell out and live in New York.”

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“No fear,” said Nick. “No man ever left paradise unless he was driven out by flaming swords.”

“Then you won’t be gone long?” she asked, playing with the abalone chowder on her plate.

“Not more than a month anyhow; maybe a few days less if I get homesick; though it would hardly be worth while to go so far for a shorter time, after staying West so many years without a single break. First, I count on poking round in some of our old haunts —poor mother’s and mine—and then, when I am way down in the dumps I’ll yank myself up again with a little fun—theatres and roof-gardens and such-like.”

“You’ve seen good plays in San Francisco,” said Carmen.

“Yes, San Franciso’s a great place. Only I haven’t had time to go there once in a blue moon. And just now it’s those old associations pulling—something seems drawing and drawing me to the East. It’s like a voice calling my name—’Nick—Nick, I want you. Come!’ Funny, isn’t it?”

Carmen was not sure that it was funny. For she was superstitious beyond all things; and at that moment it happened that she could hear the moaning note of doves—a sound which she believed always brought her bad luck.

“What kind of a voice is it?” she asked, laughing rather shrilly. “Not a woman’s, I hope?”

“I guess it’s that angel’s I was telling you about.” Nick smiled.

Carmen motioned the Chinese butler to fill her guest’s glass, which he had hardly touched.

“Don’t let’s talk any more of angels,” she said. “Let’s talk of me, and you. Nick, do you know what to-night is? A year since I was free. ’At the end of a year’ I always said to myself. ’Twelve long months of hypocritical respect paid to the memory of a person who was more brute than man. But not a day more, when the twelve months are over. Then —happiness—new life!’ Don’t you consider I’m justified in feeling like that?”

Nick thought for a moment, not looking at Carmen. He gazed out through the torn curtain of roses into the silver of the moonlight, over the wide lawn with its fountains, toward the walls of trees which screened from sight the rolling billows of the ranch-meadows with their cattle, their shining, canal-like irrigation-ditches, their golden grain, their alfalfa, their fruit and flowers. All this wealth and much more old Grizzly Gaylor had given the pretty young singer in exchange for her beauty and the pleasure of snatching her away from other men. Despite the “boss’s” notorious failings, it grated on Hilliard to hear Carmen rejoice aloud because her husband was underground, and she was free of him now that his back was turned forever.

“Probably you’re right,” Nick said. “Yet—it kind of rubs me up the wrong way to listen to you talkin’ like that, in particular just this very night.”

“Why in particular this very night?” she asked sharply.

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“Well—I guess it’s only conventional, because, why are twelve months more important than fourteen or any other number? But it’s the feeling of an anniversary, I suppose. A year ago to-day he breathed his last—and he didn’t want to die. It sort of seems as if to-day ought to be sacred to him, no matter what he was. And—maybe I’m a dashed hypocrite and don’t know it, but it doesn’t suit my ideas of you to get the feeling that you set up to-night as festival. I expect I’m wrong, though, and you ought to be lecturin’ me instead of me you.”

“I don’t want to lecture you, Nick, whether you understand me or not,” said Carmen. But the dinner and the meaning of the feast were spoilt for her in an instant. She could have bitten her tongue out because it had spoken the wrong words—words which jarred on Nick at the very moment when she most wished to charm him. She knew, with a heavy weight of premonition, that this moonlight talk she had planned would give her nothing worth having now. To try to make Nick feel her power would do more harm than good, because the night had suddenly become haunted by the spirit of the dead man. “I’m punished,” she thought, superstitiously. But she exerted herself to be cheerful, lest Nick should go East disgusted with her. And that would be the end of all.

IV

A GIRL IN MOURNING

Angela May sat in her chair on the promenade-deck of the *Adriatic* and felt peacefully conscious that she was resting body and brain.

The ship was not crowded, for it was spring, and the great tide of travel had turned in the opposite direction—toward Europe. On either side of her chair were several which were unoccupied, and a soothing silence hovered round her, through which she could listen to the whisper of the sea as the ship glided on to the land of hope.

Loneliness gave a real joy to Angela; for, young as she was, she had lived through an ordeal, and had taken a step which meant high nervous tension leading up to a supreme decision. She was glad all was over, and well over; desperately glad that her courage had not failed.

“Oh, how thankful I am!” she said again and again, under her breath. Still, she vaguely envied some of the family parties on the ship, who appeared happy and united. Not that she wanted them to talk to her. Witty, lively people could be very nice when you were in the mood for them, but agonizing when you were not; and since it wasn’t permissible to cover human beings up like canaries when you had tired of them, or send them away like children when they had prattled enough, Angela cuddled down among her cushions and rugs, glad to be let alone for the first time in her life. But there was a young mother with a small imp of a curly-haired girl, who fascinated her, and made her think. Once,

when the imp fell on the deck, to be caught up and kissed until a wail ended in a laugh, Angela said to herself, “If my mother had been like that, everything would have been different for me.”

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Saunterers for exercise or flirtation often turned for a glance at Angela. What they saw was a slim girl, with pearly fair skin, big gray eyes, quantities of wavy hair of so pale a yellow-brown that it was like gold under the mourning hat she wore. Her low black collar made the slender throat that rose out of it white as a lily. The oval of her face was perfect, and when she read or closed her eyes, as she sometimes did, the long lashes, many shades darker than her hair, and the delicate arch of the brown eyebrows, gave her the soft, sweet look of a child asleep.

Always the glances were more admiring than curious; but they were curious, too, for every one was wondering who she was. In spite of her youth, there was something of pride and distinction about her which made it seem that she could not be an ordinary sort of person you had never heard of; a mere Miss Smith or Mrs. Brown. Yet all the "swells" on board had been duly accounted for and recognized. She was not one of them.

"What a pretty girl!" people said. "And she seems to be travelling alone, unless her friends are too sick to come out of their cabins. Apparently she hasn't even brought a maid—yet what lovely clothes she has, though so simple, and all black. Perhaps she's in mourning for her father or her mother, or some near relation. She's too young to be a widow!"

Angela did not much mind these glances, or this gentle curiosity, for no normal woman objects to being thought pretty. But it was delightful to feel sure that no one knew who she was. If she were on the passenger-list as the Princess di Sereno she would be more stared at and bothered than that poor, fat Duchess of Dorsetshire, who was too near-sighted to recognize her at a distance, thank goodness. Each glance thrown her way would have been an annoyance, for there would have been nothing flattering in any spice of interest her title gave. Some silly creatures might have stared at her because she was a princess; but—far worse—others would have looked because they knew all about her.

These would have buzzed: "Why, that's the Princess di Sereno, don't you know, the only child of the California millionaire who died about ten years ago, so suddenly while his wife and little daughter were in Europe! The girl married that Roman prince, Paolo di Sereno, who used to make such a sensation going about in an aeroplane, and gambling high at Monte Carlo—awfully handsome man, a lot older than she. He must have been nearly forty, and she seventeen, when she married him. Her mother made the match, of course: girl just out of school—the wedding wasn't six weeks after she was presented in England. The prince met her there, has English relations, like most of the Roman nobility. But the interesting part of the story is this: they never lived together as husband and wife. The bride either found out some secret the prince had kept from her (which is what people believe), or else there was a mysterious

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row the first hour after the wedding. Anyhow, something happened; he went off the same day and left her with her mother. Afterward, he came back; but it was an open secret that the two were no more than strangers, or, you might say, polite acquaintances, though they lived at opposite ends of his palace in Rome, which her money restored, and his country place near Frascati. There was never the least scandal, only wild curiosity. Now she has cut the whole thing. Apparently couldn't stand the empty sort of life, or else he did something worse than usual, at which she drew the line."

Angela did not much care whether people in Rome knew the truth or not. That no longer greatly mattered to her, because she meant never, never to go back to Rome, or to see Paolo di Sereno, or any of his friends—who had never really been her friends. But she did not want people on the ship to know, because she was tired of being talked about, and her hope was to begin a new and different life. For herself, she had nothing to conceal; but, she had never felt any pride or pleasure in being a princess, and after the flatteries and disillusions, the miseries and foolish extravagances of the last hateful, brilliant six years, everything connected with them, and the historic title her dead father's money had bought, was being eagerly obliterated by Franklin Merriam's daughter. She knew little about her forebears on her father's side, except that they were English, whereas Paolo had centuries behind him crammed full of glorious ancestors whose deeds were celebrated on tapestries of great beauty and value. Her one tolerable memory of Paolo was that he had never touched her hand since their marriage; but the memory of her father was sacred. She adored him, and was never weary of recalling things he had said to her, pleasures he had planned for her as a child, and, above all, his stories of California, whither she was now bound.

Angela had taken the name of "Mrs. May"; May, because May was her birth-month, and also her middle name given by her father, whereas Angela had been her mother's choice. Therefore she was just superstitious enough to feel that "May" might bring happiness, since her father's memory was the single unshadowed spot in her life of twenty-three years. A brilliant life it would have seemed to most women, one to be envied; but Angela could not see why.

The lashes which shaded her slate-gray eyes had that upward curl which shows an undying sense of humour, and she had been a merry little girl, with flashes of wit which had enchanted Franklin Merriam before she was snatched away to Europe at eleven, never to see him again. Even at school where she had been "dumped" (as Mrs. Merriam's intimate enemies put it), Angela had kept the girls laughing. Now, though she had imagined her gay spirit dead with childhood, she began to be visited by its ghost. She amused herself on shipboard with a thousand things, and a thousand thoughts which made her feel the best of "chums" with her new friend and companion, Angela May. "I've come back from twenty-three to seventeen," she thought, and pretended that

there had never been an Angela di Sereno, that scornful young person who had forbidden the prince to come near her on learning that there was another whom he should have married instead of Millionaire Merriam's daughter.

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When she was a little girl in Boston (where Mrs. Merriam had insisted upon living), Angela used to sit on her father's knee; and as he curled her yellow hair over his fingers he wove romances of the Golden West, reluctantly deserted for his wife's sake; and though many illusions had broken like bright bubbles, this ideal still glittered before Angela's eyes. She had been promised by her father that she should visit California with him, when "Mother brought her back from Europe"; but he had died, and mother had not brought her back; so now she was going to make the pilgrimage alone. Not only did she intend to see the places her father had described, but when she had seen all and could choose, she meant to buy land and make a home for herself, her first real home.

Wherever she decided to live, the house must be like the one where her father had been born—long and low built of adobe; there must be a patio, with a fountain in the middle; and the rooms must be kept cool by the roof of a veranda, shading the windows like a great overhanging eyelid. Lovely flowers she would have, of course, but the garden must be as unlike an Italian garden as possible. Italy was beautiful, but she did not wish to be reminded of that country, or any other in Europe where she had wandered in search of forgetfulness.

She had little fear that ghosts of the past would come to haunt her in her new home, for though the Prince di Sereno had once cared for her in his way, she had struck at his pride and made him hate her in the end. At last he had been glad to let her go out of his life, for she had made arrangements by which he kept more than half her money. There was no danger that he would try to snatch her back again; and as for European friends and acquaintances, it was unlikely that such worldly persons would care to come to the place she meant to select. It would be far from the paths of tourists.

The eight-day voyage passed pleasantly for Angela. She had spoken to no one except stewards and stewardesses for, taking her meals on deck, she had not come into contact with other passengers. The mourning she wore for her mother, who had died four months before in London, seemed to set her apart from others, though had it not been for the cause of her mourning, probably she would not now be on her way to America. It was a few weeks after Mrs. Merriam's death, when she had recovered from the shock which was hardly sorrow, that Angela said to herself: "Now she is beyond being grieved by anything I do, and I can go away—for good." For the girl had been under the frail cold woman's sway, as the strong man, Franklin Merriam, had been in his time; and Mrs. Merriam had derived such pleasure from having a daughter who was a Princess di Sereno that Angela could hardly have found courage to deprive her of it.

At home, both in the country and at her palace in Rome, the Princess had been waited on by two French maids, one of whom dressed her, while the other kept her belongings in order. When she travelled, as she often did, one or both went with her; to Egypt; to Algeria; to Russia; to Paris; or to England. But "Mrs. May" had no maid; and, landing in

New York, it seemed that she was the only person who did not meet with a welcome from friends on the dock.

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Suddenly, she ceased to enjoy her isolation. For the first time since leaving Rome "on a long visit to relatives in America" (according to newspaper paragraphs), the Princess di Sereno did not hug her loneliness and her secret. She hardly knew what to do as she stood under the big letter "M" waiting to have her luggage examined. Her fellow "M's" as well as all the other letters appeared to be having desperate trouble with the custom-house men, who clawed out the contents of their trunks and then calmly left the cowed owners to stuff everything back as best they could.

Angela's heart beat fast when her turn came, and she wished for long-nosed, hard-voiced Josephine as a bulwark; but the ordeal was not as bad as she expected. She looked at her inquisitor with the air of a hunted child who had got lost and hardly hoped ever to be found; so the protective instincts were aroused, and the wind was tempered to the shorn lamb. In half an hour after the ship had docked, Mrs. May was inquiring of a large, obliging Irishman (who had a vast store of knowledge concerning all useful subjects) how on earth she was to secure a cab.

Her hotel was decided upon, and rooms engaged. An old friend of Mrs. Merriam, a cosmopolitan American woman, had once praised the Hotel Valmont, Angela had remembered; and driving from Twenty-third Street up into the Forties, New York was almost as strange to her as if she had never seen it before. Indeed, she had seen little of it, for the Merriams had lived in Boston, and Angela was only eleven when she bade her father and America good-bye. How vividly that day came back to her now! She could see her father, and feel his kisses as he said, "Never mind, little girl. When mother brings you back then we'll have the time of our lives—just you and I—in California together."

But that day did not bear thinking of. And, by and by, rattling through the bright, busy streets, in the vivifying sunshine, she began to feel happy again, as well as very young and eager.

"This is the gate of my future, and I'm driving into it," she thought.

The Hotel Valmont, which Mrs. Corning had said was small, loomed imposing to Angela's eyes, as her taxicab stopped before the ever-revolving glass wheel of the Fifth Avenue door. The building towered to a height of sixteen or seventeen storeys at least, and appeared only a lesser mountain among mountains.

A polite man in livery bowed her through the swift whirl of the glass wheel, and she found herself in a large hall with floor and walls of marble. Formally cut laurel-trees grew in huge pots, and the gilded ceiling was higher than those of the Palazzo di Sereno.

There were many desks, and she explained to one of a dozen clerks that she was Mrs. A.V. May, who had cabled for a bedroom and sitting-room.

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She was expected, and her suite was ready. Would she kindly register? And the young man, admiring the face framed in gold hair and black straw, pushed forward a ponderous volume that lay open on the counter. As Angela pulled off her glove and took the pen, she laid down a gold chain-bag which she always carried hanging on her arm. Angela was used to it, and she had no idea that it might be considered ostentatious in travelling. It was convenient as well as pretty, which was all she thought of; nor did she notice that several persons grouped near the desks looked at her, and at the bag, which was edged with diamonds and sapphires.

A diamond or two, and a sapphire or two, sparkled and gleamed on her fingers as she wrote; but except for her rings and a small, plain brooch, she had no jewellery which was meant to show. Under the black chiffon of her blouse, however, there was a glimmer of pearls which she wore night and day for safety.

“Mrs. A. V. May,” she wrote, then paused before giving herself a habitation. Everybody else on the page was placed as well as named. London was as good a background as any for an unknown Mrs. May, so she provided herself with it, and then, moving her arm abruptly, her gold bag fell on the floor. Naturally, a man who had been leaning on the counter, looking at Angela, sprang to pick it up. But another man was before him. Pulling off a wide-brimmed gray hat which had been pushed to the back of his head, he held out the gold bag a little awkwardly.

“I guess you dropped this, lady,” he said.

Angela was on the point of laughing. She was used to dropping her bag a dozen times a day, and having some one pick it up for her, but it had been funny to see it snapped away by this tall, oddly clad fellow, from under the dapper gentleman’s rather sharp nose. Of course, she did not laugh, but smiled gratefully instead, and she could not help staring a little at the retriever of her lost property. So, also, did the other and smaller man stare. This person was well dressed, and had a slight, pointed moustache, like a German officer’s.

“Yes. It’s mine. Thank you very much,” said Angela. And she thought: “What an extraordinary-looking man. But how handsome! He might be dressed for a play—only, somehow, he doesn’t look like an actor. Whatever he is, he’s the real thing.”

The wide gray sombrero remained in the young man’s hand. He was so tall that he made most of those standing near look insignificant. Yet they, on the other hand, made him conspicuous.

It was a long way up to his face, but when Angela’s eyes had climbed to that height, she saw that it was attractive, and the eyes splendid, even compelling, so that it was difficult to remove hers at once and discreetly from their influence.

The type of man was new to her, and the look which he gave her was new, somehow. His was a wild, uncivilized kind of handsomeness, she thought, like that of a noble, untamed creature of the forest, changed by enchantment into a man and thrust into modern clothes. Yet the look he gave her was not uncivilized, only surprised, rather boyish, and as if the brilliant eyes had suddenly lit upon something good which they had been seeking. Very odd, and a little exciting, Angela found the look.

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If the young man's clothes were modern, they were far from being fashionable; not at all the sort of clothes to suit the background of a marble hall in a New York hotel. His shirt was of some soft white material which did not seem to be starched, and a low collar was turned down over a black, loosely tied cravat like a sailor's. Instead of a waistcoat he wore a leather belt, of the sort in which one would quite expect to see a knife or revolver sticking out. His blue serge suit was of a country cut, the trousers rather short and tight for the long, straight legs; and the shoes were wide in the toe, thick in the sole.

All these details Angela noted in one quick glance; and admiring the tall brown eccentricity as she might have admired a fine bronze statue out of place, in the wrong surroundings, she wondered from what sort of niche the statue had transplanted itself. In her mind there was no room whatever for the little man with the pointed moustache, so she forgot his existence.

"Mighty pleased to—do any service for you, lady," stammered the bronze statue, and though his voice was pleasant, it had not the cultured accent to which Angela was accustomed. Besides, it was quaint to be addressed as "lady." London cabbies and beggars called one "lidy"; but they were a law unto themselves. Still it sounded rather nice as he said it: "pleased to do any service for you, lady."

She nodded politely as she moved away, following the bellboy who had the key of her rooms, and as she reached the lift, something made her glance back. The sombrero was on the dark head again, and the head was bent over the hotel register, where Mrs. May had written her name. The man was either looking at that or writing his own. Angela inclined to the latter supposition. Probably this wild creature of forests had just arrived in New York from somewhere very far away, perhaps from her father's Golden West, the country of the sun. As the lift flashed her with horrifying swiftness up to the twelfth floor, she still seemed to hear the echo of the pleasant voice, saying "Pleased to do any service for you, lady." A few minutes later, however, she forgot the incident of the dropped bag in admiring her pretty suite of white and green rooms, the bath, and the cedar-lined wardrobes in the wall, which she remembered as typically American. She felt like a child examining a new playhouse. Suddenly she was sure that she would get on well with Americans, that she would like them, and they her, though until to-day she had been afraid that her country-people, in their own land, would seem to her like strangers. Although she had not made up her mind how long she would stay in New York before going West, she unpacked a great many things without stopping to think that perhaps she was giving herself useless trouble. Then, when she had scattered quantities of dresses, petticoats, hats, and cloaks in both rooms, she paused bewildered. Everything she had taken out on shipboard looked wrinkled and rather haggard. She wished, after all, that she had brought Josephine, though she had not been fond of her, or of the others. She did not know what to do with the things, and never could she get them all back again when it should be time to leave the hotel! It was as Josephine had prophesied. How the Frenchwoman would enjoy saying, "It is as I warned Madame la Princesse!"

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“Perhaps a servant of the hotel would help me,” she thought; and a call through the telephone brought to the door a tall, dark, Irish girl, who would have been pretty if her eyes and cheeks had not been stained with crying. At first glance Angela was interested, for she was beginning to be happy, and could not bear to think that any one who came near her was miserable. At all times, too, she had quick sympathies, and could read the secrets of sad or happy eyes in a flash, as she passed them in the street, though less sensitive persons saw nothing noteworthy; and often she longed to hurry back to some stranger, as if a voice had cried after her which she could not let cry in vain. Now, as she talked to the maid about the unpacking, unspoken sympathy went out from her in a magnetic current which the Irish girl felt. Her tear-blurred blue eyes fixed themselves on the young lady in black, and she had a strong, exciting impression that some blessing hovered near her, which she could take hold of if only she had courage.

“Indeed, miss, I’ll love to help you,” she said. “’Twill be a rale pleasure—and not many comes my way, these days.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Angela told her. “Perhaps you’re homesick. I think you must have come not long ago from a green island which every one loves.”

“You’re right, miss.” The Irish eyes brimmed over. “And I’m homesick enough to die, but not so much fur Oireland, as fur a place I niver set eyes on.”

Angela was interested. “You’re homesick for a place you never set eyes on? Then some one you love must be there.”

This time the tears could not be kept back. The young woman had begun her work of gathering up Angela’s belongings, and lest the tears should fall on a lace nightgown she was folding, she laid it on a chair, to search wildly for her handkerchief. “Do excuse me, if ye can, miss,” she choked. “I’ve no right to make a fool o’ meself in front of you, but you’re that kind, I got filled up like. It’s the State of Oregon I’m thinkin’ of, for the man I crossed the say to marry is there, and now I don’t know when we shall ever see one another.”

“Oregon’s a long way off,” said Angela. “I know that, though I’ve lived in Europe most of my life. Only the other day I looked at it on the map.”

“Have ye got that map by you, miss?”

“Yes. We’ll find it presently, in this mass of books in my cabin trunk. But I was going to say, though Oregon’s ever so far West, the man you came from Ireland to marry will surely send for you. Then how happy you’ll be, by and by.”

“A long by and by, I’m afraid, miss.”

“Oh, why? Isn’t there money enough?” Angela began to plan how she might make the course of true love run smooth; though in these days she was not as rich as she had been.

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“There was, to begin with,” the girl answered. “You see, miss, he sent for me to meet him in New York, and ’twas he paid me way over. He’d bought land in Oregon, and irritated it, as they calls it—and was doin’ wonderful. The idea was he should meet me at the ship, and we’d get married and go West, man and wife. But his partner cheated him out of his eyes, and the trick only come out when I was on the water. So instead o’ findin’ me Tim I found a letter. The poor boy’s had to start all over again; and I tuk service, waitin’ till he can scrape up the money to fetch me out.”

“I may be going quite near Oregon myself before long,” said Angela impulsively. “Do you think you could learn to be my maid, and would you like to go with me?”

“Like it!” the girl echoed, turning white and then red. “’Twould be heaven. I’m not too happy here. The housekeeper’s got a ‘clow’ on me. And indade, I’ve done a bit of maidin’ to a lady in the ould country. I’d work early and late to please ye, miss!”

“I feel sure you would,” Angela said. “But you know, if you’re going to be my maid, you must give up calling me ‘miss,’ for I am—Mrs. May.”

“I beg your pardon, I’m sure, ma’am. But ’twas because ye look so young, it never entered me head ye could be married, and perhaps even a widow.”

Angela did not speak, and at once the girl made sure that she had hit upon the truth with her last words. The lovely lady was in black for her husband, to whom she must have been married when almost a child. “My name’s Kate McGinnis, ma’am,” she went quickly on, “and though I’ve got no recommendations in writin’, because I thought to take a husband and not service, I can get a good word from the priest, and——”

“Your face tells me enough,” Angela broke in. “I know you’re a good girl, and that you’ll be a comfort to me on the journey. But if you go, you mustn’t expect to get out to Oregon immediately. I mean to travel to California, and I should like you to stay with me until I settle somewhere. Then I’ll send you to the place where your *fiance* lives.”

“That’s what I’d like best of anything,” exclaimed Kate. “Tim ain’t ready yet, but he will be soon—now the worry about payin’ the big price of me railway ticket will be off our minds. Oh, but doesn’t it seem too good to be true?”

“Why not say too good *not* to be true?” asked Angela, whose optimism to-day was ready to triumph over past stumbling-blocks. “It’s settled, then—if the hotel will let you off.”

“I’ve giv’ in me notice, miss—madam, I mean,” replied the girl hastily. “There’s some things I don’t think Tim would like about me bein’ in a hotel, and I was lookin’ out for a private place. Me time’s up here day after to-morrow. But, oh, ma’am, there’s a thing I haven’t told ye—indade, ’twas because I forgot, not that I meant to desave. Maybe,

when ye know what it is ye'll change yer mind about havin' me—and I couldn't blame ye."

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Angela's clear eyes looked full into the clear eyes of the Irish girl. "I don't believe you can have anything to tell me which will make me want not to have you. Is it serious?"

"Yes, ma'am, very serious." Kate paused, swallowing heavily. "It's—it's a cat."

"A cat!" Angela burst out laughing. "How can a cat come between us?"

"A black cat, ma'am named Timmy after me own Tim, who give him to me, a kitten, three years ago, before he left the ould country. I promised be this and be that I'd niver part with the crature till Tim and me was made wan, and I niver have. Neither will I, if I have to starve. But I pay fur his kape in the hotel, out o' me wages, as if he was a Christian, and so he is, pretty near. There's nothin' he doesn't know; but I don't suppose ye'd allow him to travel in the trains—and I couldn't lave him."

To have a travelling cat, and a maid named McGinnis! The idea was preposterous, but Angela was in a mood to do preposterous things, and enjoy doing them. "I like you for your loyalty," she said, "and I shall like Timmy, too. Cats are misunderstood people. They can be splendid friends. And black cats are supposed to bring luck."

"I should love to have Timmy bring *you* some, ma'am," said Kate. "Not that ye need it, of course."

"But I do," Angela answered. "As for you, I shall call you by your first name. Kate, as if you were a French maid. I like it better than McGinnis."

"Thank you, so do I, ma'am. But it's me Tim has the fine name, which he'll give me when the right time comes. It's Moriarty, and to my mind there's none with more music in it. Oh, if ye only knew how happy ye've made me! I was afraid me name would be as black in yer eyes as the cat, so that's why I broke it to ye gently, and now I'm rewarded for everything."

Angela laughed again. "I fancied I was all alone in the world," she said to herself, "and here I am collecting a family."

She had luncheon brought to her own sitting-room, when Kate had put away everything and gone. Quantities of flowers she ordered, too—American Beauty roses, which looked extraordinarily intelligent and companionable, she thought. Then, most of the afternoon she spent in poring over maps, planning what she called her "pilgrimage"; and a little before six she was ready to go down and buy her ticket West, at the travel bureau which, she heard, existed in the hotel. Afterward she meant to take a stroll, and see Fifth Avenue by sunset.

Not once since entering her rooms had she consciously remembered the "bronze statue." In the marble hall, however, she recalled him, and thought most likely he was out amusing himself and seeing New York. But no; there he was, sitting rather

dejectedly in a large rocking-chair; and as her eyes found him, his found her. Instantly his whole aspect changed. The statue came to life. His listless expression brightened to the puzzling intentness with which he

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had looked at her in the morning. As she passed near him, on her way to the travel bureau, he got up and stood like a soldier at attention. Seeing this Angela went by quickly without seeming to glance at him, for she was afraid that he meant to speak, and she hoped that he would not, for she did not want to snub him. She need not have feared, however. He made no sign, but looked at her as if she were a passing queen, for whom it was a man's duty and pleasure to get to his feet.

Angela would have bowed in recognition of the morning's courtesy, but dared not, lest after all he should be encouraged to speak; for his type was so new to her that she did not understand it in the least. It was, however, rather an agreeable mystery, and she saw him feature by feature, without appearing to lift her eyes. It was too bad that he had been foolish enough to discard his becoming costume of the morning for a conventional suit of clothes, which, it was painfully certain, he must have bought ready-made. The things did not fit too well, though they had probably cost a good deal, and they were astonishingly like advertisements of men's clothes which Angela had seen in American magazines on shipboard. They did their best to give him his money's worth, by spoiling his splendid looks and turning him into something different from what nature had intended. His broad shoulders were increased in size by the padded cutaway coat, until they seemed out of proportion. His collar was an inch too high, and he was evidently wretched in it. Also he had the look in his eyes of a man whose boots are so tight that he wishes to die. His fancy waistcoat and maroon necktie must have been forced upon him by a ruthless salesman who would stop at no crime in the way of trade, and the consciousness of these atrocities and the largeness of his scarf-pin had reduced the poor fellow to the depths of gloom. In one hand he held a pair of yellowish kid gloves which hung limp and feeble, like the dead bodies of small animals, and on the floor near his feet, as if drawing attention to the brilliance of his patent-leather shoes, was the latest extravagance in silk hats.

"My spoilt statue!" Angela thought. "I believe he is as sorry for himself as I am for him. Who knows, though? Perhaps I'm mistaken, and he's as proud as Punch. In that case, I give him up!"

But she would not have believed any one who had told her that she, and she alone, was the cause of the tragic change. He had wished to appear well in her eyes, and had gone about it in the way that seemed best.

V

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT

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Walking down Fifth Avenue, after buying tickets via Washington and New Orleans to Los Angeles, “Mrs. May” happened to see a poster advertising a recital by a violinist she had always contrived to miss. At once she decided to go; and as it was for that night, there was just time to hurry back to the hotel, dine, and dress. She was lucky enough to get a box, in which she sat hidden behind curtains, and the evening would have been a success if the carriage ordered to take her home had not been delayed by a slight accident. She had to wait for it, and was much later than she had expected to be in getting back to the hotel. Theatres were over; suppers were being eaten in the Louis Seize restaurant, into which Angela could see as she got into the lift; and upstairs shoes had already been put outside bedroom doors. In front of the one next her own, she saw two pairs which made her smile a little, for, though she could not be certain, she fancied that she recognized them. One pair was stout, unfashionable, made for country wear; the other looked several sizes smaller, glittered with the uncompromising newness of patent leather, and was ultra “smart” in shape.

“Poor statue!” she said to herself. “If they’re his, how dreadfully the new ones must have hurt him!”

Then she went into her own room, where Kate presently came to undress her with affectionate if inexperienced hands.

Angela was still excited by all the events of the day, her first in her own country since childhood, and fancied that she would not be able to sleep. But soon she forgot everything and lay dead to the world, very still, very white in the light that stole through the window, very beautiful, drowned in the waves of her hair. Then, at last, she began to dream of Italy; that she was there; that she had never come away; and that there was no escape. She moaned faintly in her sleep, and roused herself enough to know that she was dreaming; tried to wake and succeeded, breathing hard after her fight to conquer the dream.

“It’s not true!” she told herself, pressing her face caressingly against the pillow because it was an American pillow, not an Italian one in the Palazzo di Sereno, and because it made her feel safe.

So she lay for a minute or two, comforting herself with the thought that all bad and frightening things were left behind in the past, with a door, double-locked by a golden key, shut forever between it and her. Nothing disagreeable could happen now. And she was falling asleep once more, when a slight noise made her heart jump. Then she and her heart both kept very still, for it seemed that the noise was in the room, not far from her bed.

It came again, and Angela realized that it was at one of the two windows, both of which were open.

At her request, Kate had pulled the dark blinds halfway up, and Angela would have laughed at the suggestion that a thief could creep into a room on the twelfth story. Nevertheless, the night glow of the great city silhouetted the figure of a man black against the shining of the half-raised window-panes. It was kneeling on the wide stone sill outside, and slowly, with infinite caution, was pushing the heavy window-sash up higher, so that it might be possible to crawl underneath and slip into the room.

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As she stared, incredulous at first, then driven to believe, Angela guessed how the seeming miracle had been performed. The man had crept along the cornice which belted the wall, on a level a few feet lower than the line of the window-sills. She remembered noticing this as one suddenly recalls some forgotten detail in a photograph. A clever thief might make the perilous passage, helping himself along by one window-sill after another until he reached the one he wanted.

Angela turned sick, her first thought being of the immense drop from her window to the ground. “If he should fall!” were the words that sprang to her lips. Then she remembered that it would be better for her if he should fall. He meant to rob and perhaps to murder her. She ought to wish that he might slip. But she seemed to hear a crash, to see a sight of horror, and could not make the wish.

She lay motionless, her thoughts confused by the knocking of her heart. If she jumped out of bed and ran across the room to the telephone, the man could see her. Then, knowing that she was awake, and caution on his part unnecessary, he would fling up the window, jump in, and choke her into silence.

“What can I do?” she asked herself. In two or three minutes more the slow, stealthy lifting of the window-sash would be finished, and the thief would be in the room.

Her rings, and her gold bag with a good deal of money in it, lay on the dressing-table. If only he would be satisfied with these, she might lie still and let him act; but her watch was under the pillow, and her pearls were round her throat. The pearls were worth far more than the bag, and the black shadow out there must know that she had many things worth taking, or it would not be at her window now.

“What can I do?”

Suddenly she thought of a thing she could do; and without stopping to ask whether there were something else better, she leaned out of bed and knocked on the door between her room and the next. The door was fastened, but, rapping with one hand, with the other she slipped back the bolt. “Quick—quick—help!” she called. “A thief is getting in at my window.”

There was a faint click, the switching on of electric light, the swift pushing back of a bolt, and the door flew open. The shoes she had seen in the hall had told her the truth. It was the man she expected who stood for the fifth part of a second in the doorway of her darkened room, then, lithe and noiseless as an Indian, made for the window. The thief was taken completely by surprise. When Angela suddenly cried out, he had been in the act of letting himself down to the floor, by slipping under the window-sash, raised just high enough for him to squeeze through. He had half turned on the wide ledge, so as to get his legs through first and land on his knees; therefore, he was seized at a disadvantage. The most agile gymnast could not have pulled himself back from under

the window-frame, balanced his body steadily again on the stone ledge outside, and have begun to crawl away toward safety, all in those few seconds before the cry and its answer. He did his snaky, practised best, but it was not quite good enough. The man from the next room was too quick for him, and he was caught like a rat in a trap.

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Angela sat up in bed, watching. The thing did not seem real at all. It was but a scene in a play; the black figure, dragged along the floor like a parcel, then jerked to its feet to have both arms pinioned behind its back; and in a brief moment, with scarce a sound. The light from the next room let her see the two men clearly: the tall one in pajamas, as he must have sprung out of bed at her call: the little one in black, with a mask of crape or some thin material over the upper part of his face. Now, in the silent struggle, the mask had become disarranged, to show a small, light, pointed moustache. She recognized it, and knew in an instant why she had been thought worth robbing. This was the creature who had tried to pick up her gold bag; he had seen her rings, and perhaps had spied the pearls.

“Take care!” she gasped a warning. “He may have a revolver!” As she spoke, she sank back on the pillows, feeling suddenly limp and powerless, as she lay drowned in the long waves of hair that flowed round her like moonlight.

“The little sneak won’t get to draw it if he has,” said the tall man, in a tone so quiet that Angela was struck with surprise. It seemed wonderful that one who had just fought as he had could have kept control of breath and head. His voice did not even sound excited, though here was trembling. “Don’t be scared,” he went on. “The mean galoot! A prairie-dog could tear him to pieces.”

“I’m not frightened—now,” she answered. “Oh, thank you for coming. You’ve saved my life. Can’t I help? I might go to the telephone and call——”

“No. Do nothing of the sort,” her neighbour commanded. “There must be no ructions in your room. I’m going to take this thing to my quarters. The story’ll be, he was getting into my window when I waked up and nabbed him.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Angela, roused to understanding and appreciation. “For me, that would be good—but for you——”

“For me, it’s all right, too. And you don’t come on in this act, lady.”

“He’ll tell,” she said.

“I guess not. Not unless he’s in a hurry to see what it’s like down where he goes next. If he so much as peeps while I’m in reach, I’ll shake him till his spine sticks out of his head like a telegraph-pole. Or if he waits till he thinks I can’t get at him, I’ll scatter him over the landscape with my gun, if I fire across a court-room. He sees I’m the kind of man to keep my word.” These threats were uttered in the same quiet voice, and the speaker went on in a different tone, “I’ll tell you what you *can* do, lady, if you don’t mind. I hate to trouble you; but maybe ’twould be best for me not to try it with one hand, and him in the other. If you’d slip into my room and push up the window nearest this way a few inches higher, it would bear me out better when I say he came through there.”

Angela sat up again, and reached out for her white silk dressing-gown, which lay across the foot of the bed. Wrapping it hastily round her, she ran into her neighbour's room. As she flashed by him, where he stood holding his captive, he thought more and more of his angel vision with the moonlight hair, and it seemed a strange, almost miraculous coincidence that he should behold it in real life, after describing his dreams to Carmen Gaylor.

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“The nearest window,” Angela repeated, respecting the man’s shrewdness and presence of mind. The nearest window was the one to open, because the thief had come crawling along in that direction on the cornice, and soon it would be found out which room he had occupied, since he must be staying in the hotel.

She pushed up the heavy sash, already raised some inches, and turning, saw that the silent, sulky prisoner had been dragged in by her champion.

“Thank you, lady,” said the latter, briskly. “Now, you just go back to sleep and forget this —cut it out. The rest’s my business.”

“But—how can I let you have all this trouble on your shoulders?” stammered Angela. “You’ll have to bear witness against him. There’ll be a trial or something. You may be delayed, kept from doing things you want to do——”

“You can sure bet there’s nothing on God’s earth I want to do so much as keep a lady out of this business,” her neighbour assured her. “Now go back to your room, please, and lock your door.”

Their eyes met, and Angela felt herself thrill with admiration of this new type which had set her wondering. The forest creature turned into a man, was a man indeed!

“Good night, then,” she said. “I can’t thank you enough—for everything.”

She flitted away, her small bare feet showing white and pink under the lace of night-dress and dressing-gown. She locked her door obediently, as she had been told, but she did not go back to bed, or try to forget. There was a big easy chair not far from the door she had just closed, and she subsided into it, limply, realizing that she had gone through a strenuous experience. Huddled there, a minute later she heard her neighbour’s voice speaking through the telephone, and was consumed with curiosity as to how he was keeping the wriggling prisoner quiet.

“He must have contrived to tie the wretch somehow,” she told herself. “Or perhaps he’s strong enough to hold him with one hand. He’s the sort of man who would always think of an expedient and know how to carry it out.”

It seemed dreamlike, that such a scene as her imagination, pictured was really passing in the next room, where all was so quiet save for the calm voice talking at the telephone, and Angela could not help listening anxiously, hoping to catch a few words.

After the first murmur at the telephone, through the thick mahogany door, there fell a silence more exciting to the listener than the indistinct sounds had been. Then suddenly there was a stirring, and the mumble of several heavy, hushed voices. After that, dead silence again, which remained unbroken. Evidently the police had been sent for; had come; had listened to the story of the attempted theft as told by the thief’s

captor. Angela was sure his version had not been contradicted, or she would certainly have heard a shot. The forest creature would have kept his word! But he had not been tempted; and the thief had been carried away. Angela wondered whether her neighbour had gone too—or whether he remained in the next room, taking his own advice to her, and “trying to forget.” She would not be surprised if he were able to sleep quite calmly.

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VI

WHEN THE TABLES WERE TURNED

Next morning Angela said nothing to Kate of what had happened in the night. Her thoughts were full of the affair, but since the true version was to be suppressed, it would be better to have no confidant. She asked, however, to see a morning paper, and when it came was disappointed to find no paragraph concerning the thief at the Hotel Valmont. She did not know anything about the making of newspapers, but took it for granted that the story had been too late for press, and became very eager to meet her neighbour, that she might hear all at first hand from him.

She passed him hurriedly the day before, her head bent, because she was afraid he meant to speak, and she would have to snub him. But now the tables were turned. She dressed and went down early, making an excuse to glance over a quantity of magazines and papers in the big hall, hoping that he might appear. But he did not. It was almost, she told herself, as if he were punishing her for avoiding him yesterday, by paying her back in her own coin. Not that she believed he was really doing so. Yet it was extremely aggravating that he should keep out of the way. He ought to have understood that she would want to know what happened after the first chapter of the story was brought to a close by the shutting of the door.

Because she was waiting for him (whether she acknowledged this or not) and because he did not come, Angela thought of the man every moment, without being able to put him out of her mind. He had shown such astonishing tact as well as pluck last night, and was so good-looking, that his very lack of cultivation made him more interesting as a study. She would have liked to ask the hotel people about him; whence he came and what was his name; but, of course, she did nothing of the sort. All she did was to make various pretexts for lingering in the hall till nearly luncheon time; and then the arrival of evening papers partly explained to her mind the mystery of the man's absence. Also they made her a present of his name, and a few other personal items.

"Nick Hilliard of California Makes Hotel Thief Feel Small," was the heading of a conspicuous half-column which caught her eye.

The said thief, it seemed, was known to friends and enemies as "Officer Dutchy." He had "worked" with success in Chicago and the Middle West, but was a comparative stranger in New York. He "claimed" to have been an officer in the German army, but probably lied, though he had evidently been a soldier at one time. He had numerous aliases, and spoke with a German accent. His name appeared on the register of the Valmont as Count von Osthaven, and he admitted an attempt to enter the room occupied by Mr. Hilliard, having reached it by a daring passage along a stone cornice, from his own window, four rooms to the left, on the twelfth storey.

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The case against “Officer Dutchy” would be an interesting one, as his previous career was—according to the reporter—full of “good stories.” Mr. Hilliard was hoping, however, that it might be hurried on and off, taking up as little time as possible, as he had use for every moment other than hanging about a court-room giving evidence. Born in New York, he had gone West while a boy, and had never since been in the East till a day or two ago, when he had arrived from the neighbourhood of Bakersfield, California, with the avowed intention of enjoying himself. Naturally he did not want to have his enjoyment curtailed by business.

Angela felt guilty. It was her fault that the poor young man’s holiday was spoiled. She ought not to have let him take her burdens on his shoulders; but it was too late to repent now. She could not come forward and tell the real story, for that would do him harm, since it would differ from his version. She could atone only by showing her gratitude in some way. Because he came from California, she longed to show how friendly and kind she could be to a man of her father’s country—a man worthy of that country and its traditions she began to think.

She lunched in a quiet corner of the restaurant; but Mr. Nickson Hilliard of California did not show himself, and at last Angela went up to her own rooms disappointed. Hardly had she closed the door, however, when a knock sent her flying to open it again. A bellboy had brought a note, and she sprang to the conclusion that it must be from Mr. Hilliard. He had found out her name, and had written to tell what had happened behind the closed door—the loose end of the story which the newspapers had not got, never would get, from any one concerned. But the bright pink of excitement and interest which had sprung to her face died away, as she opened the envelope and glanced down the first page of the letter, which was headed, “Doctor Beal’s Nursing Home.” She read:

Madam:

I am requested by Mr. Henry Morehouse of San Francisco to express his regret at not being able to meet your ship and offer his services as he hoped to do, at the request of his elder brother, Mr. James Morehouse, of the Fidelity Trust Bank, San Francisco. Mr. H. Morehouse was coming East on law business, when his brother suggested that he make himself useful to you, and he was looking forward to doing so, having known the late Mr. Franklin Merriam. On starting, however, Mr. Morehouse was far from well, and found himself so much worse on reaching New York, that he was obliged to consult a doctor. The result was an immediate operation of appendicitis. This was performed successfully yesterday and Mr. Morehouse feels strong enough to express (through me) his regret, wishing to explain why he failed, in case his brother may have let you know that he intended to meet you.

Yours faithfully,

N. Millar

(Nurse in Doctor Beal's Private Hospital).

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Mr. James Morehouse (in whose bank there were funds for “Mrs. May”) had not informed her of his brother’s intentions, and though she was sorry to hear of the poor man’s sufferings, she could not regret his failure to meet her at the ship. She did not wish to be helped, nor told how to see things, nor be personally conducted to California. She enjoyed being free, and vague, able to stop as long or as short a time as she liked on the way. She wanted to see only places which she *wanted* to see, not places which she ought to want to see; for there was sure to be a difference.

* * * * *

Nevertheless, she wrote a gracious answer to the letter, and ordered flowers sent to Doctor Beal’s Nursing Home, for Mr. Henry Morehouse. Then she proceeded to forget him, unconscious of the direct influence his illness was to have upon her future. She thought far more about Mr. Nickson Hilliard, whom she had avoided yesterday, and who seemed to avoid her to-day. The fact that the letter which had brought colour to her face was from a strange, unwanted Mr. Morehouse, vexed the Princess unreasonably with Nickson Hilliard, who ought to have written, if he could not call, to tell his story; and when she heard nothing from him, saw nothing of him, it was in resentment that she left New York next morning. Though it was entirely subconscious, the real thought in her mind was:

“Since he didn’t choose to take the chance when he had it, now he shan’t have it at all!”

For a woman of twenty-three is very young. It is annoying to be cut off in the midst of an adventure, by the hero of the adventure, when you have flattered yourself that the poor fellow was yearning to know you. If Angela was unjust to Hilliard she was not an isolated instance; for all women are unjust to all men, especially to those in whom they are beginning to take an interest. Angela did not know that she was interested in Nickson Hilliard, and would have laughed if any one had suggested the idea, from a personal point of view; but in her social reign as the Princess di Sereno, she had been a good deal spoiled—by every one except the Prince. Vaguely, and like a petted child, she had taken it for granted that all men were glad to be “nice” to her, and she thought the “forest creature” was showing himself a backwoods creature—rude and unenlightened.

Angela loved the sea, and chose to travel on it whenever she could. The trip from New York to New Orleans was even more interesting than she had expected from tales of her father’s, for the ship steamed along the coast, in blue and golden weather, turning into the Gulf of Mexico after rounding the long point of Florida. Cutting the silk woof of azure, day by day, a great longing to be happy knocked at Angela’s heart, like something unjustly imprisoned, demanding to be let out. She had never felt it so strongly before. It must be, she thought, the tonic of the air, which made her conscious of youth and life, eager to have things happen, and be in the midst of them. But Kate was a comfort, almost a friend. And Timmy the cat was a priceless treasure.

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No town in America, perhaps, could have contrasted more sharply with New York than New Orleans. Angela felt this, even as the ship moved slowly along the great canal and slipped into the dark, turbid gold of the Mississippi River. The drowsy landscape on either side was Southern landscape, and among live-oaks draped with mourning flags of moss, and magnolia-trees gemmed with buds, there were planters' houses which seemed all roof and balcony. Buzzards flew up suddenly, out of rice-fields, as the ship rounded a curve—creatures big and long-legged as the storks of Holland and Algeria. The wharf, when the ship docked at last, was filled with bales of cotton, and it was as if all the negroes in America must have come down to meet the boat. She might have been walking into an old story of Cable's, in the days "befoh the wah."

Her idea had been to travel on to the West next day, but New Orleans held her. She had left the Old World eagerly for the New; but this bit of the Old, in the midst of the New, made her feel as if she had stumbled into an ancient Spanish court, in the middle of a modern skyscraper. The contrast was sharp as the impress of an old seal in new wax, and Angela loved it. She liked her hotel, too, and said but half-heartedly each morning, "To-morrow I'll go on." With Kate for duenna, she wandered through streets which, though they had historic French names, reminded her more of Spain than of France, with their rows of balconies and glimpses of flowery patios paved with mossy stones, or cracked but still beautiful tiles. She made friends with an elderly French shopkeeper of the Vieux Carre, who looked as if carved out of ivory and yellowed with age. His business was the selling of curiosities; antique furniture brought in sailing ships from France when New Orleans was in the making; quaintly set jewels worn by famous beauties of the great old days; brocades and velvets which had been their ball dresses; books which had Andrew Jackson's name on yellow fly-leaves; weird souvenirs from the haunted house where terrible Madame Lalaurie tortured slaves to death; fetishes which had belonged to Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen; sticks and stones of the varnished house where Louis Philippe lived, and letters written by Nicholas Girod, who plotted to rescue Napoleon from St. Helena and spirit him across the sea to New Orleans. The selling of these things, or rather the collecting of them, was the pleasure as well as the business of Monsieur Bienvenu, and he had stored in his mind as many legends of the old town as he had stored treasures in his low-browed, musky-smelling shop. Angela spent her mornings listening to his tales of slave-days, and always she bought something before she bade him *au revoir*, in the Parisian French which enchanted the old man.

"You light up my place, madame," he said; and insisted, with graceful gestures, that she should not pay for her collection of old miniatures, necklaces, gilded crystal bottles, illuminated books and ivory crucifixes, until the day fixed for her departure.

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“Once you pay, madame, you may not come again,” he smiled. “I am superstitious. I will not take your money till the last moment.”

On the third day, however, Angela decided that she must go. Her father’s country called, with a voice she could hear above the music of the Southern town, the laughter of the pretty French girls and the chatter of black and brown babies who babbled a language which was neither French, Spanish, nor English, but a mixture of all. She bought more things of Monsieur Bienvenu, and also in other curiosity shops which she dared not mention to him, since his one failing was a bitter jealousy of rivals.

“Where is my gold bag, Kate? Have you got it?” she asked, when the moment came to pay a hundred dollars for two or three snuff-boxes, picked up in a place she had not visited until that day.

“No, ma’am, you had it on yer arm when I noticed last,” said Kate, looking startled. “Fur all the saints, I hope ye haven’t lost it!”

Angela, too, began to look anxious. Not only was her bag valuable—worth seven or eight hundred dollars—but all her money was in it, and a check-book she had brought out that morning, to pay Monsieur Bienvenu the rather large sum she owed him. Still, she was not greatly distressed. She had lost that gold bag so many times, had dropped it from her lap when she got up, left it in motor-cars, or lying on the floor in friends’ houses, and always it had come back to her! She cheered herself, therefore by saying that to-day would be no exception.

“Let me think, where were we last, Kate?” she wondered. “The shop where I bought the lilac and silver stole, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am it was. And indade, if ye’ll not mind my sayin’ so, I begged ye not to go in there, the place looked so disrespectable, as if there might be measles or ‘most anything, and the man himself come poppin’ out to entice ye in, like the spider with the fly.”

“We must go back at once and see if I left the bag after paying for the stole,” said Angela. And, explaining to the late owner of the snuff-boxes, she hurried out with Kate, leaving her parcel to be called for.

Little Mr. Isaac Cohensohn, of the brocade shop, made a search, but could not find the missing trinket. Unfortunately, a number of people had been in since the lady left, strangers to him. If madam was sure she had gone out of the shop without the bag, why, somebody must have taken it since then. The question was, who? But she must apply to the police.

“If only I hadn’t stuffed in that check-book!” Angela said to Kate. “Perhaps they would have cashed a check in the hotel. Anyhow, Monsieur Bienvenu would have taken one for what I owe him. Now I’m in the most horrid scrape! I don’t know how I’m going to get out of it.”

They walked back toward the shop of the snuff-boxes gloomily discussing the situation, which was complicated by the fact that, grown cautious since the attempted burglary at the Valmont, Angela had left her most valuable jewellery in a bank at New York. It was to be sent on, insured, only when she finished her travelling, and settled down.

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“I’ll have to call the police, I suppose,” she said. “Though it’s sure to do no good. I shall never see my bag again! I can telegraph to have the checks stopped at the San Francisco bank; but I had nearly five hundred dollars in the purse. What shall I do about my hotel bill and everything? And my railway tickets? We’ll have to stay till I can get money.”

Suddenly, because it seemed impossible, she wanted passionately to start at once.

Always she had hated postponing things.

“Somehow, I *will* go!” she said to herself. “I don’t know how—but I will.” And she walked on with Kate, back to the hotel, remembering how she had told the head clerk that this was her last day—she was giving up the rooms to-morrow. And the hotel was crammed, because there was a Convention of some sort. It might be that her suite was already let for the next day.

She went to the desk, asking abruptly, “If I find that I need to stop longer, are my rooms free for to-morrow?”

“Unfortunately, we’ve just let them—not as a suite, but separately,” said the young man. “This is a big week for the Crescent City, you know, and we’ve got people sleeping in bathrooms.”

“What shall I do?” Angela exclaimed, trouble breaking down reserve. “All my money and a check-book I had in my gold bag have been stolen. I’ll have to telegraph my bank.” And she had visions of being deposited in a bathroom, with all her luggage and Kate, and Tim the cat.

“Well, that’s a shame,” the clerk sympathized. “I’ll tell you what I can do. A gentleman came in about an hour ago; said he was looking for a friend; glanced over the register, and must have found the name, because he’s going to stay. He’s got to sleep in the laundry to-night, but he’s among those I’ve allotted to your suite to-morrow. When he hears a lady wants to keep her room, he’s sure to wait for it.”

“I don’t like to ask a favour of a stranger,” Angela hesitated.

“American men don’t call things like that favours, when there’s a lady in the case,” replied the clerk. “It wouldn’t do for *you* to be in the laundry.”

It was rather unthinkable; so when the young man added that the newcomer might be in at any minute for luncheon, Angela flitted to her own quarters, which looked more than ever attractive now that they might be snapped away from her. She descended again soon, hoping to hear her fate; and there, by the desk, stood Mr. Nickson Hilliard.

His brown face reddened at sight of Mrs. May, but he did not show surprise. Seeing that she intended to recognize him, his eyes brightened, and Angela felt that she, too, was blushing a little. She was vexed with him still, but it would have been stupid as well as ungrateful to show her annoyance except by being elaborately polite. After all, she owed him gratitude, which she had wished for a chance to pay.

She put out her hand, and he radiated joy as he took it. Happiness was becoming to Nick. An all too cordial grip he gave, then loosened his grasp in a fright; “I hope I haven’t hurt you!” he exclaimed, horrified.

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Angela laughed. “Only a tiny bit; and that’s better than a fishy handshake. Luckily, I left my sharpest rings in New York. And, oh, the gold bag you saved is gone forever! I’ve just had it stolen.”

“That’s too bad,” he remarked. But he did not look cast down. “I’ll rummage New Orleans for it, if you give me leave to have a try,” he volunteered.

“Thank you,” she said. “But I shall have to tell the police, I suppose. Not that there’s much hope.”

“You wouldn’t let me set the ball rolling, would you?” he asked, as if he were begging a favour instead of wishing to do one. “I mean go to the police for you, and all that?”

“How kind you are!” exclaimed Angela. “But—no, indeed, I won’t spoil your visit to New Orleans as I did your visit to New York.”

Nick looked astounded. “What makes you think you spoiled my visit to New York?”

Here was Angela’s chance for a gentle reproach, and she could not resist the temptation of administering it, wrapped in sugar.

“I don’t *think*. I know. And it distressed me very much,” she said, sweetly. “I read in the papers that you hadn’t been in New York since you were a boy; that you were there to ‘enjoy yourself.’ And all your time was taken up with the bother that ought to have been mine! You were too busy even to let me hear what happened that night, after——” Suddenly she was sorry that she had begun. It was silly and undignified to reproach him.

His face grew scarlet, as if he were a scolded schoolboy.

“Too busy!” he echoed. “Why, you didn’t think *that*, did you? You couldn’t!”

“What was I to think?” asked Angela, lightly. “But really, what I thought isn’t worth talking about.”

“It may not be to you, but it is to me, if you don’t mind,” he persisted. “I—I made sure you’d know why I didn’t—send you any word or—or anything. But if you didn’t see it the right way, I’ve got to tell you now. It was because—of course, it was because—I just didn’t dare butt in. I was afraid you’d feel, if I had the cheek to write a note, or follow up and speak to you in the hotel, that I was—kind of takin’ advantage of what was an accident—my luck in gettin’ a chance to do a little thing for you. A mighty small thing; ’twouldn’t have been visible except in a high-powered microscope, and only then if you looked hard for it. So I said to myself, ‘Twas enough luck to have had that chance.’ I’d be a yellow dog to presume on it.”

Instantly Angela realized that it was her vanity which had been hurt by his seeming negligence, and that it was stroked the right way by this embarrassed explanation. She was ashamed of herself for drawing it out, yet she was pleased; because she had been really hurt. Now that she need not puzzle over the man's motives, she would perhaps cease to think of him. But she must be kind, just for a minute or two—to make up for putting him in the confessional, and to prove the gratitude she wished to show.

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“You must be a very modest person, if you didn’t understand that I longed to hear—*lots* of things you wouldn’t let the newspapers get hold of,” she smiled. “Of course, it was interesting to read about that wretched man—Dutchy, or whatever they called him. And as he seems to have stolen from heaps of people, I suppose it’s well for the world that he’ll be shut up in prison—although I can’t bear the thought of prison for any one. It stifles me. There ought to be some other kind of punishment. But I *did* want to know what happened in your room after——”

“Nothing much happened,” said Nick. “The little beast was all in. I’d kind of got on his nerves, and he knew I’d dig a hole in the ground with him if he so much as peeped. I just rounded him up, and then the police came and played out the rest of the hand. As for you spoilin’ my visit to New York, why ma’am, you *made* it. I had the time of my life.”

Angela laughed, because he called her “ma’am” (which was even funnier than “lady,” from the hero who had saved her life), and because all his expressions struck her as extremely “quaint.”

“It was a very short time of your life then. I should have thought you’d want to stay weeks in New York, as you hadn’t been there for so long—and you’d travelled so far. You see, I saw in the paper that you’d come from California. And that interested me, because my—because dear friends of mine have told me so much about California.” She did not add that she was on her way there, but, of course, he might suspect, meeting her in New Orleans, if he were curious concerning her movements.

“I did mean to stay some time when I went East,” he admitted, “but—well, perhaps I was homesick. Anyhow, I felt as if I’d got a hurry call to go home.”

“What an odd coincidence, our meeting here!” Angela spoke out her thought.

“Ye-es,” assented Nick. “I reckon it does seem that way.” He was interested in the pattern of the carpet. “If you won’t think it a liberty, now I *am* here,” he began again, “I’ll be mighty glad to try and find your bag. If you’ll tell me just how and where you lost it ——”

Angela shook her head. “You’re not to spend your time fussing with the police, as you did in New York.”

“But I’d like it better than anything,” he said. “I didn’t come to New Orleans to see the sights, anyhow. I’ll feel down and out if you won’t let me help. ’Twill seem as if I’d managed wrong in New York.”

“Oh, if you’re going to feel like *that*!” And forthwith Angela told him the story of her loss.

“All your money and a check-book full of blank checks!” he echoed.

“Yes. I’ve wired already to have the checks stopped for the bank’s sake. But it’s a bore. And I was fond of that bag. Besides, I had about five hundred dollars in my purse. Now I shall have to wait here till I can get more.”

“You wanted to go?” he asked.

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“Yes—to-morrow. However, that doesn’t matter.”

“It does, if you wanted to. But, see here, ma’am, I’ve thought of something.”

“My name is Mrs. May,” said Angela, smiling.

“I know—I mean, are you willing I should call you it, just as if I was really acquainted with you?”

“Of course. Why not?”

“Well, you see,” he explained. “What I don’t know about society and the right way to act with ladies could be put in a book bigger than the Bible. And I wouldn’t offend you, for—for a good deal.”

“I feel certain you’d know the ‘right way to act,’ by instinct,” Angela assured him. “You were splendid to me that night in New York. Very few men would have known how to do what you did.”

“Thank you a thousand times for saying that, though I don’t deserve one word,” Nick burst out, flushing again, and hoping she did not see, because he had a trying task before him. “But my idea is this. Couldn’t you let me lend the money you need, and go on when you like, instead of waiting? You could send it back, any old way—check or anything. And I wouldn’t care a hang—I wouldn’t care a red cent—when.”

“Oh, I couldn’t——” Angela began, but the look on his face stopped her. It was so strong a mixture of disappointment and chagrin, as to make him instantly pathetic in her eyes. She had just said that he was a man whose instinct would always be right, and she had meant it sincerely. She knew, if she knew anything about men, that here was one of Nature’s gentlemen. He had proved that already; and—it was a shame to hurt his feelings after all he had done for her.

“I beg your pardon if I’ve said the wrong thing. I meant no harm,” he apologized warmly. “But I get left-handed and tongue-tied, I guess, when it comes to being civilized—where there’s a lady in the case. It must have been I said it the wrong way, for, I *do* know the thing itself would be right. You want to go. You’ve lost your money. And I expect your bank wouldn’t send it on a telegram. They mostly won’t. That means waiting days, perhaps. So I thought——”

“It would mean waiting,” she broke into his pause. “My bank is a long way off. You’re very kind, and I *will* borrow the money, if it won’t inconvenience you, on condition that—-you let me give you security.”

“That would hurt my feelings badly,” said he; “but I’d rather you’d do it than not take the money, because your convenience is a heap more important than my feelings.”

“If I go I can get money in a few days, and wire it back to you here,” Angela reflected aloud, at a loss how to treat the situation when it became a question of hurting Mr. Hilliard’s feelings.

Nick’s face fell. “I—unless you give me your orders—I don’t want to stay here very long,” said he. “I don’t care when I get the money back.”

“Why, you’ve only just arrived, haven’t you?”

“Ye-es. But I feel my homesickness coming on again. I shouldn’t wonder if I’ll always be sort of restless, now, away from the West. It’s my country—anyhow, the country of my heart.”

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Angela came near saying, “So it is mine.” But that might have necessitated explanations. “Well, you must take the security, I’m afraid,” she said, “or I can’t take the loan. As I told you, I left most of my things in New York, to be sent on when I settle down. Still, there’s *one* thing, which I couldn’t pawn, or leave with hotel people. But I wouldn’t mind giving it to you. It’s a diamond frame for a miniature I always carry with me. I could take the miniature out.”

Nick stared hard at the carpet again. He was afraid to let her see the look on his face. “It’s her dead husband’s picture,” he thought. “She must have loved him, if she always carries his portrait around.” Aloud he said, “Very well, if you won’t do my way, I’ll have to do yours.”

“I’ll give you the address of my bank; and I must have your address,” Angela went on. “Then, if you should change your mind and stay here——”

“I’m going to stay just long enough to get your bag,” he replied.

She laughed. “That may be forever.”

“I reckon it will be some hours at longest.”

“You must be a wonderful detective!”

“There’s more of the bulldog than the detective in me. But it will go hard if we don’t find that bag.”

“Thank you again. We shall see!” she said. “Anyway, as you’re to be my banker I can tell the hotel clerk I shan’t need to keep people in bathrooms, waiting for my suite, after to-night.”

“Oh, was it you?” exclaimed Nick. “The fellow was telling me a lady wanted to stay——”

“Then it’s *you* they’ve stuffed into a laundry!”

“I like it,” Nick assured her. “It’s a mighty clean place. I wish you could see some of the holes I’ve slept in—that is, I *don’t* wish so! But it’s all right. And now, just say how much money you want. Anything up to three thousand dollars I can give you in a minute——”

“Oh, not nearly so much. A few hundreds. But I’m going to lunch now. Would you care to lunch at the same table, and we can arrange about the loan? Also you can tell me more of Dutchy.”

“I’d like it better than anything,” said Nick. “But first I’ve got to fix things about your bag with the police. I’ll be back, and look you up by the time you’re halfway to dessert. I remember just what that bag was like, because—maybe you’ve forgotten—I picked it up

in the hotel hall when you dropped it. I can see it as plain as if it was here. 'Twas a kind of knitted gold, like chain armour for a doll. And there was a rim all smothered in diamonds and blue stones."

"Sapphires," said Angela.

"That's right. Well, I'll be back in twenty minutes."

It was useless to protest against his going, for he had gone before she could speak. And instead of beginning luncheon, Angela went upstairs to take from its diamond frame her father's miniature. On the gold back of this frame there was an inscription: "Angela, on her eleventh birthday, from her father. The day before she sails." And it was because of the inscription that she could not have offered the frame to an ordinary person as security, no matter how desperately she had wanted a loan. But Mr. Nickson Hilliard was not an ordinary person.

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VII

A POLICE MYSTERY

It was a blow to Nick to be told that there was little hope of finding the lost bag. He had pledged himself to “see the thing through,” but he had reasons—immensely important reasons they seemed to him—for wishing to leave New Orleans next day.

So far as was known, Cohensohn was an honest man. There was nothing against him, and his shop could not be searched by the police. All they could do was to get a description of the people who had called between the times of Mrs. May’s going out and coming in. But ten chances to one, like most women, she had mislaid her bag somewhere else, or left it at home.

Nick did not like these insinuations against the sex to which an angel deigned to belong; but he took them quietly, and instructed the police to offer five-hundred dollars reward for the bag alone, or a thousand with the contents intact. Then he went back and had lunch with Mrs. May, which was, without exception, the most exquisite experience of his life. Yet he did not know what he ate, or afterward, whether he had eaten anything at all—unless it was some bread which, with bitter disgust at his bad manners, he vaguely remembered crumbling on the table.

He was cheered, however, by a plan he had, and by the inscription on Angela’s miniature frame. He would have hated the thing if it had been her husband’s.

Evening came and there was no news of the missing bag. There were not even any satisfactory clues.

When Nick heard this he thought very hard for a few minutes, and then inquired at what time the shops closed. He was told; and consulting his watch, realized that they would shut in less than an hour.

“What’s the name of the best jewellery store in this town?” he wanted to know.

There were several which ranked about the same, and scribbling three or four names on his shirt-cuff, he rushed off to find the first.

“Got any gold handbags?” he asked in a low voice, as if he had something to conceal. “Kind made of chain, with diamonds and sapphires along the top.”

He was shown the stock; saw nothing apparently which struck his fancy, and was off like a shot in search of the next name on his list.

At this place lived a bag which, so far as he could remember, seemed the duplicate of Mrs. May's except that the stones alternating with the diamonds were emeralds instead of sapphires.

"Just keep that thing for twenty minutes," said he. "I'll come back to tell you whether I'll take it or not, and what I want done to it, if I do."

"Another gentleman was in to-day looking at that bag," said the attendant. "If he comes before you, I must let him have it."

"What price did you make for him?" asked Nick.

"Seven hundred and seventy-five dollars," was the reply.

"Well, will you do a little gamble? Keep it till I come in, and if I take it I'll pay eight hundred. If I don't, you can have twenty-five dollars interest on your time."

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The attendant laughed. “We don’t do business that way. But I guess I can promise to keep the bag till you come back, if you hurry.”

Nick did hurry, and visited three other shops within ten minutes, though they were at some distance from each other. He found nothing to suit him.

“I’ll take that bag, if you can change the stones and put in sapphires instead of emeralds,” he announced, somewhat breathlessly, wiping his forehead. “I know it will come dearer. But I’m willing to pay.”

“When would you want it?” asked the shopman.

“To-morrow morning by ten o’clock at latest.”

“Oh, impossible!”

“I don’t know much about that word,” said Nick. “We’ve cut it out of the dictionary up my way. Offer your men what they want to do night work, and I guess they’ll name a price.”

After all, even in a smart jewellery shop they do not sell a gold bag every day; and a point was stretched to gratify the purchaser, who had a way which made people glad to please him.

He went back to his hotel, feeling guilty but happy. “She’s going to have a gold bag, anyhow,” he thought. “I don’t believe she’ll ever know the difference.” And Nick began to rejoice that the old bag would never be found. It would be splendid to know that she was using a thing *he* had given her. If the other bag did turn up, the police would let him know. That was arranged; and he would manage somehow.

“Only to think,” he said to himself, “a year ago I might have been as wild to do this deal as I am now, but I couldn’t have run to it. This is the first real fun I’ve got out of my money. Mighty good thing money is—though I used not to know it mattered. Dollars, even if I’d a million, could never put me in the same class with an angel. But they give me a chance to travel with her, and that’ll be something to remember.”

For Nick had found the angel of his dreams, and had recognized her at first glance that day in the hall of the Valmont. He would have known the angel by her eyes and hair, if nothing else had answered the description; but all the rest belonged to the same picture—the picture of his ideal, the girl he had never expected to see in real life. And it was all the more wonderful that her name should be Angel, or something near it. He might not have learned that exquisite detail if she had not given him the diamond frame to hold as security. And to be sure of his security he was keeping it in a pocket over his heart. He knew that this was sentimental, but he did not care a red cent! Indeed, he gloried in it. Soon all would be over, for she was of a world different from his, and presently she would vanish back to her own high place, wherever that might be. He could not have

defined the difference between their worlds, if he had been called upon to do so, but he felt it intensely. Still, he meant to make the most of every minute, and he intended to have as many minutes as he could get. Each could be separately treasured as if it were a pearl. He would make a jewel-case of his memory, he told himself, for he was very sure that never would so good a thing come to him again.

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When he reached the hotel it was dinner-time, and hoping that Mrs. May might invite him to her table, as she had before, he dressed carefully, despite his inconvenient quarters. When he was ready, however, his heart failed him. It seemed too good to be true that his luck should hold. She would probably be dining in her own sitting-room, or else she would have had enough of his company earlier in the day. But no, there she was in the restaurant, at the same table where they had lunched together; and after all everything arranged itself very simply. He had to tell her the news of the gold bag—his version of it; and hearing that it might be restored, she exclaimed, “You’re wonderful! I’m sure it’s all through you. It will be nice to have my dear bag again, when I go aboard the train.”

It was a pleasant dinner for both, and each seemed to find out a good deal about the other’s likings and dislikings, though—perhaps purposely, perhaps by accident—they said singularly little about their own affairs, their past lives, or future intentions. Afterward, in her own room, Angela laughed as she thought over the day and the queer things she had somehow been led into doing.

“It’s too quaint that I should have borrowed money of him!” she said to herself, giggling under her breath like a schoolgirl. “Of course, on top of that, it’s nothing at all that I should invite him to lunch and dine. And the funniest part is, it never once seemed queer at the time, or as if I could do anything else.”

At all events she had no regrets. The coincidence of Mr. Nickson Hilliard’s appearance in New Orleans, just as her hour of need was striking, had given a bright side to what would otherwise have been a disagreeable and sordid adventure. Certainly there was something about him that inspired confidence. She felt that through him she might retrieve her bag; and, if, by chance, the money were intact she could pay him what she owed. He would then return the miniature frame, and it would not be necessary to give her address or say where she was going! Not that he would misuse such information. She was sure of this now, and she could not help being pleased that he had come back into her life just for one day—long enough to explain himself.

Next morning, at a quarter-past ten precisely, a note was brought to her room. It began:

“Dear Madam” (Nick had not dared venture upon “Dear Mrs. May”; it had not even occurred to him that he might), and informed her primly that the bag had arrived. Also it inquired in stiff language whether the writer might be permitted to place it in her hands.

Angela laughed as she read, partly with pleasure because her bag was found, partly because the poor young man’s stiffness amused her. She knew enough about him now to understand that it was shyness and ignorance of social customs; but earlier she might have thought she had offended him. “Anyway, he writes a good hand,” she thought. “Full of character and strength and not a bit uneducated.”

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“Ask Mr. Hilliard to come to my sitting-room,” she said to the bellboy.

A few minutes later Nick appeared, his manner strained in a painful endeavour to hide anxiety.

“So you’ve got my bag. How splendid!” Angela exclaimed, as they shook hands. “I’m sure I have your efforts to thank more than those of the police.”

“No, indeed,” said Nick valiantly. “The police of this town are a fine set of men.”

“How did they find it?” she asked eagerly.

Nick looked grave.

“Well, it seems there’s—er—a kind of secret concerned,” he explained. “The thing required is that we don’t ask questions. And perhaps you’ll agree, for what you want is the bag.”

Desperately obliterating all expression from his face, and hoping that his eyes were not anxious, Nick took from his pocket a gold bag whose diamonds, alternating with sapphires, sparkled as the sunshine struck them.

Angela accepted it delightedly, with but a superficial glance at the bag itself. “Why, there’s something inside!” she exclaimed.

“Only money,” he hurried to break the news. “Not the purse, nor the check-book. I’m mighty sorry, but they’re both gone. The police did their best. May get them later.”

Angela opened the bag. “Five hundred dollars,” she said counting rapidly. “Now, isn’t that odd? I didn’t think I had quite so much! How queer the *money* should have come back without the purse it was in, and especially the check-book. One would think that would be of little value to a thief.”

“There’s no accounting for a thief’s ways,” said Nick solemnly. “And I guess a lady can’t always remember to a dollar or two what money she had.”

“No-o,” Angela admitted. “But—it looks different, somehow.” She glanced again at the outside of the bag, and Nick’s heart jumped. “The *bag* looks different, too,” she said. “Newer, and——”

“As a matter of fact I took the liberty of having it cleaned up before it came back to your hands.”

“But the stones——”

“The worst of it is they had to be put back in again,” said Nick. “That gives a different look.”

“The thief had taken out the stones?”

“Somebody had, anyhow—some of them.”

“And I’m not to ask questions! It’s the most mysterious thing I ever heard.”

“I expect it’s one of those cases where ‘the least said soonest mended,’” Nick remarked.

“But do *you* know who took the bag, and what happened?”

“No more than you do. I—just had to make the best of a bad business. I hope you don’t think I did wrong?”

“No, indeed. That would be ungrateful. Only—it’s very strange. I suppose this *must* be my bag, but——”

“You can take your oath of that, anyhow. And it’s your money.”

“More than I thought I had. And the bag looks prettier. It’s as if I’d cast my bread on the waters and it had returned—buttered. One good thing is, I can pay you. Four hundred dollars I borrowed. Here it is.”

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Nick had not bargained for this transaction, and it was the last thing he wanted.

“But—but—you’re not leaving yourself enough,” he objected.

“Oh, yes. I can pay for my ticket as far as my first stopping-place. Already I’ve written the bank to have money to meet me there, and it will be in time, for I shall stay in that town several days. You must take it—really.”

He could not refuse, although it meant that he would not have her address, or an excuse for giving his. Slowly he drew the miniature frame out from an inside pocket of his coat. “I kept it there so as to be sure it was safe,” he explained, lest the lady should think he had taken a liberty in wearing her property close to his heart.

Then, with many more thanks from Angela, and protestations on his part, they said good-bye. Although the newspapers had told her that Mr. Hilliard lived near Bakersfield, California, she had no association with that part of the State, and it seemed improbable to Angela that she should ever meet the handsome forest creature again. As she had no home she could not, even if it seemed best, invite him to call upon her at some future time; but she felt a stirring of regret that her travelling adventure was over—quite over—now.

After that she had not much time to think, because there were things to do before she took the train. And then she was in the express, getting settled in a stateroom, which would be hers all the way to Los Angeles. Kate, who was to have a berth in the same car, arranged her mistress’s things, and beamed with excitement and joy. They were really going West now—she and Timmy the cat: and going West meant getting nearer and nearer to Oregon. Meanwhile the girl was happy, for she adored Angela.

When Kate had finished her work everything was delightfully compact in the pretty green room, which was almost as big as Mrs. May’s cabin on the ship. A white silk dressing-gown hung from a hook. The gold-backed brushes and crystal bottles from her fitted bag were arranged conveniently. There were lilies of the valley in a vase.

“Where did those flowers come from?” Angela asked.

“I don’t know ma’am. I found them here,” said Kate. “Perhaps the railway people supply them to the state-rooms.”

Perhaps they did. But Angela suspected something different. She was touched and pleased. *He* must have taken some trouble in getting the lilies placed in the right room. And it was like him not to have come forward himself to bid her good-bye. But—-suddenly the question sprang into her head—how had he found out that she was travelling in this train?

All the afternoon she watched the Louisiana plantations, lakes, and bayous fly by in sunshine and shadow; or she read a novel of the South as it had been in old days. It was an interesting story and held her attention so closely that she was late in going to dinner. When at last she went there was only one chair left, at a table for two. Mr. Nickson Hilliard sat in the other.

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VIII

THE GOLD BAG COMEDY

If ever there was a blush of guilt, it was Nick's.

Angela lifted her eyebrows, though she smiled. It would have been ungracious not to smile, and Angela hated to be ungracious. All the youth in her was glad to see him again; but all that was conventional, all that responded to her early training, disapproved of his presence.

"This is very unexpected!" she exclaimed, wondering if he would say it was a surprise to him, almost hoping that he might say so, because she could then seem to accept his word; which would save bother.

Nick hung his head. He jumped up when Mrs. May was shown to the table, and did not sit down again until she was seated. Now he disappointed Angela by making no attempt to defend himself. "Will you please forgive me?" he begged.

This forced Angela to be stern, and she decided to spare him no pang.

"Forgive you for what?" she asked.

"For coming," he answered to the first turn of the rack.

She was coldly puzzled. "But—do you mean your being in this train? Surely that can have nothing to do with me."

Nick was silent for a moment. The dining-car was full, and the waiters all busy. No one had come to take Mrs. May's order. Gathering his mental forces he resolved upon honesty as the best and only policy. "'Twould be easy enough to say it had nothing to do with you; that I'd have been travelling by this train to-day, anyhow," he began bravely. "The fact is, I came on board meanin' to try and make you think so, without exactly tellin' lies. But you've asked me a straight question, and I've just got to answer it straight, even if you refuse to speak to me ever again. I'm here because you're here, Mrs. May. But I promise I won't trouble you. And maybe you won't believe me, after my tellin' you this, but it's true; I didn't intend ever to let you see me to-night, and maybe not the whole journey. I only wanted to be on the same train and then, supposin' you should happen to need help any way, I'd be ready."

"But—that's rather too much self-sacrifice," said Angela, looking him full in the face with her dark-lashed, slate-gray eyes. "I'm not alone. I have my maid. I shan't need help."

“I guess you know I’m not making a self-sacrifice,” Nick said honestly. “I’d be gladder than glad to do anything for the first angel I ever met on earth. But please don’t be worrying, Mrs. May. This ain’t any hold-up. I won’t come near you, unless you happen to need a man to look after you. I’ll fade away this minute, if——”

“Certainly not!” cried Angela. “It was your table before it was mine. But—I don’t understand yet. I think it would have been better if you’d finished your visit to New Orleans.”

“I was sure there for the same reason I’m here,” Nick blurted out. “I guess I have to tell you the whole thing now.”

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“You mean—you came to New Orleans because I——”

“Yes, that’s right,” he finished for her, when she paused, at a loss for words. “Something made me do it. Something stronger than I am. You were a kind of dissolving view, and I couldn’t let it get out of my sight for good. When I heard you’d gone to New Orleans by boat——”

“How did you find out?” Angela’s sweet voice had a sharp edge.

“In the travel bureau of the Valmont Hotel.”

“Ah! Was that quite—considerate?”

“I know how it sounds to you. But it wasn’t so bad as you think. I inquired as if from a friend of yours, a man I know out home——”

“How—how *horrid* of you! I’d rather you didn’t explain any more.” Angela’s cheeks were bright pink, and she was more beautiful than Nick had ever seen her before, except the night of the burglar, when she had been drowned in the gold waves of her hair, the angel of his dreams. “But you may go on about the rest,” she added hastily, when he was struck into silence, without being able to bring in the name of his one excuse, Mr. Henry Morehouse. “I’d better know the *worst*. When you heard where I’d gone——”

“Well, I was too late for your ship, because I had to hang on and see Dutchy’s case through, so I took the first train I could get when that business was wound up. And in New Orleans I found you. I didn’t know for certain where you were going next, but——”

“But what?”

“I was pretty sure you were bound for California. And anyhow, wherever it was, I made up my mind to go. Not to bother you—no more than if I was your hired man. Just to see you through, from a distance, to know you were all right, and—and not to lose sight of you. I—of course you can’t understand. I reckon no woman could. I don’t wonder you’re mad. I was dead sure you would be. Yet I had to stand for it.”

“It’s the most extraordinary thing I ever heard,” said Angela, working herself up to be as angry as she ought to be. “That you should have left New York, after being there only a few days, and—oh, it doesn’t bear thinking of! And I’d rather not believe it.”

Again Nick wished to wave the name of Morehouse like a white flag of truce, but the San Franciscan lawyer, lying far away in a New York hospital, seemed too weak to flutter in the breeze of Mrs. May’s displeasure.

“I’d rather have jogged along without tellin’ you this,” he said. “But as things worked out, it seemed as if I had to speak.”

Angela was silent, busily thinking for a moment.

“Would you leave the train at the next stop, if I asked you?” she inquired.

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“No. I’d be real sorry, but I wouldn’t do that, even if you asked.” And here was his chance to use Mr. Morehouse—a chance which might never come again. “I was going to tell you, I *do* know a man who’s acquainted with you, Mrs. May. We came East together. His name’s Morehouse, and when he was taken sick, I went to see him, and—and had a little talk—all the nurses would let me have. I wanted him to write a note I could give you in New Orleans, but he wasn’t strong enough. He did say I could mention his name when I told him I meant to go back West and look after you; but somehow it never seemed the right time in New Orleans. And now, when I began to explain how I inquired about you at the Valmont, as if it was from Morehouse, you didn’t——”

“I felt there could be no explanation I’d care to hear,” Angela finished for him. “I beg your pardon! Still I don’t see why you should take Mr. Morehouse’s responsibilities on your shoulders—for my sake.”

“No, you’ll never see that,” Nick sighed. “Only, if you could just see your way to forgiving me, I should be mighty thankful. I promise to switch off till you send for me. I’m in the next car to yours, if you should need to—if there’s anything I could do, between here and Los Angeles——”

“How do you know my journey ends there? Did Mr. Morehouse tell you that, too?”

“When he and I were travelling East, he said Mrs. May had the notion to see California; and I thought you’d be sure to begin with Los Angeles.”

“You, no doubt, will go on to Bakersfield,” remarked Angela coldly, making a statement rather than putting a question.

“I suppose so, pretty soon,” Nick assented, too crushed by the angel’s displeasure to be flattered because she remembered where he lived.

“Of course you will, at once,” she announced relentlessly. “Meanwhile, I hold you to your word, Mr. Hilliard. It was—wrong of you to come, and knowing Mr. Henry Morehouse—of whom I never heard till after I landed—doesn’t make it much more—-sensible. I’m sure your motives were—most kind. But—you’ve made a mistake, as you must realize now, and the only way to atone is to—to——”

“I know. Keep out of your way. And I’ve promised. But I *don’t* realize that I’ve made a mistake, Mrs. May. There’s no use sayin’ I do; for, in spite of all, if ’twas to do over again, I would. I wouldn’t change anything.”

“Then you shouldn’t boast of it!” exclaimed Angela. “Confession may be good for the soul of the confessor, but it can be embarrassing for the one confessed to. You oughtn’t

to have told me why you came. The only thing to save the situation would have been to let me think it was an accident."

"You wouldn't have thought so long—unless I lied. Ought I to have lied?"

She was rather thankful that the waiter came just then with the menu, and saved her from answering. She ordered her dinner, and the smiling negro turned to Nick.

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“I don’t think I want——” he began. But Angela sternly caught his eye, mutely commanding him to eat. When he had chosen several dishes at random, and the waiter had gone, she reproached him again. “What would people think if you went away in the midst of dinner? There’s a man opposite staring at us now! You’re not as tactful as you were the night of the burglar. Then, you did just the right thing, cleverly and bravely. For that I can forgive you a good deal—but not everything. Now you make one blunder after another.”

“That night in New York you wanted me. This time you don’t. I guess that’s what makes the difference in the quality of my gray matter,” said Nick. “I feel riddled with bullets, and they’ve hit me right where I live. I—I suppose you’ll never forgive me, will you? If you only half guessed how little I meant to butt in, or be rude, or annoy you, maybe you could, though.”

“Maybe I can—by and by; for the sake of your kindness in the past.” Angela relented. “But not even for that quite yet. And not *ever*, if you look so stricken that you make people stare.”

“I *am* stricken,” Nick confessed.

“You deserve to be.” She crushed him deeper into the mire. Whereupon the soup arrived, and they began to eat, and talk politely. Nick had never known before that a man could be wildly happy and desperately miserable at the same time, but now he knew. And he would not have changed places with any other man in the world. “I’m under a spell,” he said to himself, “and I wouldn’t get out of it if I could.”

At the same moment Angela conjectured that there must be something strange about the air she was breathing in this New World. “It makes one want to act queerly,” she thought. “I’m sure I should have acted quite differently about this whole affair in Europe. It’s so easy to feel conventional in places where you’ve always lived, and where you know everybody. Or is it only because this man’s so different from any one else? I thought I was beginning to understand his nature, but now I see I don’t. The thing is, I was *too* nice to him. I oughtn’t to have asked him to lunch and dine in New Orleans. That began the mischief. And it was my fault more than his.”

But then, according to the man’s own confession, the mischief had begun in New York. “I wish I could make myself enjoy snubbing the extraordinary creature,” she went on, as she ate her dinner, throwing an occasional sentence concerning the scenery, or, as a last resort, the weather, to her chastened companion. “But it’s difficult to snub a person who’s saved your life and lent you money and found your gold bag. That’s why he oughtn’t to have put me in this position—because I owe him gratitude. It’s really horrid.” And she began to feel sincerely that the New Type had conducted itself unworthily.

She gave Nick a cool bow when she was ready to go, and left him plunged in gloom, but stubbornly unrepentant. “It’s a tough proposition I’m up against,” he thought, “but a man’s as good as his nerve. And I’ll fight till the next spring rains sooner than let her slip away out of my life.”

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It was deep blue dusk when Angela went back to her stateroom, too dark to look out of the window; yet she had lost interest in the book which she had found absorbing earlier in the day. It seemed irrelevant somehow; and though there was no reason why they should do so, her own affairs appeared more insistently exciting than before. “It’s the call of the West already,” she answered her own question. “I hear the voice of my father’s country.”

And then her thoughts returned to Nick.

“I wonder what *he* is doing now—whether I made him see the error of his ways?” she asked herself, stroking Timmy, lent by Kate. And she was not sorry for the forest creature: not sorry at all. It was stupid even to think of him. But in her lap, a splendid plaything for the black cat, was the gold bag. It seemed associated with Mr. Hilliard now. Odd, how different it looked since she had got it back! Bigger, somehow, though, of course, it was the same. There couldn’t have been a mistake. Almost mechanically she began to count the jewels set along the mouth of the bag. Fifteen sapphires—-fifteen diamonds. Why, there had been only twenty-eight altogether! She was sure of that. She had counted them before, in absent-minded moments. What could this mean? Suddenly an explanation of what it might mean flashed into her head. The theory seemed too elaborate—yet it would account for the mystery Hilliard had made of the whole matter, and his anxiety that she should not interview the police, or come into contact with them. And the five hundred dollars—more money than ought to have been in the bag. She recalled now having mentioned that sum in telling of her loss. And the forest creature had said that he “knew exactly what her bag was like.” If he had found a duplicate, and palmed it off upon her, the absence of the check-book and the presence of the money without the purse would be explained. But could he have found a bag, ready-made, so like the lost one as to deceive her until now? She must question him at once. Yet, with her finger on the bell, ready to summon the porter, she paused. Only half an hour ago she had forbidden Mr. Hilliard to come near her. Now she was about to send for him. This would appear to be a triumph for the enemy. “But I’ll soon show him it *isn’t* a triumph,” she thought, and pushed the electric button.

“In the car between this and the dining-car, there’s a Mr. Hilliard,” she announced when the porter arrived. “Please ask him to come and speak to Mrs. May.”

“Yes, miss, I’ll tell the gen’leman with pleasure,” replied the elderly negro, trotting off to cry aloud a name more or less resembling Hilliard.

Nick, not daring to hope that luck might change so soon, had drifted into the observation car; but a man answered to the call, beckoning the porter.

“Sure you understood the name right, George?” he inquired. “My name’s Millard. What kind of a looking lady is this Mrs. May?”

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The black porter, who was not George, but who had answered to the name a thousand times, smiled a smile like a diamond tiara. “She sure is the prettiest young lady I evah see, sah,” said he. “Most ob dese wite ladies look jest alike to me. I cyant tell one ob dere faces from de odders. But dis one—my! I won’t forget her in a month o’ Sundays.”

“I know who you mean now, and I guess it’s Millard she inquired for,” said the gentleman of that name. “You got it a little mixed.”

So a minute or two later Angela had her second surprise of the evening. Expecting Nick, and with her first shot prepared, she saw at her stateroom door a man as different as night from day—the man who had stared in the dining-car. He had a dyed black moustache, like the brand of Cain, and an air of thinking that women and other animals of the chase were made for him to hunt.

“Mrs. May, I believe?” he began politely. “I’m Mr. Millard. I think you sent for me. We’ve met somewhere before, and——”

Angela explained matters coldly, in three words; though she fancied that no explanation was needed. Mr. Millard showed signs of seeking an excuse to linger, but none was granted. Even Timmy was in a dangerous mood, and, as Kate appeared, on her way back from dinner, the gentleman from the next car retired in good order.

“You saw Mr. Hilliard, who brought my—a gold bag to the sitting-room in New Orleans?” Angela said to Kate. “He’s in the car between this and the dining-car. Please find him, and let him know that I should like to see him here.”

Kate’s quest produced Nick; and Mrs. May did not mention Mr. Millard. She fired her shot without warning.

“This is not my gold bag.”

Nick’s jaw squared itself. “It is your bag,” he insisted.

“Mine had twenty-eight stones. This has thirty. How is that to be explained?”

“How should I tell?” he echoed, bold as brass. “It’s a question for the police.” She had scolded him for confessing. He would not court the lash again.

“I wonder if you *couldn’t* tell—if you would? I insist, Mr. Hilliard, that you give me the whole truth, if you know it. And I think you must know.”

“I warned you there was a mystery,” he mumbled.

“You gave me the impression that it was a police mystery. Now I believe it was of your making. A little while ago you asked me to forgive you. Don’t you see I *never* can, unless you tell the truth about this wretched bag?”

“A little while ago you wouldn’t forgive me because I did tell the truth.”

She answered like a woman. “That’s *entirely* different.” And dimly Nick realized that it would be worse than useless to ask why. Queer how a woman seemed to want only the things you were just out of!

“You—*bought* this bag,” she stated.

“Oh, well, it’s no use!” groaned Nick. “Once I thought ’twas a fake about little George Washington; but I see now it can be harder to tell lies than truth to some people. I can’t tell one to you,” the prisoner in the dock confessed. “I did buy the bag, but when yours is found, they’ll send it on to me. Then we can change.”

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“It will never be found. Oh, how *could* you?—and the five hundred dollars!—your money. How idiotic of me—and how you must have laughed when I paid you back the four hundred I owed—out of your own pocket.”

“I never felt less like laughing in my life than I did then. Unless it’s now.”

“You can’t feel as distressed as you’ve made me feel. I still owe you the four hundred; and another hundred besides. That makes up the five. And the worst of all is, I can’t pay you till Los Angeles. But here is the bag.”

“Do you hate me so much you’ve got to give it back?” Nick’s eyes implored mercy from the court.

“I’m more vexed than I can tell. This is beyond everything! Please take your bag at once.”

“I swore just now it was your bag. And it is.”

“Surely, it’s hardly necessary for me to tell you I can’t keep it?”

She held the bag out to him, and when he would have none of it, forced the soft gold mesh into his hand. He let the thing drop, and at the instant of its fall Kate returned, hovering uncertainly. She supposed that Mrs. May’s visitor had gone by this time, and had come to ask for a promised book.

“Kate, there’s been a mistake.” Angela said. “This gold bag isn’t mine after all, though they look so much alike. Please pick it up from the floor and give it to Mr. Hilliard.”

These tactics overmastered Nick. He could not let a woman, be she maid or mistress, grovel on the carpet in his presence. He dived for the bag, and, pale and troubled, handed it to Kate. “It seems this has got to be mine,” he stammered. “But I don’t want it. Will you take the thing? If you won’t, it goes out of the window, sure as fate.”

“Oh, ma’am, what will I do?” cried Kate. “Why, it’s a rale fortune! I—*must* I let him throw it out the window? What all them jewels and gold would mean to me and Tim—the difference in our lives! If I won’t have the bag some wicked tramp may find and sell it for drink.”

“Do as you choose. It has ceased to be my affair,” said Angela.

“Are you *sure* you’d fling the bag away, sir, if I say no to it?” the Irish girl implored.

“Dead sure.”

“Then—oh, I *must* take it! I can’t give it up to a tramp, when ’twould buy Tim and me a home. You must be a millionaire, sir, throwing away good money like that.”

“I’ve got more than I know what to do with, good or bad,” said Nick, drowned in gloom. “Thank you very much for taking it. It’s real kind of you. And it’s a comfort to me the thing’ll be of use to some one.”

He looked at Angela, but she would not see him. And without another word he effaced himself.

“I suppose that snuffs me out,” he muttered, dolefully, returning to his own car. Almost, he was minded to leave the train in Texas—to go on by another; or to return to New York and do what he could to forget the hard-hearted angel. But he did not leave the train. He went on doggedly. “I’m hanged if I give up,” was his last thought. “It’s no soft snap, but I’ll make her forgive me before we’re through.”

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“You’ll not be cross with me, ma’am because I couldn’t be lettin’ him throw away the beautiful bag?” Kate coaxed her mistress. “I seen he *would* ha’ done it. There was fire in his eyes.”

“Yes, he would have done it,” Angela echoed. “I’m not cross with you, though I hoped you would refuse. I’d no right to dictate when it meant your sacrificing a lot of money—a hundred pounds at least, which would go begging unless you accepted.”

“A hundred pounds!” the girl stammered. “Oh, I didn’t know the bag was worth the half of that! Will I give it back to the gentleman?”

“It’s too late. There would only be a scene. He’d refuse to take the thing.”

Kate looked relieved. “Then I’ll just try and sell it in the first big city where we’re stopping ma’am,” she said, with a happy sigh. “You *tould* me a black cat brought luck!”

Angela neither slept well nor lay awake well that night. Whenever she closed her eyes she seemed to meet Nick Hilliard’s beseeching look; and next day, angrily pushing him and his problems out of her mind, she devoted herself passionately to scenery. He must have taken his meals very early or very late, or else had none at all, for not once did she see him in the dining-car. The following day at luncheon, however, he was going out as she came in. She bowed to him coldly, but her heart beat as if something exciting had happened. That night she forgot to set back her watch, and so went to dinner earlier than usual. Not far ahead, also bound for the dining-car, was Mr. Hilliard. She disliked the large tables laid for four; and when he could, her favourite waiter kept a place for Mrs. May at a small table for two persons. Often she got one to herself, but this evening, as she sat down, Mr. Millard appropriated the other chair. Had he not been rather stout, he would have squeezed himself into place before she could protest; but being a tight fit, inadvertently he gave her time to think.

“This seat is engaged,” she said, raising her voice to reach the ears of Mr. Nickson Hilliard. He turned and saw invitation in her eyes. “I’m keeping your chair,” she calmly informed him—since between two evils it is wise to choose the less.

“Thank you,” said Nick, as quietly as if it had been a long engagement.

“Did that galoot annoy you?” he asked, dropping into the seat.

“No,” said Angela. “But I preferred you for a neighbour.”

Having explained her motives, she made it clear that conversation was not included, and Nick, knowing that a man in disgrace should be seen and not heard, was silent. When Mrs. May had finished a light meal, she unbent far enough to say: “It was clever—and kind of you to understand. One thing more! I must have your address at Bakersfield, to send the money.”

Then Nick told her that he lived on a ranch a good many miles from Bakersfield. “I call it the ‘Lucky Star Ranch,’” he added.

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“I’ll write you from Los Angeles,” said she, and became conscious that her last words had been overheard by Mr. Millard. He had seated himself at a table close by, and now glanced up with such an intelligent look that she was sure he had taken in something of the situation.

When the journey through Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona was over, and the train slowed into the station at Los Angeles, she had cause to remember this incident, for Millard was on the car steps, just in front of her. He caught up the large dressing-bag which the porter had carried out of her stateroom, and, looking back, said:

“It’s my turn to help you a little now, Mrs. May, since your friend’s going on farther. You’re English, I guess; and if you haven’t got anybody to show you around here, you must let me make myself useful.”

“I would rather the porter took all my luggage, please,” replied Angela, glancing about for her black friend. But doubtless Mr. Millard had claimed authority, and “George” was giving his services to some one else.

“Porter isn’t here. You’d better let me look after you, and get a carriage,” said Millard, whose legitimate business it was to travel for a manufacturing firm.

The train stopped, and he jumped off with Angela’s dressing-bag, but only in time to have it taken in a business-like manner by Nick, who had swung down from his own car while the train was still in motion.

“It just occurred to me you might be giving yourself a little unnecessary trouble,” said he. “I’ll see to this lady.”

“I thought you were going on,” stammered the commercial traveller.

“Not just yet,” Nick spoke mildly, but his eyes looked dangerous, and Mr. Millard thought best to give up the point without further argument.

“I always have to thank you for something! It’s too bad!” laughed Angela, as Nick put her and Kate into a carriage which he had secured. “Good-bye; I suppose it’s fated that I must forgive you, as we shan’t see each other again.”

With this she put out her hand, half friendly, half reluctant, and as Nick shook it eagerly, the train moved away.

Angela gave a little cry. “Now I’ve made you miss your train! And your luggage!”

“I won’t howl about that,” said he. “I’ll wire. And I can get another train by and by—-when I want it,” he added under his breath. Then he let the carriage drive away.

IX

THE LAST ACT OF THE GOLD BAG COMEDY

“May I go out, ma’am, and see what they’ll be givin’ me for the gold bag?” Kate asked, when the unpacking—for a few days—was done at a Los Angeles hotel.

This was a sore subject with Angela. She believed that she disliked the bag; but also she disliked having it go out of her life beyond recall. “Think of the money he spent, and the trouble he took!” something seemed to moan in her mind. But with an impersonal air she gave Kate permission, dismissing the past as represented by the Hilliard incident, and plunging into the joy of arranging future motor-cars and trains—a future which was to concern her, and Kate, and Kate’s cat alone, not Mr. Hilliard.

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A singularly sympathetic and apparently intelligent hotel clerk not only advised a motor for sightseeing in the neighbourhood, but recommended one owned and invented by a friend. It was a “clipper,” he said; could do anything but climb trees or jump brooks, and might be hired by Mrs. May, at a reasonable price, for a day, a week, a month, a year. Angela felt bound to say that she should like to see it; and—almost before the last word was out of her mouth—the garage was rung up by telephone.

The car arrived with startling promptness, and if Angela had been given time to think it might have occurred to her that there was not, perhaps, as much competition for this new invention as the hotel clerk had implied. The inventor, who was driver and chauffeur as well, bore a striking resemblance to a sulky codfish, but his half-boiled eyes lighted up and glittered (even as his car glittered with blue paint), at the prospect of business. Other vehicles were now being produced by a firm who had bought his patent, said he, but at present his own; appropriately named the “Model,” was the “only one running.” He lifted the brilliant bonnet, and revealed intricate things, all new and silvery and glistening like crystallized sugar. Angela fell an easy victim. She knew nothing about the mechanical virtues and vices of cars, though she had two at home for her own use, and the Prince a dozen, valued only less than his aeroplanes. Hers had been gray and dark green. She had always wanted a blue car, and this was a lovely colour. Though she was no more vain than a pretty young woman ought to be, she consented to an experimental run, with an undertone of conviction that the car would become her as a background.

As she made her decision, Kate arrived, breathless with the excitement of bargaining, to find her mistress on the curbstone.

“Oh, ma’am!” she panted. “I’ve *done* it! I’ve got five hundred dollars in me pocket!”

“And they’ve got the bag,” Angela regretfully murmured.

“Yes, ma’am, they have. Unless they’ve sold it since. Such a fine jewellery shop. The name an Oirish one, and I went there first, for luck. Then I tried another place, but they offered less, and I ran back to Barrymore’s. They said ’twas a splendid bag, and they’d ’a give more, but they haven’t the same call for the article as if ’twas Paris or New York; and they must make their profit.”

“No doubt they will make it,” Angela almost snapped. She felt as a certain type of woman feels on hearing that the first man who ever proposed to her has married some one else. And when the codfish, whose name was Sealman, asked her where she would go for a trial spin, she said that he might take her to the shop of Barrymore the jeweller. But that was when Kate had disappeared into the hotel.

The automobile ran quietly, and the springs, as the codfish said, were “grasshoppers.” The motor made a pleasant purring, not much louder than Timmy’s when you scratched

his head through the open roof of his basket. It was a small car, but as Angela wanted it only to run about the neighbouring country, keeping Los Angeles as a centre, she began to think that she might as well engage it. After the poor codfish had given her this run for nothing, how could she disappoint him?

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Exactly what she meant to do when she stopped before the shop of Thomas Barrymore & Company she could not have explained, even to herself. Perhaps she had the curiosity to see how the bag would look in the window, in case the jeweller had placed it there; and sure enough, he had displayed it, anxious not to miss a sale. There were other gold bags, but this one—of many adventures—was by far the most beautiful; and suddenly she knew why she had come. She was going to buy the thing for herself. She could not bear to let any one else own that bag.

Of course, if she had been sensible and business-like, she might have told Kate before selling to inquire at some shop what would be a fair price; and then she might have offered the girl that amount. Now she must pay for her pride; and having less than half the income of the Princess di Sereno, Mrs. May ought to have been thinking about the California land she wished to purchase before committing useless extravagances which she could no longer afford. Besides, if she bought back the bag, she would always be ashamed to use it under the eyes of Kate.

She pointed it out to one of the Barrymore assistants, who said it had just arrived from Paris, and the price was seven hundred and fifty dollars. For her life, Angela could not have contradicted him or haggled. Luckily, or unluckily, her money had come from San Francisco. It served her right, she thought, to pay two hundred and fifty dollars more than if she had dealt with Kate. She should have been ashamed even to want Mr. Hilliard's bag, still more to buy it; and she took away her purchase in a beautiful box, with all the joy of a normal female thing who has secured for her own something which she ought not to have. When Angela di Sereno had been able to afford everything, she had longed for nothing. There was a new spice in life. And the redemption of the bag was to be a dead secret.

"Back to the hotel, please; and I'll engage your car for the next three or four days," said Mrs. May to Sealman, suddenly full of kindness for him and all the world.

Nick sat in the window of a better hotel than Angela's. She had chosen hers on the advice of a lady in the dining-car, a lovely blonde, *nee* brunette, who had once enjoyed a honeymoon in Los Angeles, and was now on her way Nevadaward to get a divorce. Nick had been to Los Angeles before, and knew where to go without asking advice, though the same lovely lady would have been enchanted to give him some. Mr. Millard was also in his hotel, and would not move to Mrs. May's (although it was cheaper), so long as Nick remained on guard. That was one of the reasons why Nick stayed. But there were others. His luggage he had wired for, and it would come back.

He sat by the window, wondering whether Mrs. May would be angry if he showed himself; or whether, on the principle that a cat may look at a king, she would consider that he had as much right to be in Los Angeles as she had.

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Then she flashed by in the blue automobile, which was as becoming as she had expected. Nevertheless, Nick jumped up from the chair in which he had been lounging, and frowned. “Great guns! If there ain’t that bandy-legged, crop-eared, broken-nosed auto Sealman came to offer Mrs. Gaylor last winter, and wanted to palm off on me!” he grumbled to himself. “How in creation did that maverick get hold of Mrs. May? Bet there’ve been bribes flyin’ around somewhere.”

Angela, being on the way back to her hotel from Barrymore’s when Nick caught sight of her, had returned by the time he strolled in to ask if Mr. Sealman was staying there. Mr. Sealman was not; but the clerk admitted acquaintance with him.

“I want to know if his car’s engaged,” began Nick.

Yes, the clerk happened to know that it was engaged for the next three days, perhaps longer, to a young lady in the hotel who intended to do some touring in the neighbourhood.

“Contract all fixed up?” asked Nick.

Everything was arranged; had just been settled; in fact, Mr. Sealman had gone home.

Nick stood still and thought for a moment, looking as sad as if he had earnestly desired the Model for himself, which was, of course, the impression conveyed. As he reflected (not so much wondering what he wanted to do next, as whether the thing he wanted to do would “work”) Kate came down, with a letter in her hand ready to post to Mr. Timothy Moriarty, White Orchard, Oregon.

“Oh, sir!” she exclaimed, flitting up to Nick. “P’raps you don’t remember me, but I’m maid to Mrs. May, and ’twas to me you gave that beautiful bag you said you’d throw out o’ window if I didn’t take it. Ye don’t mind if I sold it, do ye?”

“Of course not,” Nick assured her. “I gave it to you for that.”

“I thought so, sir; and I’ve done fine with it to-day. A gentleman named Barrymore, who keeps a smart jewellery shop, paid me five hundred dollars. I’m all in a flutter, sir! Just to think, it’s the same as if you’d give me the money.”

“Not a bit of it,” said Nick. “Some cow might have swallowed the bag by this time if you’d let me chuck it out of the car window. Or a goat, maybe.”

“Well, thank you again a thousand times. And what with you, and my lady, Mrs. May, I’m the happiest girl in the wurruld.” And Kate tripped away to post her letter.

“‘My lady, Mrs. May,’” echoed Nick, beneath his breath. “She’s *my* lady, too—my angel—though she doesn’t know it. And nothing can change that till doomsday.”

He had hated the gold bag when it was rejected by Angela; but now he felt differently. His heart warmed toward it. Had it not been hers, if only for a little while? It had hung on her wrist. It had been in her hand. It had held her lace handkerchief, which smelled like some mysterious flower of fairyland. Now he knew what he had come to learn, there was nothing to keep him any longer; and, walking out of the hotel, he asked the first intelligent-looking man he met where to find Barrymore's.

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“A young lady in black, in a blue auto, sir, bought the bag you must have seen in the window,” he was presently informed by the youth who had served Angela. “A young lady with golden hair. You might almost have met her on the way.”

“I rather think I did meet her,” drawled Nick. And though the bag was gone forever, he was suddenly so happy that he could have sung for joy. He hurried away to telegraph Henry Morehouse, at Doctor Beal’s Nursing Home, asking a favour which he was sure Morehouse would grant, because they had grown very friendly on the journey East. Next, he called at the largest garage in Los Angeles, and asked advice of the manager about buying a motor-car. “You wrote me in the winter, saying you had a fine one here to dispose of,” he said. “Maybe you remember?”

Remember? Why, of course, the manager remembered Mr. Hilliard! Every one had been talking of his Lucky Star gusher.

Nick laughed. “A right smart lot of letters wanting me to buy things came along about that time. I hadn’t got any use for an auto then. Now I have. And I want a good one, for touring. The best there is.”

“Any make you fancy?”

“I don’t know much more about motors than elephants,” Nick confessed. “No use pretendin’ to be an expert, but I’m going to learn the whole game from A to Z.”

“I’ve got a machine here now,” said the man of the garage, “that might suit you if you want something first-rate. Belongs to a millionaire who went broke before he’d had his auto a week. Best American on the market, and better than new. She’s found herself. Come and have a look at her.” Nick went. “She” was a beauty, inside and out a pale primrose yellow.

“Almost the colour of *her* hair,” he thought.

“I must have a shuvver to overhaul the machine, until I’ve been put wise,” he said, when, after some discussion, he had agreed to buy the yellow car if it were satisfactory. “But I want to learn to drive right away. I’d sure be on pins and needles, sittin’ like a duke, in behind, with somebody else at the helm. How long will it take me? I’m pretty quick at pickin’ up new things.”

“Can you drive a horse?” the man inquired.

Nick laughed. “I can worry along some.”

Few men in California knew more about horses than he.

“Well, then, you’ll get the trick of steering sooner. Six or seven lessons might do you.”

“Lessons of an hour or two?”

“Well, yes. That’s about it.”

“Suppose I pay extra, and practise extra? If I keep at it all day and every day, will I be warranted safe and kind after, say, four lessons? I can have several men to teach me maybe, if I tire one out.”

“But you’re only one man. Keeping at it like that you’d feel a strain.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” said Nick. “I’d have a doze or two and a sandwich or two in between spins. No harder work than a round-up.”

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“All right, then. In four days like that you’ll be a dandy driver, I promise you, Mr. Hilliard,” said the man of the garage.

“Fit to drive—ladies?”

“Fit to drive a queen.”

“That’s what I want to do,” mumbled Nick under his breath.

X

WHEN ANGELA WENT SIGHTSEEING

The next five days Angela spent in seeing the country her father had helped to create, and in breaking down in the blue motor-car at brief and inconvenient intervals. At first they were unexpected intervals; but soon they were taken for granted; for the more she knew of Mr. Sealman’s invention the less was Angela surprised at anything it chose to do. The Model was a model of all the vices. It smoked like a chimney, drank like a fish, and developed, one after another or all together, every malady to which motor-metal is heir. The stages of the way, even to the Mission of San Gabriel, in its sleepy old Mexican village on the fringe of Los Angeles, were punctuated with disasters. A burst tire was a comma; carburetor trouble a colon; nervous prostration of the sparking-plug a period. But Mr. Sealman never lost confidence. He explained everything, justified himself and the car; told anecdotes of his courage, and let fall pathetic words concerning an invalid mother dependent on him and his success.

“I’m a pioneer, I tell you,” he said. “You and I are making history this minute.”

Angela would gladly have turned from so lurid an occupation to any other pursuit; but Mr. Sealman looked as if his health were more fragile than that of the car. When he clawed obscurely at the crystallized sugar ornaments under the bright bonnet of the fainting Model, his air looked so dejected, his eyes so hollow, and his smile so wan that Angela’s fury melted into pity. Passionate resolves to shed him and his blue abomination died within her as she watched his struggles. His whole future depended, he said, on the Model. If Mrs. May should throw him over and hire another car, the news would fly like lightning from garage to garage of Los Angeles; indeed, from end to end of California. He would be ruined. His mother, who had been forbidden excitement, would, without doubt, die of heart failure.

The heart of Angela failed also, again and yet again. She began to see that Mr. Sealman had cast himself for the part of Old Man of the Sea, in a travel drama of which she was heroine. She felt alone in the world. “It will probably end in my having to buy the little blue brute and burn it,” she thought. “But even then the codfish will probably insist on being my butler.”

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These gloomy forebodings shadowed her mind one morning when the Model broke down about half a mile from fantastic little Venice, the Coney Island of South California. In a rage she got out and walked, past a kaleidoscopic pattern of tiny bazaars, shooting-galleries, paper icebergs, and cardboard mountains. She threaded her way through a good-natured crowd of tall, tanned young Americans, pretty girls with wonderful erections of golden hair, dark-faced Mexicans, yellow-faced Japanese, a few Hindus and negroes. Then, by the pier, she saw an old Spanish galleon disguised as a restaurant, and drifted in to lunch on fried sand-dabs attractively advertised in big black letters. How old, how Spanish, and how galleon the craft might really be, none could tell—or would. But the sand-dabs were delicious; and from the queer window near her table—a window cut in the ship's side—she could see the Pacific, blue in distance, green where it tossed white foam-blossoms on a beach of gold.

"Breakdowns would be fun if I'd some one to laugh at them with me," she thought; and her mind conjured up the image of Nick Hilliard, seating him opposite her at the little table.

She had ordered him home and he had apparently obeyed; which seemed unkind and poor-spirited, and altogether unlike him. Ever until now he had been at hand to save her from all that was disagreeable. Even at Los Angeles he had jumped off the train to circumvent Mr. Millard. His ways had been like the ways of story-book heroes, who, by some extraordinary coincidence, invariably appear in time to rescue the heroine from a villain, a mad bull, a runaway horse or a burning house. The only difference was that Mr. Hilliard could not possibly be the hero of this story, and his opportune arrival was, on his own confession, never a coincidence. He came on purpose; and that was bad taste. But as he had done it so often, why couldn't he have transgressed just once again, to rescue her from Sealman?

She thought of the tall forest creature with yearnings, which interfered with her appetite for sand-dabs. He might unobtrusively have stayed, she thought, and put himself at her service. Not the most clinging Old Man of the Sea could continue to cling if that square-chinned bronze statue pointed out the wisdom of letting go. But no doubt *he* was at home near Bakersfield, before this—Angela seldom named Nick in her mind—otherwise she must have run across him somewhere that first day at the City of the Angels when she had spun gaily from park to park, the Model for once behaving well. Almost, she had expected to see him the next morning when the car refused to move, and she had taken a trolley car, halfway to San Gabriel. It would have seemed appropriate, somehow, to meet him strolling in front of the Mission, his hands in his pockets, gazing up at the beautiful half-ruined facade, with its delicate chain-armour of gold lichen, its tower, and its flowers like blossoming barnacles.

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Angela knew now that she had felt certain of meeting Hilliard “accidentally,” in the Mission church. That while she walked beside the elderly Spanish verger, chatting of his native Cordova, listening to tales of Father Juniperra Serra, Father Somera, and the legend of the Indians with the miraculous portrait of the Madonna, she had started more than once at a footfall, fancying it that of her lost hero.

Of course, if he had ventured to show himself at any time she would have known that it was no coincidence; and she would have lifted her eyebrows in silent reproach, talking more earnestly to the verger, who had been happy because she knew Cordova and all his beloved Spanish cathedrals. Nevertheless, the bronze statue would have fitted well into the scene, and something lacked because it was absent.

“I do think he might write from his ranch and acknowledge the money I sent him,” she told herself now, neglecting the sand-dabs to stare through the galleon window at the floating seaweed on the tide-dark gold-green kelp, like lost laurel-wreaths torn from the brows of drowned divinities. “I posted the letter myself, that first day. He must have got it—if he *is* at home.”

Just then a tall, dark young man walked into the ship-restaurant, taking off a sombrero. Angela gathered herself together, ready to administer a gentle snub. But she might have saved herself the trouble. It was not Nick. She could have cried with disappointment. Snubs of the past were coming home to roost.

There was time to buy California jewels in the bazaars—tourmalines and pearl-blisters—before the car came up, purring sweetly, and looking innocent as a cat gorged with canary birds. Mr. Sealman was so sure that nothing could or would go wrong ever again that Angela had no heart to receive him coldly.

They started off for a run through bungalow-land, and the Model conducted itself like a newly converted sinner.

“I’ve been thinking out a dandy plan, while I was tinkering on the auto,” remarked Mr. Sealman in an engaging manner. “What do you say to doing a tour of the Missions? You know, I guess, there’s a chain of ’em, and the fine thing it would be to see the lot by road! I tell you, this little auto’s going to be all right—all right. It’d be the best kind of a stunt for a lady from Europe; and if the papers got hold of it, I bet they’d give us a bang-up notice—a photo too, maybe, you could send your friends on the other side.”

Angela shuddered. She could hardly bear even to hear this proposal from the codfish, for a pilgrimage to the Missions of California had been a dream of Franklin Merriam’s. He and she were to have followed the footsteps of the Franciscan Fathers, stage by stage; and if a Mission here or there were falling into ruin, Merriam had talked of offering to restore it at his own expense. Now the money had gone to restore the Palazzo di Sereno, and to buy motors and aeroplanes and ladies’ favours for the Prince of that

name. Yet some day Angela meant to make the pilgrimage, when she had built her house and given herself a starting-point.

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“I’ve other things to do,” she replied coldly. “I shall see only the Missions I may happen to pass on this tour.”

“Well, some folks’d ruther save this trip for a weddin’ journey,” Sealman suggested. “I suppose widows have weddin’ trips, don’t they?” He gazed thoughtfully at the gray coat and gray-veiled motor hat which Angela wore to protect her from the dust. She sat in front beside the chauffeur for the motion of the car was less there, but she decided that, if she were ever hypnotized into associating with the Model again, she would take the back seat.

“The Missions for mine,” he went on, when his passenger made no reply. “There’s some prefers the Yosemite, but there’s no motorin’ there. And if I was a girl I wouldn’t feel married without a motor. In the Yosemite there’s; so much honeymoonin’, the minute you see a lady with a man you put ’em down for bride and groom.”

Angela had cause to remember this remark later.

“Speakin’ of honeymoons, looks as if there’d been some around here,” the codfish continued chattily.

They were running about through the suburbs of Los Angeles, and if Sealman’s passenger had deigned to answer she would have been compelled to agree. It was ideal honeymoon-land; a moving picture, painted in colours, seemingly by rival artists of different nations, for the mingling of effects was mysterious as the scenery of dreams.

Just as Angela told herself that it was like Holland in the jewel-box neatness of little streets and little houses—behold the Riviera, with groups of palms among tropical flowers, and feathery pepper-trees, graceful and large as giant willows! Then, when she had decided on Italy or Southern France as a simile, far-off, sharp mountain peaks, a dark, grotesquely branching pine in filmy distance, and a doll’s house with a red pointed roof, suggested a sketch on a Japanese fan.

This was a spick-and-span little world for a perpetual honeymoon, and at the entrance of the streets there should have been signs, Angela thought, saying, “No one but brides and grooms need apply.” It was all distractingly pretty; and though Angela had already admired the big handsome houses of Los Angeles and Pasadena, these rose-bowered bungalows caught her fancy more. After all, there is a sameness about millionaires’ mansions the whole world over; but here was something new, invented by California.

Cupid himself might have been the architect so daintily was each little dwelling planned for the happiness of two lovers; so, of course, all the women who lived in these houses must be young and beautiful. All the men must be handsome, and husbands and wives must adore each other. No creatures old or fat or inclined to be disagreeable would dare come house-hunting here; or if they did come, surely some wise suburban by-law

would rule them out! Once in, as residents, the happy lovers would remain forever young.

“It’s to be Riverside to-morrow, ain’t it?” Sealman inquired, when, full two hours later than she had expected, he brought her back to the door of her hotel.

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Angela hesitated. In California, at most times of year, it is hopeless to use the weather as a handle to hang an excuse upon. She looked at the sky. It was a vast inverted cup of turquoise.

“Are you sure the car is equal to so long a run?” she asked mildly.

The likeness between Mr. Sealman and a codfish became so marked that Angela feared he was going to be ill.

“You don’t know what the car can do,” he answered reproachfully.

“Perhaps not,” she admitted. “Very well, we’ll start at eight.”

“Better make it earlier.”

She made it earlier, and was actually ready; but at half-past eight Sealman appeared on foot. Of the car’s health he said nothing, but of his mother’s health he said much. She had suffered a relapse. The doctor had been with her all night. How Sealman was going to pay the bill he did not know. Would Mrs. May go to Santa Catalina Island this morning, and to Riverside to-morrow? There was time to catch the boat.

The doctor’s bill was a trump card. Angela consented to wait for Riverside, and she took Kate to that fair island loved by Californians, and by fishermen all over the world.

The name Avalon alone would have lured her; for who would not set sail for Avalon at a moment’s notice?

Santa Catalina is Corsica in miniature, Corsica without Napoleon or vendetta. But it has sea-gardens, fathoms deep under green water, where flowers bloom and fish glitter in a dazzle of jewelled armour beneath the glass floors of flat-bottomed boats. The fishermen were catching yellow-tail that day, too, just as Franklin Merriam had caught them in his time; and his daughter went back to Los Angeles full of thoughts of him.

To-morrow was to be held sacred to her father’s memory; for his old home, vanished off the face of the earth now, had been near Riverside. Angela wanted the day to be perfect, unmarred by trouble or vexation; and though she had her fears, when morning came the Model started off so well that hope began to rise.

Making a detour, they spun past the old Mission San Gabriel, where she had arrived ignominiously by trolley four days ago; and turning for a look at the facade, Angela saw a yellow car drawn up in the fleecy shadow of a pepper-tree. A chauffeur sat next the driver’s empty seat, apparently half asleep.

“That’s the motor I wanted to ask you about, a day or two ago,” Angela said, bending forward to speak to Sealman—for she had kept her resolution to sit behind him. “It’s the

handsomest I've seen; and we've met it several times; two men in it always, in chauffeur's caps and goggles."

"Oh, *that* car!" remarked the inventor with indifference. "That's what we call Smith's Folly. Thad Smith, a fellow who made a pile of money, had the thing built to order, and it brought him bad luck—lost every cent the day she was finished, and he's been trying to sell her ever since. *I* wouldn't take her for a present."

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Angela leaned back, hiding a smile behind her motor veil. She did not believe that Mr. Sealman would have the offer. His little car looked a badly made toy compared with that golden chariot. She wondered if it had been sold, or if it would be worth while to make inquiries. Somebody was perhaps trying it, she thought, for often it followed the road taken by Sealman; or, when their car broke down, as it usually did, the yellow giant shot ahead, disappeared and occasionally appeared again.

“I should like to find out if it’s still for sale,” she said to herself, gazing back admiringly. “Why shouldn’t I have a motor of my own?”

As the Model trundled her out of sight, a man walked round the corner, and, springing into the yellow car, took the driver’s seat.

XI

THE MAN AT THE WHEEL

Nick had not been visiting the Mission that day. But he had been there before, gabbling fluent Spanish with the verger. This was more than Angela could do, though she knew the cathedrals of Spain! In the morning Nick had made an early start with his new car, and, after four long days of constant practice, at last he experienced the joy of confidence in himself, at the wheel. He was now licensed to drive, and the yellow automobile was his, body and soul.

The chauffeur, a reedy and extremely young youth, with a sharp nose and a keen sense of humour, had scraped acquaintance with Sealman. Without giving away any information on his side, he had always contrived to find out, if not where the Model was going, at least where it was hoped she might go. It was to be Riverside to-day; and after a preliminary spin from six to eight, Nick had been lingering near the Mission, paying a friendly visit to the owner of the Big Grapevine and the Trained Owls. This man was the most taciturn of mortals. But something behind the locked windows of his soul recognized a congenial spirit in the open windows of Nick Hilliard’s, and the two had made friends years ago. The morning’s call was a renewal of old acquaintance; and the sea-green light under the Grapevine was as clear as on another May day, when Nick was six years younger. The alligators were larger; but the white-faced owls were unchanged—unless perhaps a little wiser, a little more instructed in the oldest secrets of an old, secretive world.

“See the way that white-veiled witch stares at me with her golden eyes?” said Nick. “Wish I could flatter myself she remembers me.”

“Of course she remembers,” said her master, “She’s the same one told your fortune when you were here before.”

“I asked her if I was going to amount to anything in the world, and she nodded her head three times. I felt like sending her a present when Gaylor made me foreman, and again when I got my ranch. She ought to have had a diamond crown when the gusher came. But, like an ungrateful beast, I forgot all about her.”

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“She knows her business,” said the Grapevine man. “Three nods mean three big strokes of luck.”

“Good king!” exclaimed Nick. “I hope that doesn’t mean I’m not going to have any more than three?”

“Anything you want in particular?”

“Well, yes, there *is* something I’m sort of set on.”

“Ask her if you get your wish.”

Nick fixed his eyes upon the owl.

“Do I get my wish?”

She sat motionless on her perch for a moment, consulting her oracle. Then she suddenly lifted her wings and flapped violently.

“Is that the best answer you can give?” Nick reproached her.

The owl repeated the gesture.

“I guess you want something she doesn’t approve of,” said the Grapevine man.

“She might give me a civil ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ See here, you Witch of Endor—*do* I get my wish?”

The owl closed her eyes, then opened them with a sudden flash of gold, but would neither nod nor shake her head.

“She knows, but she won’t tell,” said her master. “Maybe she doesn’t want to upset your feelings.”

“She can’t scare me with her mysteries,” Nick laughed. “I’m going right ahead on the same lines.” Then he said good-bye to his friend and went out to his motor. But there was enough of the boy in him to be disappointed because the white witch had refused an answer.

The car had a proud way of dismissing the landscape impatiently, if given her head; but as her new owner was not out to show what he could do, she was compelled to crawl when she would have flown, like Pegasus harnessed to the plough.

To-day, the task of subduing herself was not so painful as usual, for the blue car went on mile after mile, through the far-stretching orange groves, without a stop; and Nick enjoyed driving.

“Wish I could remember,” he thought, “how I felt when I was a kid, and walked alone across a room the first time without tumbling on my nose. I wonder if it was as good as this?”

“This” was very good indeed, and would have been good anywhere—for Nick was, according to his own way of putting it, a “crank” about doing well whatever he undertook, and he knew now that he had conquered the machine—but on such a road, and in the light and shade of orange groves, it was superlative.

The vast plain, walled with mountains, was an endless city of domed green temples, richly decorated with the gold of the late orange crop. Beyond its boundary were vines, cut close in Spanish fashion, which perhaps the Fathers had taught in Mission days; and there were tall, pink-trunked eucalyptus trees from whose wood beautiful furniture could be made; then cities of green and golden temples again, in a desert-frame of tawny yellow. Everything that was not green was golden. The sun poured gold; oranges blazed in golden splendour; and California poppies, golden with orange hearts, swept in a yellow flame over the landscape.

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“Gold under the earth, and gold over the earth,” thought Nick. “That’s California!” And he thought, too, of the gold of Angela’s hair. “She’d look mighty well in this yellow car, floating along among the white and gold of oranges and orange-blossoms, all white and gold herself,” he said. “And she’s *going* to look well in it. That’s what I got it for. That’s what I’ve been working for till this auto’s fit to eat out of my hand. And gee! but I’ve been going some!”

He grinned under his motor mask as he recalled the strenuous hours. He had enjoyed them, but he had hated the mask; and so soon as the time came—he thought it must come soon—when he could reap the reward of labour he meant to shed the abomination. It had served its purpose by letting him come by accident once or twice within full sight of the Model, safe from recognition. He had not wanted Mrs. May to find out prematurely that he was dogging her tire tracks in a car which might have shot past her like a comet. She had misunderstood him too often already, and he wished her to think him safe at Lucky Star Ranch; until the moment when she would rejoice to see him at any price.

More than once during the last four days of practice and probation Nick had been tempted to offer his services. But common-sense had held him back when the blue car was in trouble. It had warned him that a little bitter experience might incline the lady to be lenient. Several minor breakdowns, disappointments, and vexations were needed before she would see matters eye to eye with him. And Nick thought himself lucky that, so far, the Model had not been permanently disabled. Now, if anything happened, he was ready.

* * * * *

Sealman had the air of slowing down, after an unusually long nonstop run, to show off his acquaintance with the country. “That great sandy stretch is the bed of the Santa Ana,” said he. “Why, there’s so much sand and so little water mostly, they have to sprinkle the bed to keep it from flyin’ about the landscape, as if ‘twas a pile o’ feathers. It ain’t like the Oro, where first they found gold, and then, when they thought they’d got the lot, come across more in the cobbles. Not only that, but by some scientific process or other—you wouldn’t understand if I told you—they washed the river-bed, so the sand and stones riz. ‘Stirrin’ up the alluvial deposits’ was what they called it; till they could get hold of the cobbles again, to crush ’em for road-makin’. Roads was needed bad them days! And at last they hauled out the mud from the bottom to plaster over the desert that was here, so oranges and olives and grapes could take to growin’. Sort of wonderful, wasn’t it?”

Angela could have told him a great deal more than he had told her, about these “scientific processes,” for her father had been one of the men most interested in their success. But she kept her knowledge to herself.

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“Yes, it’s wonderful,” she replied. “But—don’t you think we’d better be going on? We’ve a long way before us, according to the map.”

“Yes, we’ll go right on,” said Sealman. “I just thought I’d stop her and point out the Santa Ana, for fear you’d miss it.” He was anxious to conceal the fact that it was the Model who had “just thought,” but, urging her to begin again where she had left off, the little brute refused to budge.

“Is anything wrong?” asked Angela, when Sealman had worked in worried silence for several minutes.

“Can’t see nothing,” said he, increasing in codfishiness. “She’ll be all right in a minute. Give her time to breathe!”

Angela gave her time to breathe, but the minute passed, and other minutes limped after. Sealman sweated and grunted under the open lid of the bright bonnet. Angela was sorry for him. But she was more sorry for herself, as she counted the nearest rows of orange-trees for the twenty-fifth time, following them with her eyes, as they ran up the ankles and legs of the little yellow mountains. It was luncheon-time, and she was hungry. She had been reading about the Mission Inn at Riverside, and picturing herself there, in a cool, large dining-room.

“How far are we from a railway station?” she asked desperately, when her watch said that they had sat by the Santa Ana’s bedside for thirty-five minutes.

“Can’t tell you that, ma’am,” snapped Sealman. “But it’s too far to walk, unless you’ve got seven-league boots.”

“What’s the matter? Haven’t you found out *yet?*”

“Thought it might be the pump. But it doesn’t seem to be. I give it up!” And he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief that left green streaks of oil.

“But you mustn’t give it up. We can’t stop here all day.”

Sealman grinned viciously. Perhaps he, too, hungered. Certainly he was hot, and felt like a Socialist. What was this young woman that she should sit there comfortably and nag him while he was down in the dust? “I don’t see any reason against our stayin’ all day,” said he. “And I guess the machine don’t.”

“Hateful little beast!” exclaimed Angela.

“Who, me or the Model?” Sealman wanted to know.

“I meant the—*alleged*—Model. She’s a fraud—a horror. If only I get—somewhere—I don’t care where—I’ll never come out with you again, never, never!”

“You’re engaged to me till the end of the month,” said Sealman as firmly as if he alluded to a promise of marriage. “I’ve refused two other gentlemen. If you don’t use the machine, you’ll pay, anyhow.”

Angela would have given much if she had brought Kate. To be alone with these two monsters in an uninhabited world under a blazing sun, passionately hungry and futilely angry, was a dull adventure.

“You know perfectly well I engaged you only for three or four days,” she said. “That settles it! You shall not cheat me. And since you don’t seem to know what’s to become of you or your car for the rest of the day, I shall decide on my own movements. I’m going to walk.”

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She sprang out; and Nick, awaiting developments at a safe distance of a hundred yards in the background, saw a slim gray figure separate itself from the motionless Model.

“Now’s my time, I reckon,” he said to himself, and started the car, which could be done from the chauffeur’s seat. He drove at low speed, as if he were out to enjoy the scenery, and slowed down gently beside Angela, who was walking in the direction of Riverside. At that rate she might have reached the nearest railway station in an hour and a half.

Nick’s goggles and chauffeur’s hat were off. “Why, how do you do, Mrs. May?” he asked, in his pleasant voice. “Your machine’s broke down for good this time, I’m afraid. Now do let me give you a lift.”

“Mr. Hilliard!” cried Angela, taken completely by surprise, as she looked up from under her sunshade. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve no particular choice,” said Nick. “I’m only in this part of the country because this part of the country happens to be here. I’d be just as pleased if ’twas anywhere else. Where are *you* going?”

Angela began to laugh, and could not stop laughing. Nick, seeing this, and seeing that she looked a schoolgirl of sixteen in her little motor-bonnet, ventured to laugh too.

“I was taking to the desert,” she said. “But I *wanted* to go to Riverside. Is—is this the same old story?”

She could not put her meaning more plainly, because of Mr. Hilliard’s chauffeur; but Nick understood. “I’ve been learnin’ to drive, the last few days,” he said. “And I’ve seen you, now and then, runnin’ about in that little car. It’s an old acquaintance of mine. Sealman tried to sell it to me last winter. I was sort of sorry to see he’d got hold of you.” Nick was out in the road now, standing beside her, and the big yellow car was purring an invitation.

“I was sorry for *him*,” said Angela. “But I’m not now. He’s a cheat. He pretends I’ve engaged the car for a fortnight.”

“I guess he won’t go on along that line now he’s seen who I am,” remarked Nick, “because if he does, I’ll make his Model an orphan. He remembers me from last winter. I’ll deal with him for you, if you please.”

Angela laughed again. “Thank you! He doesn’t seem likely to go on very soon, along any line, does he?”

“Shouldn’t wonder if that car’s ball-bearings ain’t broken,” said the sharp-nosed chauffeur. “That’s a real favourite accident of Sealman’s. We’ve got to know it by heart

in Los Angeles. It generally happens with him—across a trolley track. Takes all day to dismount and fix up again."

"We can't go away and leave him to his fate," said Angela. "After all, he's human."

Nick could have shouted "Hurrah!" That "we" of hers told him that he had won.

"Shall we tow him to the next town?" he asked, keeping triumph out of his tone. "We'll land him in a garage. And then—if instead of his car you'll take mine to Riverside, why, I'll be mighty honoured."

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“You expected me to come to grief!” she said.

“Well, I knew that Model.”

“And you’ve been——”

“Just practising with my new machine. I thought I might as well keep around in your neighbourhood as anywhere.”

“I’ve seen your car. But you were so goggled——”

“I hated to have you misunderstand me again, till I could explain. I thought maybe some day you’d be a little glad to see me—not for myself, but for—”

“*Myself!*” Angela finished. “Yes, I’m selfish enough to be glad now—*very* glad. You’re a friend in need.”

“Then I’m happy. That’s all I ask to be—just a friend in need. Will you let me drive you to Riverside?”

“I’d let you drive me—*anywhere*, to lunch. But you mustn’t ask just now if I’ve forgiven you. It would be taking an unfair advantage of a shipwrecked mariner.”

“I shouldn’t think of doing such a low-down thing,” protested the forest creature.

XII

THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY OF MAKE-BELIEVE

Nick refrained from mentioning this to Mrs. May, but when he had last seen the Mission Inn at Riverside he had thought that he would like to come there, next time, on his wedding trip. There had been no bride in view then, or since; but now he remembered that wish. It was a good omen that fate should have made the one woman of all the world his companion to-day.

He had not expected such a wonderful stroke of luck. The little blue auto might actually have gone a whole day without mishap, or might not have collapsed until after Mrs. May had lunched alone at the Glenwood. But here they were, he and she, in his yellow car, sailing into Riverside together; he driving, Angela by his side, talking as kindly as if she had forgiven him his sins without being asked. If he had not thought it “wasn’t playing fair,” he would have “made believe” like a small boy building air-castles, pretending that it really was a wedding trip, and that he and his Angel were about to have their first luncheon together.

“But she’d hate me even to make believe,” he said to himself. “No! It wouldn’t be a fair dream to have, behind her back.”

Yet it was difficult not to dream. Angela was so delighted with the garden city watched by desert hills; and she said so innocently, “What *sweet* houses for brides and grooms! Oh, *no* one except people in love ought to live here!” that Nick had to bang the door of his dream-house with violence. And for the first time since he had fallen in love with Angela, he began to say, “Why not—why shouldn’t I try to make her care? There are folks who think you need only to want a thing enough to get it.”

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She appeared to him radiant as a being from a higher planet. Never could she be content with his world, he had told himself. Dimly and wordlessly he had felt that here was a creature who had reached an orchidlike perfection through a long process of evolution, and generations of luxury. The earth was her playground. Men in Greenland hunted seal, and in Russia beautiful animals died, merely that she should have rich fur to fold round her shoulders. In the South perfumes were distilled for her. There were whole districts engaged in weaving velvets and silks that she might have dresses worthy of her loveliness, and men spent their lives toiling in mines to find jewels for her arms and fingers, or dived under deep waters to bring up pearls for her pleasure. It was right and just that it should be so, for there was nothing under heaven fairer than she. And since such things must always have been part of her life, because she was born for them and would take them for granted, was it reasonable to hope that she would waste two thoughts on a man like Nick Hilliard, a fellow reared on hardships, who had learned to read in night schools, and had considered it promotion to punch cattle?

All this was as true to-day in Riverside as it had been in New York and New Orleans. Angela was prettier than ever in the simple dress she wore for motoring, and the gray silk cap that framed her face, making a halo of her pale gold hair. Her dainty and expensive clothes were a part of her individuality, as its petals are of a rose; and she appeared to think of them no more than a nun thinks of her veil. But Nick felt this morning that Angela had come down from her shining heights to be human with him. She laughed like a schoolgirl, in sheer pleasure of motion which the big car gave after martyrdom with the Model. She had travelled all over the Old World, yet she said there was nothing anywhere prettier than Riverside; no such petticoated palms as those that trailed the gray fans of other years down to their feet like the feathers of giant owls; no such pepper-trees; no such cypresses even in Italy, as these standing black as burnt-out torches against the desert sky; no such rose-covered bungalows; and, above all, no hotel so quaint as the Mission Inn.

The hour for luncheon was past, but Nick ordered flowers and a feast for a dream-bride. Then, while it was preparing, the two walked in the garden court and under pergolas where bunches of wistaria, lit from above by the sun, hung like thousands of amethyst lanterns.

“I shall build a house like this in miniature,” said Angela, half to herself. “I can’t have the shrines and the ‘Mission’ Arches with the bell-windows; but I can have the court and the arcades and the pergolas; and a well and lots of fountains. Inside there shall be walls of natural wood, and great beams across the ceilings, and big brick chimneys—’Mission’ furniture too, and Indian rugs and pottery. I can hardly wait to begin that house!”

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“Where will it be?” Nick asked, afraid of the answer.

“In California somewhere,” she said.

“You mean it?”

“Oh, yes! I don’t know where, yet. I’m falling in love with the South now, but I won’t let myself fall too deep in, till I’ve seen the North.”

“If you’re in love, *can* you keep yourself from falling deeper in?” said Nick. “I don’t think I could; I’d sure have to let myself go.”

It had been so good to see the forest creature at the moment when he was needed most, that Angela had melted toward him as snow melts in the spring sun. She had not only forgiven, but forgotten—for the moment—that there had been things to forgive; so she answered this question of his, humanly and simply. “I wonder?” she said. “If it were not a question of a country, but a person? I can’t tell. I’ve never fallen deep in.” Then she pulled herself up abruptly. “Luncheon must be ready,” she went on in a changed voice. “I’m starving, aren’t you?”

“Starving!” Nick answered mechanically. But he was saying in his heart, “She’s never been in love! Hooray!”

The thought shot new colour into existence. “I’ll pull the world up by the roots to get her,” he thought. “And she wants to live in California! Maybe, if I try to make myself all over again, a little worthier—a little more like what she’s used to, at last she——” It seemed sacrilege to finish the sentence.

It was for this end, to “make himself more like what she was used to,” that he had bought the new clothes in New York. They had not been a success. But, luckily for his happiness to-day, he did not know how Angela had laughed when she saw the shiny shoes outside his door.

Never was a luncheon like that which they ate together in the great cool dining-room, whence everybody else had vanished long ago. Angela sat facing one of the big windows, and a green light filtering through rose-arbours gave her skin the luminous, pearly reflections that artists love to paint. Up in the minstrels’ gallery a harpist played, softly, old Spanish airs.

“Before you decide where to live, will you come to my part of the country?” Nick asked, his eyes drinking in the picture. “There’s a ranch you’d admire, I think. Not mine. I’d like you to see that, too. But the one I mean is a show place. It belongs to Mrs. Gaylor, the widow of my old boss. She’s a mighty nice woman, and handsome as a picture. She’s pretty lonely and likes visitors. If she invites you, will you come?”

“Perhaps, some day,” said Angela, in a mood to humour him, because everything round her was so charming that to refuse a request would have sounded a jarring note. Not that she had the slightest intention of visiting Mrs. Gaylor, the widow of Mr. Hilliard’s “old boss.”

“But I’ve mapped out a programme for myself already,” she went on, “which may take a long time, for if I like a place very much I shan’t want to hurry away. For instance, maybe I shall have a whim to come back here and stay a week or a fortnight. You see, some one I loved dearly, long ago, lived in California, and there are parts of the country I want to visit, for his sake as well as my own.”

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This was a blow in spite of her late confession. But in a moment he took courage. If this girl (who looked eighteen and couldn't be much over twenty) had loved a man long ago, that man must have been a father or an uncle. And with a sense of relief he remembered the miniature frame.

"Would you tell me what parts you want to see most of all?" he asked, with an air of humility which was engaging in a man so big, so strong, and brown.

Angela's eyes smiled mischief.

"Why do you want to know?" she catechized him. "I think you'll admit that after—after several things which have happened, I've a right to ask—a question, before I answer yours."

"I know. You're afraid I'll want to be following you again," said Nick. "But following wasn't in my mind. I want to *take* you in my new automobile."

She stared in amazement.

"You extraordinary person! As if I *could* do such a thing!"

"Why not?" He asked it meekly, looking boyish, ready to be rebuked and snubbed—and yet to make his point. "I expect, when you were at home—wherever that was—you were used to travelling sometimes with your maid, in a motor, and nobody else except your chauffeur?" (Nick pronounced this word rather originally, but this was a detail.)

"Certainly. That's entirely different."

"Now you've got a cat too."

Angela broke into laughter. This man, and this day, were unique. She was delighted with herself for forgiving Mr. Hilliard. Because, of course, she could unforgive him again at any minute, if it seemed really best.

When a woman laughs at your *bon mot*, there is hope. There is also happiness. Nick felt both. They came in a gust, like a spray of perfume in his face, taking his breath away. "I believe she'll do it," he said to that sympathetic chum—himself, who was taking the kindliest interest in his love affairs. "It's up to me now."

"And in my car you'd have two shuvvers. What with us both, and your Irish maid, and your black cat, wouldn't we be enough to take care of you?"

"You're not a real chauffeur," said Angela.

“I’ve been qualifying for the article, and if I do say it myself I’m as smart a driver this minute as you could find in California.”

Angela shook her head. “You amuse me, because you’re quite, quite different from any man I ever saw, but—I’m afraid I can’t engage you as my chauffeur.”

“Not if I could give you a first-rate character, ma’am?”

“Don’t call me ’ma’am’!” Angela reminded him. “It’s too realistic, Mr. Would-be-Chauffeur.”

“I call you ‘Angel’ behind your back. You can’t say you won’t be an angel, because ’twould be irreligious.”

“I used to play at being one when I was a wee thing,” said Angela, her eyes far away. “Bed was the sky. The pillows and sheets were white clouds tumbling all round me. I could bury myself in them. I made believe I was disguised as a child by day, but the door of dreams let me into heaven.”

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“It mostly does,” Nick mumbled. Then he said aloud, “If you used to like making believe then, wouldn’t you just try it for a little while now? Make believe I’m going to take you round in my car, and I’ll tell you some of the things that will happen to us.”

“Well—it couldn’t do any harm to make believe just for a few minutes, could it?” Angela wondered if she were flirting with the forest creature. But no. Certainly not. She never flirted, not even with the men of her own world, as most of the young women she knew were in the habit of doing. This was not flirting. It was only playing—and letting him play a little too—at “making believe.”

“What would happen to us?” she asked.

“Well, shall we begin with to-day—what’s left of it?—or skip on to to-morrow?”

“I hate putting off things till to-morrow—if they’re pleasant.”

“So do I, and this would be pleasant. When you’d seen all you wanted of the Mission Inn, I’d drive you along Magnolia Avenue, that’s walled in with those owl-palms in gray petticoats. As you go down it looks like a high gray wall in a fort, with bunches of green at the top, and roses trained over it. We’d run up Mount Rubidoux, that has a grand, curlycue sort of road to the top, where there’s one of the old Mission bells, and a cross, and a plaque in memory of the best Father of ’em all, Juniperra Serra. Rubidoux’s one of those yellow desert mountains, the biggest of the lot, with a view of Riverside, and miles of orange groves like a big garden at its foot. We’d sit up there awhile, and I’d tell you a story of General Fremont, when he passed in the grand old days. Then we’d spin on to Redlands, and see the park and the millionaires’ houses——”

“I like the lovers’ bungalows best.”

“Do you? Would you like one better for yourself?”

“A thousand times!” But she broke that silken thread quickly. “Go on. What would we do next?”

“Oh, next an orange-packing factory. You’d enjoy seeing the oranges running like mad down a sloping trough, pretending they’re all equal, till the boys watching spy out the bruised ones that are sneaking along, and pitch ’em away before they can say ‘knife.’ By and by the small, no-account oranges are sent about their business, which is to play second fiddle, and the big, noble-fellows, who’re worthy to succeed, fall first into the hands of girls, who wrap them up in squares of white paper. My faith, but those girls’ hands go fast! It makes you feel like heat-lightning just to watch ’em fly! Anybody who wants to can order a box of picked oranges, each wrapped in paper, with a lady’s name and a verse in her honour printed on it. Lots of fellows do that. When you’d seen the factory I’d drive you back to Los Angeles, and we’d get there after dark. But there’s a

searchlight on my car equal to a light on a battleship, and her name alone's enough to illuminate the road. I've christened her Bright Angel."

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He paused for half a second; but if the analogy meant anything to his companion she did not choose that he should know. “And then?” she said.

“Then—if you’d seen enough of Los Angeles, I’d ask you to let your Irish girl pack up. And I’d start off with you—for good. I mean, you and the maid, and the cat, and Billy. Billy’s the other shuvver, besides me. I’d take you to Santa Barbara.”

“That’s one of the places on my programme.”

“And Monterey.”

“Another of my places. But I want to go to the Yosemite. You couldn’t motor me there.”

“I could guide you. I’ve known horses longer than I’ve known motors. And I know the Yosemite. Once I got hurt in a kind of accident. I wasn’t good for much, for a while afterward. And as I couldn’t do any work I went and loafed in the Yosemite Valley. I’d always wanted to go. It was grand. But it would be heaven to see it again with y—with an angel.”

Angela traced the steel embroidery on a gray *suede* bag which lay on the table. She had got it the other day to serve as understudy for the gold bag which was “taboo” for public use at present. She was glad that the forest creature did not know, and never would know, that she had secretly bought back his gold bag. If he found out, it might be his turn to misunderstand.

“How were you hurt in an accident?” she asked, for the sake of diverting the talk from angels.

“It was in a fire,” said Nick.

“Oh! On your ranch.”

“No. In San Francisco.”

Her interest grew. “In the great fire?”

“Yes.”

“Did you live in San Francisco then?”

“No. I just went there.”

“I think I guess. You went on purpose to help?”

“I felt as if every man ought to do what he could. I couldn’t do much. Shall we go on making believe?”

“You don’t like talking of your good deeds.”

“Oh, good deeds! I don’t like talking of myself when there are better things to talk of. I could make you out a tour in the Yosemite, Mrs. May. You shouldn’t travel by the ordinary stages. I’d get you something special, for the driving parts; and you should have the finest trail pony in California. I’d give ten years off my life to show you the Big Trees. There are some mighty fine ones in other places, you know; the Santa Cruz forest is splendid. But it’s the Mariposa Big Trees, in the Yosemite, I mean. We’d drive from Wawona early in the morning, one day, and stay till the sunset. You can’t think what sunset’s like among the giant Sequoias, with the red light, like a rain of ruby stars, falling through the branches. And those trees are God’s own architecture. I guess even you have never seen a cathedral to touch it; because there can’t be one. All day you should stay in the forest. I’d find you places for lunch and dinner, and the squirrels would come and help you eat.”

“It does sound nice,” said Angela, bewitched by the picture.

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“It would be—the nicest thing that ever happened. Only ‘nice’ ain’t a big enough word. *Can’t* it come true? Think, with your cat and your Kate and your trail guide? You called me a ‘friend in need.’ Can’t I be your guide in need? You’d have to get a guide for the Valley. Why not me?”

“We’ve only known each other a few days.”

“Any other guide would be a stranger. And I guess, Mrs. May, if that’s all, we know each other as well as a good many, who call themselves friends, get to know one another in years. Do you ever find out anything about people that you didn’t *feel* the first moment you set eyes on them?”

“Well—you did save my life!” she conceded. “I can’t get away from that.”

“Do you mind not getting away from it?”

“No-o.”

“Then will you take me for your shuvver and trial guide to those places? I won’t ask you any more, now. You can send me packing afterward, if you don’t think I live up to the character Mr. Morehouse has given you of me.”

“Mr. Morehouse! I haven’t heard from him since my first day in New York.”

“I mean the other Mr. Morehouse, his brother—your banker. Henry wired to him from New York. And he was writing you, to say, if you hadn’t got anybody who knew the ropes to see you through your excursions, you couldn’t do better than let Hilliard of Lucky Star be your pilot—kind of courier, you know. Both the Morehouses vouch for me, though it’s Henry who’s my friend. All strangers who come to have a look around California take a Californian to show them the sights. If you haven’t got Mr. Morehouse’s letter, it must be waiting for you. I reckon it ought to have arrived last night or this morning. And if you find he recommends me as a trustworthy man, will you think the plan over, before you say no?”

“You take my breath away! But—ye-es. I’ll think it over. I suppose one really *can* do things in America one wouldn’t do *anywhere* else?”

“That’s why there’s so much emigration,” replied Nick, gravely.

“And I should be studying California through you, I suppose? I begin to see that you’re a typical Californian.”

“No,” Nick contradicted her. “You mustn’t get hold of that impression. It wouldn’t be playing the game for me to let you. The typical Californian’s a very different man: a grand chap, and I reckon more like the sort you’re used to.”

Angela smiled. “Describe him.”

“Well, I’m not much at description. You’ll meet the kind I mean when you get to San Francisco, if you don’t before. The two Morehouses are the right sort; and lots of others. John Falconer’s one of the best. Have you ever heard of him?”

“Yes,” said Angela. “I remember his name. My—friends of mine have spoken of him, though he was younger, and made his fame later.”

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“I should like you to come across him,” said Nick, full of enthusiasm for the man he admired, and devoid of small jealousy. “Falconer was one of the grandest lawyers California ever had; and in a way he made himself, though he came of the best blood we’ve got.” (Nick would not have dreamed of mentioning that his own blood was as good. He, like most men of the West, thought more of his horses’ pedigree than his own, and he would as readily have boasted of his handsome looks as of his father’s people—the people who had disowned that father, and sent him to starve. But now he was boasting of and for California. That was legitimate.) “Falconer’s the wisest and most far-seeing politician we have,” he went on, “and deserves his luck—the money’s he’s made and the name he’s won. He’s high up on one of our biggest railroads, too, since he gave up law because he’d no time to follow it; and he’s not much over forty now. That’s California, Mrs. May. That’s typical. Falconer’s as different from a rough fellow like me, as—as I hope I’m different from Sealman.”

“You’re a loyal friend,” Angela said, admiring the fire in his eyes and the glow on his face as she would have admired an impressionist sketch for a portrait by Sargent. “Only this man ought to be a fresco,” she told herself as she followed out the picture-simile. “He’s too big and spirited and unconventional to be put into a frame.”

“Oh, I’m not a personal friend of Falconer’s,” Nick hastened to explain. “Wish I were! I’ve met him when he’s been to the Gaylor ranch—the ranch I want you to visit. But I expect he’d hardly remember me. And now you see that I’m not typical, maybe you’ll think there’s no place for me on your map. But I have my uses. I’m warranted sure and sound. And wouldn’t I just be ready to die tryin’, if you’d let me, to give you the time of your life in California?”

“I’ve always heard that Californian men are chivalrous and kind.”

“Oh, kind! That’s a funny word.”

“And these plans you draw for me are—are the sort of thing to make a woman feel glad there are men in the world willing to take so much trouble——”

“They’re the sort of thing to make a man glad there are women—or better still, a woman—to work for,” he amended, so good to look at in his enthusiasm, that Angela’s eyes would not be banished to the *suede* bag or to the flowers on the table—Nick’s flowers.

“But,” she went on, “but——”

“Don’t say that word to-day,” Nick begged. “Whatever you decide afterward, let me take you up to Rubidoux and on to Redlands? Make up your mind about the rest when you’ve seen Mr. Morehouse’s letter.”

“Very well,” she said. “Just for to-day, the ‘make-believe’ shall come true.”

Nick turned away his face lest it should betray him.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “Well, then, I reckon it’s time I went to round up Billy. And we’ll hit the breeze for Rubidoux and Redlands.”

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They saw the park and the millionaires' houses and the orange-packing, passing on the way picturesque little towns, with Indian and Mexican names, which charmed the eyes and ears of Angela. And always the air was sweet with scent of orange-blossoms, roses, and alfalfa, the life of the country. Once, at Redlands, Nick excused himself and jumped out of the car at a shop. He was gone three or four minutes; but when he came back he said nothing of any purchase.

It was only when he was bidding Mrs. May good night at her hotel door that, with a schoolboy air, he pulled a small package out of his pocket.

"Talking of typical Californian things," he said, trying to seem careless, "here's one. I thought, as it's only a little bouquet in a bottle—a few flowers distilled—you might accept it. But if you want to give it back, I'll take it like a lamb. It's—because you love California—I want you to have it. Don't open the paper till you get indoors. And you'll send me word whether you can go along farther in the country of make-believe?"

"Of course. I'll telephone."

"Early enough for us to start, if—if the answer's yes?"

"As soon as I wake up. Will that do?"

"That will do. And let it depend on your dreams. I'll trust my luck to them. Because dreams are in the country of make-believe; sometimes they are good—so good they make you want to go on and on. Besides, there'll be the Morehouse letter. I bank on that. But more on the dreams."

The letter had come. Angela found it when she got back to her hotel, and meant to read it at once, as a letter from so important a man deserved. But Nick's package was in her hand, and she was tempted to untie the gold string.

Inside was a fancy bottle of perfume, bound round with quantities of narrow rose-coloured ribbon.

"Parfait d'Amour. Made of California Flowers," announced the blossomy label. And Angela broke into laughter, repeating the name aloud, "Parfait d'Amour!"

She had laughed very often that day.

"He knew I wouldn't give it back to him," she thought. "That would be worse than keeping it and saying nothing."

She put the bottle down on her dressing-table, and took up the letter from Mr. Morehouse the banker. It was a pleasant letter, extremely satisfactory from Hilliard's point of view. It was evident that, in the two brothers opinion, there was no reason why

she should not accept the services of Mr. Nickson Hilliard, in seeing California. The banker, who alone knew (and would not tell) that Mrs. May was the Princess di Sereno, said “Hilliard, who was to be introduced to you in New York if my brother had not been ill, is a man your father would have approved. You are not travelling alone, I understand, but have your servant. You can trust Hilliard as a kind of glorified guide, which he wishes to be, I understand, partly out of friendship for my brother

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(who hoped to show you about), partly because he—in common with all of us Californians—is proud of our State, and likes nothing better than bringing its beauty spots to the notice of sympathetic strangers. That, I am sure, the daughter of my old friend Merriam must be; and I am looking forward to her arrival in San Francisco, which place I am too busy to leave at present. I hope our meeting may be soon; and wish I were a married man, that I might have the pleasure of entertaining 'Mrs. May' in my house."

When Angela had read the letter twice she let it fall, and again took up the bottle of perfume. Untying the bow of pink ribbon, she pulled out the heart-shaped glass stopper, and breathed the fragrance of "Parfait d'Amour, made from California flowers."

The name might be laughable, but the fragrance was exquisite as the sweet air among the orange groves.

Angela sighed, without knowing that she sighed, as she put the bottle down and pushed it away.

She did not even look at it again until she was ready to switch off the electric light, and try to sleep, after Kate had finished her ministrations. Then, once more, Mrs. May sniffed daintily at the "Parfait d'Amour," as a bird hovers near a tempting crumb thrown by a hand it fears. She wondered what flowers made up this sweetness, so different from any perfume she had known.

"It's California," she said to herself. "Essence of California."

Long after she had gone to bed, Angela lay awake, not restless, but vaguely excited, as she listened to a mouse in the hinterland of the wall, and thought her own thoughts, that floated from subject to subject. But always she could smell the perfume which—or she imagined it—filled the room with its sweetness. It was a pity that the scent had been given such a silly name!

"If the people of this country can be unconventional when they like, why shouldn't *I* be unconventional, if I like?" she asked of the darkness. "It's so gay and amusing to make believe, and so—beautiful." It occurred to her that she had just begun to live. Now a door had opened before her eyes, and she saw a new world that was big and glorious, ready to give her a welcome.

"There's something in being a married woman, and going about as I choose," she thought, "even if it is only in the country of make-believe. Why shouldn't I do what he asks me to do? I'm only Mrs. May, whom nobody knows! And it would be *fun*. I haven't had any fun since I was a little, little girl."

* * * * *

Perhaps Nick had been right to trust his luck to her dreams; or perhaps it was the influence of the letter. In any case, at eight o'clock next morning, Angela, with her hair hanging over her shoulders, and dreams still in her eyes, was ringing up Mr. Hilliard by telephone at the Alexandria Hotel.

"It's only to say that you may take me—and Kate—and the cat—and some luggage—to Santa Barbara this morning. That is, if you still want to? Oh, thanks! You're *very* kind. It's settled *only* about to-day, you know! Yes. Ten o'clock will suit me."

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She hummed a dance-tune while Kate dressed her. And the room was still sweet with the fragrance of that strange perfume, “Parfait d’Amour made from California flowers.”

She sat beside Nick in the yellow car, Kate (and black Timmy in a basket) behind with the sharp-nosed youth whom Hilliard called his “assistant.” There was also luggage—-enough to last for a few days, the rest had been sent on by train to San Francisco.

Nick enjoyed hearing Angela exclaim, “This is like Algeciras!” “That’s like the Italian Riviera!” as the car ran on. It seemed wonderful that she should have seen all the most beautiful places in Europe, that she should hold their pictures in her mind now, comparing them with these new ones, yet that her heart should be in the New World—-*his* world.

Near Santa Barbara the mountains came crowding down to the sea, as at Mentone; and on the horizon floated islands, mysterious as the mirage of Corsica seen from the Italian shore at sunrise. Over there, Nick told her, was a grotto, painted in many lovely colours; and boats dived into it on the crest of a wave. He had not heard of the Blue Grotto at Capri, but she described it; and so they went on, each with something to tell that the other did not know.

Two new battleships were trying their speed in the channel between Santa Barbara and the islands, and as the car turned into the park of the hotel the rivals raced into sight. Angela’s eyes were dazzled with the brilliant sunshine, the blue of the sea, and the flaming colour of the geranium borders that burned like running fire the length of the mile-long drive. The veranda was crowded with people, but thinking only of the great ships in the bay she was conscious of seeing no one until a voice exclaimed, “Why, Princess, what a surprise to meet you here!”

It was a voice she knew, and if she could have stepped back into the car, pulled her motor-veil over her eyes, and asked Nick Hilliard to drive away, she would have been glad. But one does not do these things. One faces emergencies, and makes the best of them. Angela had been foolish, she told herself, not to think of running across somebody she knew. If she wished to hide herself, she must be more prudent; but for this time it was too late. There was Theodora Dene, of all people, waiting to meet her at the top of the steps!

“Oh, bother!” Angela had just time to whisper, before she found herself shaking hands with a tall, red-haired, hatless girl in a white dress. Theo Dene never wore a hat unless it were absolutely necessary, for her hair was her great attraction. It was splendid in the sun, as she came out of the shade to stand in the blaze of light, shaking Angela’s hand and sending a long-lashed glance to Nick. She never looked at a woman if there were a man worth looking at within eye-shot. But she had no hypocrisy about this. She did not pretend to be a friend of women, though she was nice to them if they did

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not interfere with her and there was nothing better to do. She was twenty-eight, and confessed to twenty-four. She danced as well as a professional, sang French songs in what she called a "twilight voice," dressed better than most married women, did daring things, and had written two books which shocked Puritans. Some of her own experiences had been worked into her novels, which made them read realistically; and clergymen in England and America had preached against them; so, of course, they were a great success and sold enormously. Miss Dene herself was also a great success. She went where she liked, alone if she liked, and during a visit to Rome she had lured desirable men from ladies who were engaged in flirting with them. Angela, who was not flirting with any one, had been amused by the strange girl, but now she would have preferred a chance encounter with almost anybody else.

"Please call me Mrs. May," she whispered, as they shook hands. "I don't want to be known by the other name."

The tall young woman in white took in the situation, or a view of it, and the long green eyes (which she loved and copied for her heroines) smiled in a way that fascinated some people and displeased others. Angela thought that, with the strong sunlight bringing out the value of red hair, black brows, white skin, and white frock, she was like a striking poster, sketched in a few daring lines, with splashes of unshaded colour dashed in between.

"How do you do, Mrs. May?" the girl amended her greeting. "I thought I must be dreaming you."

"I'm not sure that I'm not dreaming myself," said Angela.

"I hope you haven't come here for your health?"

"I wanted to see California."

Miss Dene laughed. "That doesn't sound exciting. But perhaps it is." She glanced again at Hilliard, to whom a porter had come for directions about luggage. Nick was telling him that only Mrs. May's and the maid's luggage was to go in. He intended to stop at another hotel.

"Oh, *do* ask *That* to lunch with you, and invite me and my friends to your table," the girl suggested, in a stage whisper. "I never saw anything so beautiful. I must know him. I've been seeking a hero for my new book which I'm going to write about California, and I feel he's the one. Pity the sorrows of the poor author! If you don't," and she laughed to take away the sting, "I'll tell every one who you are. The reporters will get you—as they have me. But I liked it, and you wouldn't."

Angela wondered why she had ever admired red-haired women; and as for long, narrow green eyes, she now thought them hideous. She was sure, in spite of the laugh, that Miss Dene was capable of keeping her word.

“I intended to ask him to lunch with me in any case,” she said calmly; and this was true. But it was to have been a repetition of yesterday; quiet and peaceful, and idyllic. “He is a Mr. Hilliard who has—been detailed by a friend of my father’s to show me some places he knows. That’s his car. If you and your friends would care to join us, I should be delighted of course.” Then she turned away, moving back a step or two nearer the edge of the veranda, and thus closer to Nick.

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“I hope you mean to have lunch with me here, Mr. Hilliard?” she said.

He looked up, his eyes asking if she really wanted him, or if politeness dictated the invitation. Hers gave no cue, so he did the simplest and most direct thing, which was to him the most natural thing.

“I should like to, very much,” he said. “But you’ve found friends. I could come back afterward, and take you around Santa Barbara, unless——”

“One of the friends was glad when she heard you being invited,” Theo Dene broke in. “And the other friends are so new, Mrs. May hasn’t met them yet. You shall be introduced all together in a bunch.”

Of course, at that Nick came up the steps and joined Angela. He had a curious feeling as if he ought to be defending her from something; and at the same time a sensation of relief when he heard her once again called “Mrs. May.” “Princess” was only a sort of pet name, no doubt. That was what he had hoped when the word caught his startled attention. He would not like to have her turn into a real princess. An angel she was for him, and might be, without seeming hopelessly remote somehow; but the pedestal of a princess was cold as a block of marble.

The poster-simile did not occur to Nick; but he thought that the red-haired girl with the self-conscious eyes, standing beside Mrs. May, was like a coloured lithograph in a magazine, compared with a delicate painting in a picture gallery, such as he loved to go and see in San Francisco. Miss Dene’s peculiar attraction, strong for many men, left him cold, although he might have felt it if he had never seen Angela.

“I’m travelling with Mrs. Harland, and her brother, Mr. Falconer, in his private car,” Theo explained. She turned to them. “Mrs. May won’t mind my claiming her as a friend I hope. She was immensely nice to me in Rome. And we’ve met in London, too. I don’t know why I was surprised to see her. Every one comes to this country. And Mr. Hilliard, perhaps, you both know?”

“We have met,” said John Falconer, whom Nick had praised yesterday as the “typical” man of California. He put out his hand, and Nick took it, pleased and somewhat surprised by the recognition. For he was in his own eyes an insignificant person compared to John Falconer, who had done things worth doing in the world.

Angela remembered Nick’s eulogy of the man. He was about forty, as tall as Hilliard, though built more heavily. Nick was clean shaven, and Falconer wore a close-cut brown beard, which gave him somewhat the air of a naval officer, though his face was not so deeply tanned. His features were strong, and behind his clear eyes thoughts seemed to pass as clouds move under the surface of a deep lake. Such a man was born to be a leader. No one could look at him and not see that.

Mrs. Harland, his sister, who—as Nick was aware—kept house and entertained for Falconer, was as like him as a very feminine woman can be like an extremely masculine man; and, in fact, they were twins. Ralph Harland, an Englishman, who had owned a California ranch, was dead; and when his widow was not in Europe she stayed with her brother.

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They all talked together for a few minutes, or Theo Dene talked and let the others speak occasionally. Then Nick said that he must take his car to the garage, but would come back for luncheon; and when he had flashed away, Miss Dene invited herself to Mrs. May's room. "Do let me go with you," she pleaded, with a girlish air which she liked to put on with married women younger than herself. She thought that amusing. It impressed upon them the fact that she was a girl—free, with life before her. And, indeed, "The Free Lance" was a nickname of hers, which she liked rather than disliked.

Of course, Angela said, "Do come." She had found out that she was tired of Miss Dene. Still, she was curious to hear what she would say.

Kate had already opened her mistress's luggage, and spread gold and crystal toilet things about. There were flowers, too, on the sitting-room tables and mantel, California poppies with flaming orange hearts. Nick had telegraphed for these; but Angela supposed that they had been ordered by the "management." This impression was unlikely to be contradicted, because Nick had wanted her to have the flowers, not to get the credit for giving them. But Theodora Dene, who was experienced and shrewd in matters of the heart, wondered about the poppies. She made no mention of them, however, to Angela.

"I wanted you to myself for a minute," she explained, "to tell you I won't forget you are Mrs. May—*toujours* Mrs. May. And you needn't tell me—anything, unless you like."

"I have told you why I came to California," said Angela. "I came to see it."

"And I do think you're seeing it in the *nicest* way!" Miss Dene commented, sweetly. "I came for something quite different. I don't one bit mind confessing."

"To write a book about California?"

"That was what I said to reporters. And that I was going to visit Mrs. Harland. She's quite a dear, and I made her ask me, last time she was in England, because that was the first time I met her brother. I really came over with the idea of marrying him. He's splendid, and has loads of money—which I badly need, for I've spent every penny I've made from my books, and I've only eight hundred a year of my own. That won't buy my frocks! I took the greatest fancy to him. But I see now it's no use. Rather a bore! One hates to fail—and I'm not used to failure. However, there's a great romance—which is one consolation. I'm thinking whether or not I shall use it for the book. I'd like to—only Mr. Falconer's so well known. Perhaps I shall pick up another plot. Anyhow, I'm recovering from the blow, and beginning to take notice—as they say of babies and widows. That brown man of yours is a dream of beauty. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No. And he *isn't* mine," said Angela, taking off her motor-veil in front of the mirror.

“Well, then, dear Princess, if he isn’t yours, and you don’t want him to play with, do hand him over to me. I won’t grab him, if you want him yourself. You were too nice to me in Rome.”

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“You saw in Rome that I didn’t play.” Angela stabbed a hatpin viciously into her hat.

“There were cats there. Here there aren’t—at least not any who know the mouse.”

Angela daintily ceased to be a fellow-being, in a disconcerting way she had when she chose, and became a high personage. She did this without a word, without a gesture, without even lifting her eyebrows. There was merely a change of atmosphere. Miss Dene felt it, but she did not care here as she would have cared in Rome. There, the young Princess di Sereno could have made or marred her socially. In California she was on the same ground as Mrs. May. Besides, she knew a thing about Mrs. May which, for some reason or other, Mrs. May did not want other people to know. So Theo sat on a green sofa and smoked a cigarette, hoping that she looked like a snake charmer with the sinuous, serpentine smoke-loops weaving and writhing round her head.

“Pray don’t joke in that way before any one else,” said Angela. “It is rather horrid, don’t you think? No doubt Mr. Hilliard will be delighted to have you ‘play’ with him, if you see enough of each other to make it worth while wasting your energy.”

As she spoke, she wrestled with a violent desire to show Miss Dene that Nick was not to be detached from his present position of guide, philosopher, and friend.

“I don’t do that sort of thing with ‘energy.’ I do it with magnetism,” Theo drawled. Her cigarette was smoked out, and she got up. “Well, I must run down to Mrs. Harland, I suppose. We arrived only this morning, early, from Monterey, and to-morrow we’re going on to Paso Robles. That’s where Mr. Falconer’s romance comes in. Did you ever hear of Paso Robles?”

“Yes,” said Angela. “My father owned land there, with a warm sulphur lake. There’s a legend about it, which he used to tell me. The place is sold now. But I’m going to see it—because of the legend. I had photographs of the old Mission—and of the lake, too.”

“Well, perhaps you know, then, there’s a big hotel at Paso Robles and a ‘cure.’ I never heard of it before—but apparently it’s famous. If you stop there try and find out about a Mademoiselle Dobieski, and see her if you can.”

“Who is she?” Angela asked. “The name sounds dimly familiar, as if she were an actress or a dancer, or somebody one has heard of.”

“She *was* a singer. She *is* Mr. Falconer’s romance. I’d give a good deal to see her.”

“I suppose you will, if she’s a friend of his, and you’re going to Paso Robles in his private car.”

“No. I won’t be allowed. He’s sending Mrs. Harland and me straight on to Del Monte, and then to San Francisco. He’ll follow; and afterward he’s going to take us to Shasta, and the McCloud River, where they say he has the most fascinating country house in the world. I shall probably have a relapse when I see it.”

“I remember now,” said Angela. “There was a Polish girl who sang in concerts, and then made her *debut* in opera in London. I never saw or heard her, but people used to say she was divine. Then she went back to Russia, three or four years ago, and seemed to vanish into space.”

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“She vanished into Siberia,” replied Miss Dene. “Meanwhile, Mr. Falconer had had time to fall in love with her in London, just before she took her Russian engagement. It was his sister who told me this—perhaps to prove that there was no use my having Designs, with a capital D. He followed the girl to St. Petersburg; she disappeared. He put the matter into the hands of a detective—an American one, brought over on purpose—-money no object. Then Mr. Falconer couldn’t stay any longer himself, on account of important interests on this side—but I believe he flashed across once in a while, during the last four years, when he was supposed to be resting and seeing Europe with his sister. She was always in the secret. Well at last they wormed out the truth: that the Dobieski’d been arrested as a Nihilist, secretly, and, in spite of her popularity on the stage as a singer, sent to Siberia. With money, or influence, or both, she was rescued from some dreadful hole, and smuggled to England. But she’d had rheumatic fever, and her beauty was gone—she was a cripple. Still the extraordinary man was faithful—-though he’d never even had a chance to try and make her like him. Did you ever hear of such a lover, out of a book?”

“No,” said Angela, interested. But something within her whispered, “There might be another such lover.”

“Specialists—Mr. Falconer and his sister had the best—said there was practically no hope that the girl would ever be herself again. Yet the man wouldn’t give up. He thought there was no place in the world like Paso Robles for performing miracles. The doctors laughed—because it was natural he should believe in his own country. However, the Dobieski consented to come. Mrs. Harland brought her over. Now she’s been here two months, and is actually almost cured. Do try to get a glimpse of her. I’ve an evil idea that my noble host is going to drop off at the Springs, after shedding us encumbrances, for the sole purpose of proposing. If I use this for my plot, I shall give myself the satisfaction of making the story end badly.”

“I dare say you’ll enjoy doing that,” Angela remarked, in her gentlest voice.

“I really must go!” exclaimed Theo, and threw her cigarette end into Angela’s golden poppies. But she did not tell when she went downstairs, as Angela was half afraid she would, that Mrs. May was the Princess di Sereno.

Her friends had not left the veranda. Mrs. Harland was talking to some people she knew, Falconer walking up and down looking at the ships that were still trying their speed, in sight of the hotel.

“I do wonder *if the darling Angela knows about the Prince*?” Theo asked herself; and then joined Falconer in his walk, not mentioning Mrs. May.

“So you’ve met that handsome big boy before?” she began.

“Hilliard?” said Falconer. “Oh, yes, I’ve met him at Mrs. Gaylor’s.”

“Who’s Mrs. Gaylor?” Theo had the curiosity to ask.

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Falconer told her, and described Mrs. Gaylor as being a beautiful as well as immensely rich young woman.

“It must be over a year since her husband died,” he added. “’Old Grizzly Gaylor’ he was called; a brute, I’m afraid. His taking off must have been a relief to her. She’s left with a splendid property. I’ve heard it said there may be a match between her and Hilliard. He used to be foreman of her husband’s ranch; but now he’s a landowner on his own account; struck oil, and made a pile of money selling a gusher—the biggest and longest-lived we’ve had yet.”

“Are they engaged?” inquired Theo.

“I don’t know. It isn’t announced, anyhow. But it wouldn’t be a bad match, even for a rich woman. Hilliard’s a fine fellow, all the finer because he’s a self-made man. By the way, the Gaylor place is one of the show ranches of California. I think we ought to take you to see it.”

“Do!” cried Miss Dene. “I could write about it, couldn’t I? I’d like to see Mrs. Gaylor. Another California type for my book!”

And again she asked herself, “I wonder if *dear* Angela knows about the Prince?”

XIII

FOR THE SAKE OF DRAMATIC EFFECT

Somehow, Miss Dene got herself invited to spend the afternoon in seeing with Mrs. May and Hilliard all the things which Falconer and his sister had spent the whole morning in showing her. Exactly how she did this she herself might have told—with her occasional startling frankness—if she had chosen. But Mrs. May could not. Perhaps Angela had invited her, or said something which could be snapped up as an invitation; for Nick would hardly have suggested a second guest unless his first guest expressly wished for one. In any case, the fact remained that Theo Dene was going in the yellow car for a spin round Santa Barbara, to the Country Club, the Hope Ranch, and above all, to the Mission.

She stood talking on the veranda to Falconer and Mrs. Harland, as she waited for Angela to come down, and for Hilliard to bring round the car. Her host and hostess were laughing at her change of plans, for she had announced, early in the day, that she meant to “lie down all the afternoon and rest her features.”

“Who is the beautiful Mrs. May?” asked Falconer.

Theo did not like this way of putting the question, because, quite sincerely, she herself admired no woman who was not of her own type. She was tempted to take advantage of Angela's desire not to be known, and say: "Oh, she's one of a thousand other pretty travelling women with intermittent husbands." This would have been epigrammatic, and at the same time it might have quenched dawning interest in the stranger. Neither the brother nor sister was of the sort who favoured flitting ladies with vague male belongings kept in the background. But suddenly a brilliant idea occurred to Miss Dene, who loved dramatic effects.

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“Mrs. May chooses to be an ordinary tourist,” Theo said, with just the right air of mystery, “but if she liked, she could travel as a personage. She has her own reasons for coming to America, just as I have mine, though hers are different. Don’t you think she ought to see Shasta, and the McCloud River, if her impressions are to be complete?”

“Would she care to go?” said Mrs. Harland. “John and I would be delighted to take her, and put her up for a week-end—wouldn’t we, John?”

“Of course,” said Falconer. “From what I saw of her, she’d be a charming guest. But poor Hilliard——”

“Oh, do ask him, too, and give me a chance to flirt with him, please. I’ve had such poor success with you, I’m feeling crushed. Do you think Mrs. Gaylor too formidable for me?”

“If I were a betting man, I’d bet on you,” Falconer laughed. “But I don’t know how far matters have gone between Mrs. Gaylor and Hilliard. It may be gossip; all the world loves a lover, you know; and it’s human nature to weave a romance around two interesting figures placed toward each other as these are.”

“Well, I should like to try my hand, if his isn’t pre-engaged,” said Miss Dene; “and if it is, he won’t be wasted on me, for I can always use him up in a book. What fun to have Mrs. Gaylor at the same time! We should soon see if they were engaged if we brought them together, shouldn’t we? If not, I’d be free to get in as much deadly work as possible.”

“Is Mrs. May’s husband living?” asked Falconer, with a twinkle of mischief in his usually grave eyes.

“I think I mustn’t tell even you anything about her private affairs,” Miss Dene answered virtuously. “But I’ve reason to know that, for *this* race, anyhow, she’s out of the running. As Mrs. May was telling you at luncheon, Mr. Hilliard is showing her a few things because the mutual friend who was to have done it, couldn’t. He can’t show her Shasta and McCloud, though, as you can; for a mere motor’s no attraction compared to a private car. I’m sure she’s never been in one as gorgeous as the kind in America—-yours in particular.”

“Well, we must give her the chance to try it,” said Falconer.

“And you *will* think of inviting Mrs. Gaylor at the same time?” Theo turned her eyes from her host to his sister, beseechingly.

“I don’t know Mrs. Gaylor well,” Mrs. Harland demurred. “But if John wants you to see her ranch, and takes us there, I don’t mind asking her to Rushing River Camp for a day

or two. It's not very likely that she'd refuse"—the lady smiled—"as I'm afraid that socially she's more or less neglected, in spite of her beauty."

"Or because of it," said Falconer. "And here comes Mrs. May."

A moment later the car came too, and Angela realized that already she had reached the stage when she would miss taking her place beside Hilliard. She sat behind with Miss Dene, and Billy the "assistant" climbed into the seat next the chauffeur's.

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Theo availed herself of the opportunity to tell what she had heard about Nick and Mrs. Gaylor, with embroideries of her own.

The air was balm of a thousand flowers, but for Angela it was no longer “Parfait d’Amour.” The two battleships had long ago finished their speed trial; and trails of floating kelp lay like golden sea-serpents asleep under the blue ripple of the sea. Everything was very beautiful. But it was not yesterday!

In the town with the Mission still distant, she began to feel the “foreignness” of Santa Barbara. The streets had Spanish names, and the trees seemed musical, as she had thought that trees seemed in the South of Europe; as if they had heard and seen all the happiness of history, and had set them to music with their branches. Pretty girls rode bareheaded, with sunburned men in sombreros, just outside the straggling town, between hedges of roses that made boundaries for bungalows.

The beauty of the world sang a song in Angela’s ears, with the rushing breeze the motor made; the wind in the trees, the flashing lights and shadows on the mountains. Clear-cut, lovely peaks sprang toward a sky that was like fire opal with turquoise glowing blue behind it. Still, this was not yesterday! The song of the world’s beauty did not seem meant personally for her, as it had then.

Piles of grain in the fields were like plumed, golden helmets, laid down in rows to await the heads of resting warriors. The California oaks, different from all other oaks, were classic in shape as Greek temples sacred to forest deities, standing against a background of indigo sea. But Miss Dene would talk.

Theodora, in her books, made a speciality of describing the emotional souls of women, her favourite female thermometers being usually at freezing or boiling point—never temperate. Descriptions of scenery she “couldn’t do,” and what she called “landscape gazing” bored her. She was more interested in people, and big towns, than in wide spaces where Nature tried to lecture her. But because Angela admired the country she admired it, too, more audibly than Angela.

They saved the Mission for the last. Nick had set his heart on showing it to Mrs. May at sunset. As for Theo, though she said so much, he knew by instinct that it was not she who cared for the beauty of the magnolia hedges, the hay-gilded meadows, and the dark oaks that blotted the gold. He felt that he ought to admire Miss Dene, for she was handsome, and put herself out to be kind to him; but he wished the girl away, and was glad that to-morrow she would be travelling with her own friends. When she looked at him with her greenish eyes, she had the air of judging his points, as if he were a portrait she thought of adding to her collection, and of wishing him to look at her. Nick was not to be fascinated in this way.

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Along the Cliff Drive they went to the Hope Ranch, and Angela tried to think of the brave old days of the “Roaring Forties,” of barbecues, and wedding feasts for Spanish brides—days when the business of life was to love, and laugh, and dance, and spend the money yielded by thousands of rolling acres. According to the stories, all women had been beautiful, all men brave, and ready to fight for the ladies they loved; and though the world had changed since then, faster here than elsewhere, it seemed to her that at heart the men of America had kept to old traditions more closely than men in older countries. Then she smiled at herself for this impression; for, after all, what did she know of American men?

When they turned at last, coming back toward the Mission, to which, somehow, all the rest had been leading up, the setting sun was beating the dusk into sparks of fire.

At first glimpse, alighting before the steps of the restored Mission church, Angela compared it unfavourably in her mind with the lovely shabbiness of San Gabriel. She had a feeling that Santa Barbara the pleasure-place lived on Santa Barbara the Mission, with its history and romance. But she had only to go inside to beg pardon of the church for her first impression. It was easy to remember that there had never been the same stress of poverty here as among the missionary Fathers of San Gabriel, in the City of Angela. Yet in this place, too, there was the same pathetic effect which had brought tears to Angela’s eyes in the dim little church at San Gabriel; an effect that once felt and understood, gives the old Spanish Missions their great, undying charm. At Santa Barbara—sweet name, ringing like the silver bells of the Franciscan Fathers—as at San Gabriel, there had been the same striving to copy the noble designs and proportions of the Spanish cathedrals, visioned in spirit by the homesick monks, who knew well they would never see them with bodily eyes again. With simple materials and unskilled Indian workers, these exiled men had striven to reproduce in the far, lonely West the architecture of the East, loved and lost by them forever. The very simplicity of the church made its beauty.

[Illustration: “*Santa Barbara Mission, with its history and romance*”]

The scar of Santa Barbara Mission had been patched up, while at San Gabriel the bandages were vines and flowers; but the sunset light lent to the cloisters all the stateliness and glory of some old monastery in Southern Spain; the octagonal fountain on the bare terrace dripped silver; and an embroidery of lichen had gilded the rose-coloured tiles of the sloping roof with all shades and tints of gold. The sun, bidding good-bye to the day, gave back for an hour the splendour of the past.

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The three went up into the bell tower and looked down; upon the old garden of the monks, then away to the sheltering hills, with the far-off rampart of mountains. It was beautiful there, and the bells in their open, window-like arches, had the kindly beauty of age and experience. Angela tapped them with pink finger-nails, and brought out a faint, musical whisper, which seemed to breathe some secret, if only she could understand. But she could not! She felt dull and unhappy, she could not tell why. Certainly it could not be for such a stupid, dog-in-the-manger reason as because Nick Hilliard was supposed to be engaged to his "boss's widow"—a most suitable arrangement. Perhaps it was the dreamy sadness of this; place which had taken hold of her. If there were a secret in the musical whisper of the bells, it was a secret of the past; and it was time to come which was clouded for Angela. There seemed to be nothing definite in it for her to touch. Her bodily eyes looked out over the bay of Santa Barbara, grape-purple with the wine of sunset; but her spirit saw only the uncharted sea of the future, across which strange sunrises glimmered, and winds cried like harps, or voices called to her in prophecies she could not hear. Happiness which she had never known seemed to live beyond that sea in an island palace; but the key of the palace lay fathoms deep, fallen among rocks under deep water. When Angela had been on her way to California, she had said to herself: "I shall be happy there living alone in some place which I shall find, because I shall be at peace, and disagreeable things can never come to me." But now, suddenly, she felt that more than peace was needed. She wanted to be happy with a happiness far removed from peace.

"I think I'll go to the North to live," she decided. "In all this sunshine and colour, one needs love—or else one's out of the picture."

At a little distance Miss Dene was telling Nick Hilliard that she was glad she had met him, because he was just what she wanted for her book about California.

"I'm going to see your ranch," she said, "and Mrs. Gaylor's ranch. I've heard about it—-and her. She's very handsome, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Nick.

"And a great friend of yours—your best friend?"

"A great friend," he echoed, wishing that Angela, holding herself remote, would let him draw her into the conversation.

It occurred to Miss Dene, seeing Nick's eyes wander, that perhaps there was something about her which California men were not trained to appreciate, for she was not having her usual success. And she had scarcely made the sensation she had expected to make in San Francisco, although she had been interviewed, and one reporter had said that her hair was dyed. Nevertheless, if she could not have the sort of fun she wanted, she would at least have what fun she could. She was sure that with Mrs. Gaylor, and

the Princess di Sereno, and this big unsophisticated young man, between them life would be interesting even for an onlooker.

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“I can see Chapter First, anyhow,” she laughed to herself. And again she wondered if Angela “knew about the Prince.”

That night, while everybody drank coffee and talked or played bridge in the hall, it was suddenly flooded with a tidal wave of women. They flowed into the hotel in a compact stream of femininity; billows of stout elderly ladies, and dancing ripples of slim young girls, with here and there a side-eddy of thin, middle-aged spinsterhood. Each female thing had a “grip,” and of these possessions they built the desk a mountain of volcanic formation, which looked alarmingly subject to eruptions and upheavals. Then they all began to talk at once, to each other and to such hotel officials as they could overwhelm and swamp.

“Good gracious! what is it?” asked Miss Dene of Falconer, who was supposed to be a human encyclopaedia of general information. “I didn’t suppose there were so many women in the world!”

“They’re Native Daughters, out for an excursion and the time of their lives,” said Falconer.

“Why Native?” Angela ventured. “It sounds like oysters.”

“And it means California. They were all born in this State; and they will now proceed to see something of it in each other’s company. To-morrow morning they’ll ‘do’ the Mission of Santa Barbara.”

“They’ll do *for* it, if they all try to get in at once,” laughed Miss Dene. “The place will be simply crawling with Daughters. How lucky we’ve done our sightseeing to-day!”

She did not take the trouble to moderate her voice; and one of the new arrivals, who hovered alone on the edge of the crowd, like a bubble of foam flung out by the surging wave, stood near enough to overhear. She turned and threw a glance at the group, in time to catch *en route* to the back of her dress a look sent forth from the eyes of Miss Dene. It was that look which has no family resemblance to any other look, yet is always the same in the eyes of the best and the worst woman—the look she gives another woman’s dress the style and fit of which fill her with supreme disgust.

The victim did not take this well-known gaze with meekness. She was a small person, thin as a lath, with no attempt at complexion, and a way of doing her hair which alone would have proved impeccable virtue in the face of incriminating circumstantial evidence. She had neat little features, and a neat little figure, though “provincial” was written over her in conspicuous letters; and the gray eyes which she fastened on Miss Dene looked almost ill with gloomy intelligence. She did not attempt to “down” the beautifully dressed young woman with a retort, though her expression betrayed a temptation to be fishwifish. It was evident, however, that she was a little lady, though

she wore a badly made frock, and her hat sat like a hard, extraneous Bath bun on the top of her neat head. Whether or no she were a Native Daughter, native good breeding fought with and got the better of fatigue, nervousness, and irritation. She merely gazed fixedly for a long second at Miss Dene, as if to say, “I know my dress is amateurish, and yours is perfectly lovely, but I have a heart and would hate to hurt the feelings of anybody, especially one who couldn’t pay me back, whereas *your* only use for a heart is to keep your blood in circulation.”

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Angela saw this silent play of weapons, and all her sympathy was with the stranger in dusty blue alpaca. She busied herself mentally in rearranging the little woman's hair, dressing her in such a way as to make her quite pretty and young-looking, and had not finished the operation when a hotel clerk appeared with a paper in his hand.

"Your name, please," he said to the small, unaccompanied person.

"My name is Sara Wilkins," she replied in a clear precise voice, which matched her personality; "but I must tell you that I am *not* a Native Daughter, and have not engaged a room. I arrived at the same time with the others, and when they are settled I hope you'll be able to find me something; otherwise I hardly know what I shall do, as it's late, and I'm travelling alone."

"I'm afraid I can do nothing for you, Madam, if you have not engaged," said the young man, civilly. "These ladies are expected, and a great many will be sleeping three and four in a room. I'm sorry; but there are other hotels in the town."

"I'm sorry too," said the lady in the dusty alpaca. "I've wanted for years to stay in this hotel, if it was only for a few hours, as I've read so much about it, and I arranged to stop off at Santa Barbara on purpose, though I really ought to have gone on. And I'm *so* tired!"

Angela could bear no more. "Oh, would you take my sitting-room?" she asked, with the smile she had inherited with her heart and a few other things from Franklin Merriam. "It would be such a shame to go away when you've wanted to stop here—so late, too, and you mightn't get in anywhere else. I shall be delighted—really—and I'm sure they can make you up a comfortable bed, for there's a big lounge in the room."

Nick sat adoring her with his eyes, and Miss Dene believed that Mrs. May had made the offer to please him and Falconer. Men were very silly and sentimental about such things. But as she, Theo, had no sitting-room of her own they could not blame her for selfishness.

Miss Wilkins looked at Angela with her intelligent gray eyes. "Why, that's very kind of you," she said. "I don't like to take your room——"

"But you must like it, or you'll spoil my pleasure," Angela broke in, looking so charming in her wish to make the little dusty person happy that few women and no men could have resisted, or helped believing in her. It was at this moment that Falconer determined to tell Mrs. May something about certain private interests of his at Paso Robles, which he had not intended to mention.

"Well, I *will* take the room, then, and I will like it, too," returned Miss Wilkins. "I don't know how to thank you enough."

“I’m giving up nothing that I shall mind doing without,” said Angela; and did not dream that she had stirred the deep water under which a golden key lay hid; the key of that island palace in the uncharted sea of the future.

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XIV

THE MYSTERY OF SAN MIGUEL

“Do you think you will go to Shasta in Mr. Falconer’s private car?” Nick asked wistfully.

They were flying along together on the winds of the Bright Angel, Angela by Nick’s side, on the way to Paso Robles. It was afternoon of the next day; Falconer and Mrs. Harland and Theo Dene had left Santa Barbara in the morning; and the sister and brother had been so pressing in their invitation that Angela had hardly known how to refuse, though not quite willing to accept. Late that night, Mrs. Harland and Theo would arrive at Del Monte, where Falconer would join them, and in a day or two they would go on to San Francisco, where Miss Dene had already been visiting. In Mrs. Harland’s maid, Kate had found a friend from her own part of “the ould country,” who had “come over” three years ago, and who had known Tim. This meeting was such a joy, that Angela had fallen in with Mrs. Harland’s suggestion that Kate should go on to Paso Robles in Mr. Falconer’s car McCloud. The girl would thus enjoy her friend’s society for several hours, and having arranged Mrs. May’s things in the rooms already engaged at the hotel, would await her mistress’s arrival that evening. Therefore, Angela, Nick, and the little chauffeur had the Bright Angel to themselves for a run of a few hours through beautiful country, and a visit to the old Mission of San Miguel before arriving at Paso Robles.

“Do I think I shall go?” Angela echoed the question lazily, for she was happier this morning, and basking dreamily in the change, not troubling to wonder what had brought it about. “I hardly know. They were very kind to ask me. Californian people seem so warm-hearted to strangers, and so hospitable, one can’t help feeling one’s known them for years instead of days. *You* are like that too—otherwise I shouldn’t be here! And I’ve almost forgotten to be surprised at myself for—anything. I like Mr. Falconer; Mrs. Harland, too; but he is what you said—splendid. I understand why you called him typically Californian.”

“I’m glad,” said Nick. And he tried to be glad. But he had not been told the romance of Mademoiselle Dobieski. Falconer did not guess that Angela or Theo Dene knew it, though he proposed introducing Mrs. May to a “Polish lady, staying at Paso Robles.” “Then, of course, you will go to Shasta, and they’ll take you to their place on the McCloud River. They say Falconer’s house is the prettiest place of the sort in California. Mrs. Gaylor’s never been, but she reads a lot about society folk and their doings in the papers. You’ll sure have a good time.”

“Why do you say ‘you’? They invited you, too.”

“Yes, and that was *really* kind,” Nick said. “It isn’t ‘kindness’ to ask you, because ’twould be an honour to have your visit. But they don’t want me. I was asked only because I happened to be with you, and Mrs. Harland was afraid my feelings would be hurt if I was left out.”

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“I’m sure you’re mistaken,” Angela insisted, laughing within herself because he had not seen Theo’s manoeuvres. “Of course they want you.” She could not add what was in her mind. “Anyway, Miss Dene does.” As for Carmen, Angela had no idea that the invitation was to be extended to her, and the figure of Mrs. Gaylor, who, according to Theo, intended to marry Hilliard, loomed less important than after listening to Miss Dene’s gossip. Of course, it would be a good thing for him to care for Mrs. Gaylor, and if she were really nice, to marry her in the end. Only, when a young woman is in a motor-car with a handsome “forest creature” who appears to live only for her pleasure, she does not think much beyond the hour. For that hour he may be hers, and hers alone, though to-morrow they part; and she shuts her eyes to anything so far away, so out of the picture, as an “end.”

“I’m not Mrs. Harland’s kind,” Nick explained; “nor Falconer’s, though he’s too big a man to care for what people call ‘social distinctions.’ They’d be kind to me if I went, and wouldn’t let me feel any difference they could help. But there’d be a house-party, maybe, and I wouldn’t know any one. I’d be ‘out of it.’ I couldn’t stand for that, Mrs. May.”

“You’re sensitive,” Angela said.

“In some ways,” Nick admitted. But he did not admit the truth; that he could not, and would not, go to Rushing River Camp because he was jealous of Falconer. To Nick it seemed impossible that any man, free to love, could be five minutes in Angela’s society without falling in love with her.

He had had his moments of hope, but with Falconer for a rival the handicap was too great. Not that Nick meant to give up the fight; but if she went to Shasta it would be a knockdown blow. John Falconer was high enough for a place in Mrs. May’s own world. Nick despised jealousy as common and shameful, and had always scorned men who yielded to so mean a vice. Now, however, they had his pity. He knew what they suffered, and he could not go with Mrs. May, in Falconer’s car.

Nevertheless he beat down the desire to dissuade her from the trip.

“You oughtn’t to miss McCloud River,” he forced himself to say.

“I’ll see,” said Angela. “It’s nice not to make up one’s mind, but just to enjoy the minute.”

“Are you enjoying the minute?”

“Yes.”

He was rewarded. For this minute was his. They were spinning along the coast road, between sea and meadow, with the salt breeze in their faces. The red-gold earth rose and fell in gracious curves, like the breasts of a sleeping Indian girl, and now and then

an azure inlet of the sea lit up a meadow as eyes light a face. In the distance, mountains seemed to float like spirit guardians of hill-children; and desert dunes billowed through irrigated garden oases, like rivers of gold boiling up from magic mines.

Nick pointed out the two little mountains named after Louis the Bishop, and told Angela tales of the country, of the people, and of the little towns with Spanish names and faces, which gave her always that haunting impression of the Old World. Some of the stories were her father's stories, and she liked Hilliard the better for knowing them.

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They had both forgotten Miss Sara Wilkins, who had “stopped off” at Santa Barbara because all her life she had wanted to see the place. But just at that moment, on her way to Bakersfield, she happened to be thinking of them both.

At last the car plunged into a maze of folding hills, like giant dunes. The motor road was woven in twisted strands while the railway overhead strode across the gaps between height and height, on a vast trestle that might have been built for an army of Martians. Rock-crested hills rose gray in the sun above the soft night of oak forests; and as the road ascended, its ribbons were looped from mountain to mountain like the thrown lasso of a cowboy.

“Paso Robles means ‘Pass of the Oaks,’” said Nick, as they came into a stretch of billowing country where immense trees shadowed the summer gold of meadows.

“Shall we go first to the Mission of San Miguel?” Nick asked. “Or are you tired, and shall I take you to the hotel now?”

“I’m not tired,” said Angela. She did not want this day to end yet.

“We’ll hit the trail for the Mission, then,” said Nick, “and see the sunset, as we did from Santa Barbara.”

“Can this be as beautiful?” Angela asked. “Surely not?”

“You, maybe, won’t think so, but I know it will be more beautiful for me,” he answered. “That imported young lady, with all those elegant fixings, sort of jarred with the Mission architecture, to my mind.”

Angela hoped that her laugh was not cattish. “But I’m imported, too,” she said. “Shall I jar on you at San Miguel?”

“You’re *not* imported!” Nick dared to contradict her. “Or, if you are, you’re the kind there oughtn’t to be any duty on.”

A rain of sunset colour poured over mountains, hills, and meadows as Nick turned his car toward San Miguel. When they came in sight of the old Mission (built far from the Springs because of hostile Indians), the changing lights were like an illuminated fountain. At last, when they began to fade, Angela said, “Let us go. If we stay longer we shan’t remember this at its best.”

She would have been surprised if she had known what happiness there was for Nick in the word “we,” spoken as she often spoke it now: “We” must do this; “We” mustn’t forget that.

But it was a blow when she asked Billy, the chauffeur, if he would like to see the Mission. “Nothing can hurt the car,” she said; “and when we come back it will be too late.”

Nick was tempted to glare a warning and suppress the youth’s interest in objects of historical value: but he refrained. Billy must not get it into his head that there was “anything going on.” So the chauffeur was allowed to follow Nick and Angela as they wandered, so it seemed to him, sentimentally about the big Mission enclosure, between crumbling adobe walls where the Franciscan Fathers had sheltered cattle in nights of peace, and Indians in nights of

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danger. Billy could not feel the pathos of the place—desolate, yet impressive in its simplicity; but as he sauntered about, his hands in his pockets, whistling beneath his breath, “I can’t marry you!” his smart little modern mind began to work. The strategic value of the position appealed to him, and he saw why “those old Johnnies,” as he irreverently styled the Padres, had planted the Mission here. “Guess they knew their business ’most as well as if they’d been soldiers,” he said to himself.

Billy found pleasure in picturing the massacres which must have taken place, imagining the great doors of the enclosure opened hastily to let in an escaping band of “friendlies”; then the bursting in of the enemy, and the death of the Fathers as they tried to protect their Indian children. Many had died by fire and tomahawk, but always others had come to take their place; and so the work had gone on through time, even as the bell-signals had gone on sounding from Mission to Mission along El Camino Reale, the highway of the Padres.

“One Father lives here; a dear old gentleman,” said Nick. “I met him once, but he mayn’t remember me. I’ll knock at his door to ask for the key of the church. Somehow I think you’re going to like it better than the church of Santa Barbara. There’s something special about this place, I hardly know what, but you’ll know. And they’ve got some vestments they’re proud of—made by Queen Isabella the Catholic and her ladies.”

It rather surprised Angela to hear Nick speak of “Isabella the Catholic,” for this way of naming the Queen showed knowledge of history; and Angela had not yet discovered that history was Nick’s favourite reading. Indeed, she was only beginning to learn a few things about him. At first her whole rather patronizing idea of the young man had been that he was an “interesting type,” a “picturesque figure.” Then, when she heard him talk with Falconer, and Falconer talk of him and of what he had done, she saw that Hilliard was already a man of importance in his State: that the “picturesque figure” was merely the woman’s point of view. She was ceasing to patronize him mentally now, and almost every hour he gave her some surprise.

At a closed door in the white, deserted cloisters, Hilliard knocked, but there was no answer. His face clouded, for he had set his heart on showing Mrs. May this Mission church.

“This means we can’t get the key,” sighed Angela.

“I’m afraid so,” he agreed. “But it’s possible the Padre’s showing some one around, or having a look at his beloved vestments.”

They walked to the church door and found it shut; but to their surprise the big old-fashioned key was in the lock. Nick pushed the door open and they both went in,

followed by Billy. The Padre was not to be seen. So far as they could tell in the dimness the church was empty.

“Queer!” exclaimed Nick. “I wonder what can have become of the Padre? It isn’t like him to leave his church open at this time of the evening. It’s late, and we’ll have to light up before we start on, although we’ve only eight miles to go.”

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“I’m sorry he’s not here,” Angela said. “I should have loved to see Queen Isabella’s vestments.”

“Would you? Well, you shall, if I have to turn everything in the church upside down. They must be somewhere.”

The two wandered on, peering through the dusk at the primitive paintings and decorations, made by Indians according to designs of Spanish monks.

“Do you suppose the vestments may be kept up in that gallery?” Angela suggested. “It looks a safe sort of place for treasures. But if they’re there I’m afraid we shall find them in a locked box.”

It was worth trying, and they climbed the narrow stairs that led up to a gallery curtained with twilight. There sure enough was a box, and, like the door, it was open, the key in the lock. Within, free to every hand, were the embroideries, the great treasures of the church.

“Isn’t it mysterious?” she asked, in a half-whisper, for loud tones would make jarring notes in this haunt of silence. “Can anything have happened to the Padre?”

“Things don’t happen these days,” Nick reassured her.

But he was not quite easy in his mind. “It’s too dark for you to see the vestments well. Shall I carry them downstairs?”

“No,” said Angela. “I’d rather look at them here. It’s like staring at flowers in the night. The colours come up to your eyes in the most wonderful way.”

Seeing that she meant to kneel by the open chest Nick whipped off his coat to lay under her knees, and she laughed as she named him Sir Walter Raleigh. Hilliard and Billy stood behind her, Nick stooping sometimes to examine a stole or altar-cloth she wished to show him, Billy frankly bored, until a faint sound somewhere made him prick up his ears.

“Maybe that’s the Padre now,” said he. “Shall I go and look?” Then he pattered down the steep stairway without waiting to be answered.

Angela and Nick forgot him for a moment, until his nasal young voice called excitedly from below the gallery:

“Say, Mr. Hilliard, we’re locked in!”

“What!” exclaimed Nick, straightening himself up and dropping the end of an embroidered stole.

“Some fellow’s been to the door and locked it on the outside.”

XV

THE WISE BIRD IN THE DARK

It was very dim in the Mission church. Angela had not realized how dim until she heard the news announced through Billy’s nose. They were locked in!

Somebody had been to the door, somebody had locked it on the outside, and it was deep twilight, almost night.

Suddenly it seemed completely night. The colours of the old vestments still glowed in the dusk, like smouldering coals in a dying fire; but that was because of the rich tints, and because the eyes gazing at them were accustomed to darkness. Looking up at Nick to see what his silence meant, and whether he were nonplussed or merely deciding on a plan of action, Angela could hardly make out his features. She could see clearly only his eyes, luminous and gray.

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“What shall we do?” she asked. Her voice sounded appealing, like that of a child.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. May,” said Nick, with sudden cheerfulness. “We’ll get out all right. I was just studying what must have happened. That’s why I was so mum. I reckon the Padre must have been away—though why he left the key in the door beats me—and coming back he locked up for the night. Unless he went around in the direction of the auto he wouldn’t have seen it. If he looked in here, of course he’d have thought the church empty, we being in the gallery. And it’s late in the day now, so late he wouldn’t expect visitors.”

“It’s so ‘late in the day’ that it’s night!” cried Angela. “Another reason for his not seeing the motor.”

“Not quite night yet! And I’m going down to make all the noise I can at the door, assisted by Billy. There’ll be such a din, between the two of us, you’ll want to stop your ears, and as for the Padre, he’ll come trotting as fast as his legs will carry him, to stop the row.” Nick laughed so jovially that Angela began to be seriously concerned. If it were necessary to assume such gaiety he must regard the situation as desperate. She remembered how far away was the sole occupied room among the many empty, echoing cells.

Nick helped her down the steep stairway, and the touch of his hand upon her arm was comforting. It was cold in the darkening church, and she felt the chill more in imagination than in body; yet she shivered.

“What if we have to stay here all night?” she thought. But she kept the thought to herself.

Nick and Billy took turns in pounding on the door, shouting, “Hi, Padre!” then doing it together; but the separate and combined noises, ear-splitting inside the church, produced no result. The dreamy silence was shattered in vain, and at last, when the two refused to be discouraged by lack of success, Angela stopped them.

“It’s no use,” she said. “He isn’t going to hear. And I shall have hysterics or something idiotic if you keep on for one more minute.”

“I was thinking of trying another way,” said Nick, still painfully cheerful.

“What other way?—since even Samson couldn’t batter down the door.”

“A lot simpler than battering. Climb out of a window.”

“Too high,” said Angela.

“No. I can manage all right. I’ll get out, find the Padre, and——”

“And leave me here in the dark? No!”

“But there’ll be Billy.”

“Let Billy go,” Angela half whispered, “and you stay with me. Supposing you went, and the Padre wasn’t there, and—and you weren’t able to get back. Oh, I couldn’t bear *that*!”

Never had Nick known so exquisite a moment. He was sorry this queer, mysterious accident had happened, because it seemed to reflect somehow on his intelligence and foresight as a guide. And he hated to have Angela distressed. But—after his strivings with jealousy, and his defeat—it was balm that she should depend upon him, and want him with her in this adventure.

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“I thought, if worst came to worst, I might find a ladder outside,” he said, fearful of betraying his illicit happiness.

“Billy can find a ladder, if there is one,” Angela persisted. “There’s the most weird, rustling sound, which comes every once in a while, and I can’t possibly stand it with only Billy.”

Nick could hardly speak for joy, but he managed to reply, “All right; Billy shall be the man to go.”

The going was easier to propose than to carry out: for in bygone days, when the Padres of Old Spain were building New Spain, Mission churches had to protect their flocks against the devil incarnate as well as excarnate. Windows were made few and high; and now, when the brave builders sleep, it is nobody’s business to worry about the free passage of air. Such windows as San Miguel possesses were hermetically closed that night when Angela di Sereno and Nick Hilliard were imprisoned; and Billy, standing on Nick’s shoulders, had to work a few tedious moments before he could induce one of these windows to open. By the time the wiry, slim figure was ready to straddle the window-sill, slip out, dangling, and drop on the grass, night had closed in, fragrant and purple in the open, heavy and black in the church.

Angela came and stood close to Nick. She had never been a timid girl; but since the night when she had lain watching a thief who slowly, slowly raised her window, twelve storeys above the ground, foolish and hitherto unknown terrors crept through her veins if she happened to wake in the dark. And now there certainly was a rustling which stirred the silence, then died, as if it had never been.

“Don’t go away from me,” she said. “It’s so dark that if we’re separated we may be ages finding each other.”

This sounded like an allegory!

“No, we mustn’t be separated,” Nick answered, struck by her words, as if by a prophecy. Then he, too, heard the rustling—faint, winged, and mysterious.

They stood still and close together, listening. There was no sound from outside—not a call for the Padre, not a reassuring shout that Billy had succeeded in finding him.

Angela groped with her hand, and, by accident, touched Nick’s. To save his soul he could not have resisted pressing the small cold fingers! Wonderful! She did not snatch them away! Often they had shaken hands, or Nick had taken hers to help her in or out of the motor-car; but there had been nothing like this. He felt the thrill of the touch go through him as though electric wires flashed a message to his heart. He was afraid of himself—afraid he should kiss her hand, or stammer out “I love you!” And that would be

fatal, for she would never trust herself to him again. Besides, it would not be fair. She was like a child asking his protection, here in the dark, and he must treat her as a man treats a child who has come to him because it is afraid. But he could not think of her as a child. He thought of the night in New York when she had knocked on his door, and called to him, a stranger, for help. He thought how he had seen her, drowned in the waves of her hair, like the angel of his dreams.

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“Do you hear that?” she whispered, letting him keep her hand, even clasping his with her fingers. “There’s something alive in this church, something besides ourselves.”

Nick felt giddy. It was all he could do to keep himself from catching her in his arms, no matter what might be the consequences, no matter how she might hate him a moment afterward. But he resisted, and the strain of temptation passed.

“A bird has got in, perhaps,” he said.

“You—you—don’t think it could be the Padre himself ill, or—or——”

Nick understood her hesitation and fear.

“No,” he soothed her. “We’d have seen any but some small thing. I’ve got two or three matches in my box, I guess. We’ll have a look around.” This was supreme self-sacrifice on his part, for to find matches and “look around” meant letting Angela’s hand go. To let it go was tempting Providence, since almost certainly she would never, of her own accord, slip it into his again.

“Yes, do let us,” she said, and drew the hand away. Nick supposed she had hardly been conscious that he had held her fingers in his, and even pressed them. But this was not the fact. True, Angela had mechanically groped for a protecting touch. Nevertheless, she was aware of Nick’s hand on hers, and glad of it, with a gladness made up of several conflicting feelings: such as surprise, some slight shame, and defiance of that shame. She was afraid of the rustling in the dark, which might mean a lurking thief, a man half murdered, or one of a dozen things each more unpleasant than the other. Yet she half liked being afraid in the dark, with Nick Hilliard to reassure her, though she would have hated it with Billy. No unknown horror she could conjure up would have made her want to touch Billy. She was almost sorry when Nick found his matches and together they began moving about the church, she keeping a little behind.

The last match but one lit up something white that stirred beside the altar; and as the flame died down, leaving only a red glowing point, a pair of eyes like two points of fire stared up from the floor.

“Oh!” murmured Angela, and clutched Nick’s coat sleeve, like a girl of early Victorian days. But, after all, women have not changed in essentials. They are much the same now in the dark, when pale things stir or shine unexpectedly; and they are still glad to have with them at such times a man, preferably a handsome man, they happen to like better than any other.

“Great Scot, it’s an owl!” said Nick, profiting by the last match of all. It was, or appeared to be, a white owl; and it seemed to him for a second or two as if the witch-bird of the Grapevine man at Los Angeles had come to give the advice it had refused. But this was

a childish idea, he knew! The owl was a plain, ordinary owl, which no doubt lived in the neighbourhood of San Miguel, and had flopped in, perhaps in search of the proverbial church mouse. It was afraid of the other intruders, and afraid of the match, so afraid that it flapped its wings and hooted dismally. It hooted three times, which, if it had been the witch fortune-teller, might really have meant something, though there was no time just then to think what. Nick was somewhat alarmed lest, in its anger and fear, it should dash at Angela's face, but she would not let him strike the creature with his hat.

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“No, poor thing, it’s worse off than we are, because it’s alone, and we’re together,” she said. “We’ll go, and leave it in peace now we know what it is.” And she kept beside Nick in the dark by holding daintily to his coat sleeve.

He found the steps of the gallery, and made her sit down on the lower one, rolling up for a cushion his coat, on which she had knelt as she looked at the vestments. It began to seem odd that Billy had not come back, but it was difficult for Nick to regret the delay as much as he ought, for Angela’s sake, to have regretted it.

When she shivered and confessed that she was cold, Nick fetched her a priest’s coat from the gallery, a rare piece of brocade, embroidered perhaps by queen’s fingers, and smelling of incense.

“What can have happened to Billy?” Angela wondered. “It’s the strangest thing that he doesn’t come back. I begin to be frightened about him.”

Nick reassured her once more. Things often seemed queer that were simple when explained, as doubtless this would be. “I suppose you’d not like me to go——” he began, only to be cut short before he could finish his sentence.

“No—if you mean, would I like you to go and look. While you’re here——”

“Yes, Mrs. May?”

“Why, of course, nothing matters so much. And I wish you wouldn’t stand where I can’t see you. Do sit down on this step by me.”

So Nick sat down on the step, and her shoulder touched his arm. They talked in low voices, he telling her things to “keep her mind off” the situation: things about the Mission and other Missions. Then the conversation turned to Nick’s ranch and the oil gusher which had given him fortune out of threatening ruin; and he described the queer little oil city which had grown up on his land.

“I should like to see it,” Angela said, when he had pictured Lucky Star City and ranch in a simple way, which was nevertheless curiously graphic.

He caught up her words eagerly. “Would you let me take you there?” he begged. “Mrs. Gaylor’d invite you to stay at her house. You know I’ve told you about that, and how ——”

“Yes, I know.” Angela could hardly have explained why, but somehow she did not want to hear Mrs. Gaylor talked of just then. She was no longer indifferent to the idea of seeing Nick’s home, and the woman who had helped him to make it, yet she was not sure that she wished to go there. Certainly she did not wish to visit Mrs. Gaylor. But—-

she would like to know whether the mistress of the Gaylor ranch was really so very beautiful.

“What we must think about now, is how to get out of this church,” she went on, laughing faintly in the dark. “It seems as if we might have to stay here all the rest of our lives.”

“Are you hungry?” Nick inquired.

“A little.”

In his enraged disgust at not being able to procure a meal, Nick would gladly have killed and cooked the owl.

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"Are *you?*" Angela asked.

"Am I—what?"

"Hungry."

"Good heavens, no!"

Time passed vaguely, as time does pass in the dark, when there are no means of counting the minutes. They could hear their watches ticking, if they listened, but they never listened long enough to know how the seconds went by. And all the matches were gone.

"It's like being lost in a cave, or a mine, or the catacombs," Angela reflected aloud, "with your only candle burnt out. You can't tell whether it's minutes or hours."

"It must be mighty tedious for you, I'm afraid; though Billy's sure to come back soon," said Nick.

"No, somehow it isn't tedious," she answered as if puzzled. "I suppose I'm rather excited. And you——"

"Well, I suppose I'm rather excited, too," said Nick, in his low, quiet voice, that did not betray what he felt. Angela's voice told more of what went on in her soul. It was, as Nick often thought, a voice of lights and shadows.

At last—what time it might be they could not tell—there came a sound of a key turning in a lock. The door opened, and a yellow ray from a lantern streamed into the church, making the owl in its corner flutter wildly. Billy's face showed in a frame of dull gold, as he peered about, blinking.

Then, for the first time, Angela knew that Nick had been angry with the chauffeur. There was something in his tone as he said, "Well! So you have come!" which suggested that, if she had not been there, the "forest creature" might have added some strong and primitive language.

"Couldn't help it, Mr. Hilliard. I done the best I could," Billy explained hastily. "When I got out there, I was up against a tough proposition, and I guess it would have been tougher yet if I'd stopped to do much thinking."

"I don't know what your proposition was. But seems to me if it had been mine I'd have found time to yell: 'All right—coming as soon as I can!' as I passed the open window," Nick remarked dryly. "Mrs. May'll think we're a nice lot."

But Billy broke into a flood of explanations, too proud to excuse himself to Hilliard, after being, as he thought, unjustly reproached, yet willing to justify himself in the eyes of the lady.

He had dropped from the window, he said, just in time to see a dim figure, which looked like that of a Padre, disappearing in the distance. He had started instantly in pursuit. If he had waited to call out under the window the figure would have disappeared, and he might not have found it again. As it was the old man had gone so far, and was going so fast, that it had taken some time to catch up. He—Billy—had yelled. The Padre—for the Padre it was—had eventually stopped. Then had followed explanations why the key was in the church door, and the door open; why the door was afterward locked, and why the Padre was hurrying away from the Mission, late in the evening, with the key in his pocket. And all these explanations were simple enough, simpler than Billy's own.

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In the first place a gentleman in the hotel at Paso Robles—one who came often to the Mission of San Miguel, and was a most important person—had sent a message asking that the church might be opened for him in the afternoon. He wished to drive out, and bring a lady to see the Mission. The Padre, obliged to spend the afternoon at the bedside of a man dying at a distant farmhouse, stuck the key in the church door, with a note attached, asking the lady and gentleman to lock the door when ready to go away, and hide the key under a big stone which the letter indicated. The vestments and altar cloths, the great treasures of the church, had been purposely left in an open box, that they might be inspected by the visitors, and the Padre had departed with a growing uneasiness in his mind, lest the instructions should be neglected. So strong was his presentiment, "though the gentleman was not one to forget," that he felt compelled to leave the sick man before nightfall, and hurry off to the church to see if his fears were justified. He promised, however, to return to the bedside immediately; and luckily meeting the gentleman, heard a confession that indeed the key had been forgotten. Only a short time had passed since the church was left empty, therefore the Padre had no further fear for the safety of the vestments. He hurried on, missed seeing the motor, found the key in the church door as he expected, gave it a quick turn in the lock, took it out, put it in the pocket of his long gown, and started back to the farm as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Well, wouldn't he give you the key?" Nick asked, when the story had reached this point.

"Yes. He gave it to me. But it was pretty dark by that time, and a good long way from the Mission. I lost myself, and thought I was never going to get here," Billy admitted. "I guess I must have wandered all round Robin Hood's Barn, when, just as I was ready to give up boat, the stars come out through a lot of clouds, and showed me the roof of the church. I steered by that, and here I am."

"I think we must be grateful, and not scold him," said Angela.

"I did my best, anyhow," Billy persisted, "and I brought this lantern out of the auto. The worst is, I don't know how her lights'll work, for thinkin' to be at the hotel before dark, I didn't bring no water."

Nick stifled a word or two he would have liked to say, reflecting that perhaps he was as much as to blame as Billy. He ought to have left nothing to chance where Angela's comfort and safety were concerned.

They got water, though finding it meant further delay, and after all, the acetylene lamps obstinately refused to shine. It was the first time they had been used since Nick bought the car, and he abused himself roundly for not having tested their temper. Something was wrong, something which neither his knowledge nor Billy's could set right; and after tinkering for half an hour, they started with no other light than that of the lantern which Billy proposed to hold while Hilliard drove.

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By this time Angela was thankful for the cloak she had left in the car. It was nearly twelve; and the eight miles which the Bright Angel would gaily have gobbled up in the same number of minutes had she been able to use her eyes, took an hour to negotiate. Like a wounded lioness the car crawled along the dark road, illumined only by a fitful spot of yellow light; and a deep-toned clock somewhere was striking one as she drew up before the door of the hotel.

Most of the windows had gone to sleep, but a few near the front entrance were twinkling wakefully, and the door flew open in response to the call of the motor. A servant of the hotel came out, but behind the liveried man appeared the tall figure of John Falconer, with a woman at his side.

“We’ve been anxious about you,” Falconer said, coming forward.

That “we” was suggestive; and Angela’s fancy sprang to a happy ending for the marred romance. As she entered the hall, dazzled by the lights, her first glance was for the woman who stood beside Falconer, smiling though a little shy. It did not need Falconer’s introduction to tell that this was Mademoiselle Dobieski; and if the singer had lost her youth in Siberia, Paso Robles, or the magic medicine of love, had given it back. Her pale face, lit by immense dark eyes, was radiant, and though she leaned lightly on a stick, it seemed that this was a mere concession to a doctor’s order, or a habit not quite forgotten.

“This is the lady I told you of,” Falconer said to Angela, when he had heard the story of the adventure. “I told her about you, too, and she would sit up to see you. So would your maid, of course, who has been in a great state of anxiety—and even the cat was depressed. Mademoiselle Dobieski has been trying to console your poor Irish girl.”

“I could not bear her to be unhappy,” said the singer, in a voice of a curiously thrilling quality. “I am so happy myself! This is the best day of my life. I don’t want it to end.”

“The doctor has told her she will be cured,” Falconer explained. “You can guess whether it has been a happy day for me! And she has promised to be my wife. It was in the Mission church of San Miguel, bless him!”

“Then it was you who forgot the key in the church door!” exclaimed Angela. “I felt it was, somehow. And no wonder you forgot!” She threw a smiling glance at Nick.

Nick said nothing, but he too blessed San Miguel. He knew nothing about the bodily ailments which brought people to sulphur springs, but he thought that no torture of the body could be worse than jealousy; and of that pain San Miguel had in a moment cured him.

He blessed also the owl which had rustled and made Angela want him near her.

“I believe I’ll catch it, and have it tamed at my place,” he said to himself. “I’ll give it a good time all the rest of its life.”

And next morning early, while Angela slept, he motored out again to the Mission, found the Padre, caught the owl which was young and dazed, brought it to the hotel, and hired a boy to take it by train to Bakersfield.

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XVI

ANGELA AT HER WORST

But something had happened to Angela next day. That was clear, from her manner. What had changed her from a clinging, sweetly mid-Victorian girl into a reserved, coldly polite woman, Nick could not imagine. Her cool "Good morning" gave the first sign of a fallen temperature. His way of beginning the day was suited to the ending of yesterday: hers denied all that made yesterday memorable. Could it be that in recalling the scene in the Mission church, Mrs. May disapproved of something he had said, or some blundering act, and wished to "put him in his place"? Or—still more terrible—was she unhappy about Falconer? Nick was confused, miserable, and because he did not know how to take her, or consequently how to bear himself, he became self-conscious and awkward.

Angela did not refuse to go to Santa Ysabel and the mysterious warm lake, but she said that she would sit behind as her head ached a little, and she would feel the wind less than on the front seat. Nick knew, somehow, that she did not wish to talk to him. Yet there was nothing definite in her manner, of which he could take hold and say, "Have I offended you?"

"Perhaps it's only that she's tired, and didn't sleep well," Nick tried to persuade himself, because, in reason, he did not see what else it could be. "As like as not, she'll be different to-morrow."

But there was to be no to-morrow.

The blow did not fall until he had brought her back to the hotel. Then, before Nick could propose a new plan, she said quickly, in the presence of Falconer, who had strolled out to meet the Bright Angel, "Oh, Mr. Hilliard, I think you'll be glad to hear you are going to be relieved of all this bother I've been making you. I'm engaged to play chaperon for a few days. If *I* will go to Monterey, Mademoiselle Dobieski will go, and of course that will be a great, great pleasure to Mr. Falconer. You know, don't you, that *our* plans were never made for a day ahead? She and I will travel in the wonderful private car, and meet Mrs. Harland at the other end of the journey. I know Mr. Falconer means to ask you too, so we shan't be saying good-bye, or even *au revoir*, if you accept. His idea is for you to let your chauffeur drive the Bright Angel, and meet you where you like. But he'll tell you all about that, of course. We arranged this at breakfast, which Mademoiselle Dobieski had with me, in my sitting-room."

With this, she walked away, leaving the men to settle the question between themselves. Nick thought then that he understood. She mentioned the promised invitation, rather than break away from him too abruptly, but certainly she could not wish

him to accept. If she had not wanted to escape from his society, she would not have fallen in with Falconer's suggestion. Perhaps she had even asked Falconer to help her out of a situation which, for some dreadful

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reason, she suddenly found impossible. This was very likely Falconer's way of coming to the rescue. The excuse seemed a fairly good one, and the invitation was calculated to save sensitive feelings. But it was not quite good enough—or the feelings were too sensitive. Nick thanked Falconer, and said that he was sorry to miss such a pleasure, but could not trust Billy to drive the Bright Angel: he must stick to the helm.

When Angela came back in a few minutes with Sonia Dobieski, Falconer was still trying to persuade Hilliard to change his mind, proposing that, if Billy could not drive, the Bright Angel should be put upon a train. For an instant Nick's eyes sought Angela's, but she was tucking a rose into her belt, and did not look up. Her lowered eyelids and long lashes gave her a look of deliberate remoteness. Nick again expressed his gratitude, but was "afraid he couldn't manage, although he would like it mighty well." This time he made no excuse for his refusal, and Falconer let the subject drop. He saw that something was wrong, and feared that he had been selfish in suggesting an idea which would give him Sonia for a guest. Certainly Mrs. May had accepted readily; but now there was a jarring note. He was sorry, but could do nothing more, except to express regret that Hilliard would not be of the party on board the McCloud. Mademoiselle Dobieski followed suit, and, in common civility, Angela had to say what they said whether she meant it or not. She had to look up, too, when she spoke, and Nick's eyes met hers. She blushed like a schoolgirl, and glanced away, adding quickly that she would have liked his advice as well as Falconer's, at Monterey. "You know, Mr. Falconer thinks I shall want to buy land along the Seventeen-Mile Drive, and build my house there," she said. "I wonder? Since Santa Barbara, I've been thinking I might prefer the North. But I can't tell, one bit. There's something about the climate of California—I suppose it must be the climate!—which makes me in two minds about the same things, every day."

Nick was not sure whether to take this as an excuse or a stab. He was sure of but one thing. Something hideous had come between him and his angel, while he slept and dreamed of her; and nothing would ever be the same again. Of course it must be his fault; and if he were used to women he would perhaps see what he had done that a woman would disapprove. Or perhaps, even so, he would be in the dark, for there were all the other women in the world, and there was Angela May. She was a law unto herself. It looked just now as if she were a hard and cruel law, but she must not be blamed. She had a right to break with him. She had promised nothing.

"I think," said Nick, when he had learned that the McCloud was to be "hitched" to a train, in the afternoon, "I'd better be getting on. I might as well say good-bye to you all now." When he shook hands with Mrs. May, Falconer and Sonia Dobieski turned aside a little, speaking to each other. "I hope you understand, Mr. Hilliard, and don't think I'm being rude after all your kindness," Angela said, melting a little; "I could hardly refuse them,

when it was a question of chaperoning a newly engaged couple; and I thought you would join us, of course."

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This concession gave Nick an unexpected chance. He dared to hope that it was an olive branch held out. “Did you really think that?” he asked quickly, in a low voice.

“Certainly. Why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know! That’s the trouble. But—if you did think it, maybe you’ll let me see you again—maybe this won’t be good-bye for always?”

“Dear me, I hope not, indeed!” she answered in a light, frivolous tone again. “We’re sure to meet. You come to San Francisco sometimes I’ve heard you say. I shall be there—oh, ages.”

“You’ll let me call?” Nick was faintly—very faintly—encouraged, not to hope for much, but for a very little; for a chance to retrieve some of the ground he had lost in a night; to begin low down, and work up.

“I shall be glad to see you at the Fairmont Hotel, when I get there.” She was almost too frankly cordial suddenly. The tone would have been perfect if the words had been spoken in New Orleans, before a thousand things had happened. But they had passed that stage now—for good or ill.

Then they finished shaking hands, and a few minutes later Nick left her with Falconer and Sonia Dobieski. The instant he had gone, Angela would have given a good deal to call him back, although she was sure she had done only her duty to herself and him.

Her reasons for the great change were not mysterious at all. They were very clear, and seemed to her very virtuous, very praiseworthy—up to the last minute. Then she thought that she was a prig, and a wretch, and several other things which she would have been furious to be thought by anybody else. She had wanted Nick to realize—that is, she had felt it her duty to make him realize—that things could not go on as they were, after last night. She had been incredibly silly in the Mission church. All night long she had scolded herself for the way she had “behaved” and let the “forest creature” behave—holding her hand, and sitting as close to her on the gallery stairs as if they were engaged in a desperate ballroom flirtation. She must show him that she was not really a stupid, sentimental person. She made up her mind that they must begin all over again, the very first thing in the morning; and, true to her resolution, she had, indeed, begun all over again. She had torn a hole in the net which was binding them together—all through her own silly fault!

In her heart, she had wanted him to accept Falconer’s invitation; but she had not wanted him to know that she had wanted him. The thing was to give the impression that she would be pleased if he went, and not miserable if he refused. If they all went to Monterey together on Mr. Falconer’s private car, they would not be losing each other—-

as friends; they would merely be adjusting their relations, which, owning to San Miguel, had suddenly got dangerously out of hand.

It was only when Nick's back was turned, and he was going, that she saw things from his point of view. Why had she not been clever enough to keep to the happy medium and not make him think that he had done something dreadfully wrong—that on second thoughts she was blaming him for last night, and punishing him? Surely she might have managed better—she a woman of the world, and he a mere "forest creature"?

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But it was too late. The thing was done, and badly done. Angela saw herself a worm, and Nick noble as a tall pine-tree of the mountains. Still, it was best that the break should have come, one way or another.

“Why on earth should I care?” she asked herself angrily. ”'We could never go on having a real friendship, all our lives—I and a man like that. He’s a splendid fellow—of course, above me in lots of ways; but we’re of different worlds. I don’t see how anything could change that. What a pity it all is—not for my sake, but for his!” And she thought how awkward his fit of shy self-consciousness had made him appear in contrast with a cultured man, a cosmopolitan like Falconer. It was she who had made him self-conscious. She knew that. But there was the fact. Falconer was a man of her world. Nick Hilliard was not. It was sad that Nick, with his good looks and intelligence and fine qualities, could not have had advantages when a boy—could not have gone to a university or at least associated with gentlefolk as their equal—which he was in heart. But now he had got those slipshod ways of speaking he could never change. And there were a thousand other things which put him outside the pale of the men she knew. She would not listen when a sarcastic voice within defended Nick, sneering, “Oh, yes, Prince Paolo di Sereno and some of his friends are *far* superior to Mr. Hilliard, aren’t they?”

Irritated because the “forest creature” had become of paramount importance in her life when he should remain the merest episode, she was surprised and even horrified to find herself despairing because he had done what she forced him to do. She could have cried for what he must be thinking of her. She wanted to go on seeing his faults, but in her changing mood she could see only her own. “He is one of the noblest gentlemen in the world,” something inside her said. “You aren’t worthy to black his boots!” Then the picture of herself blacking them—the shiny ones that were too tight—-rose before her eyes, and she was afraid that she was going to laugh—or else to sob. Anyhow, he was gone, and there was an end of it all!

But when afternoon came, things were different again. In Falconer’s private car, where she, Princess di Sereno, was the chaperon, and Sonia Dobieski was queen, Angela was so desperately homesick for Nick Hilliard that she did not see how she could get on without his—friendship. “After all,” she reminded herself, excusing her inconsistency, “*I* didn’t send him away. He went of his own accord. He might be here now. He refused to come with us. It’s only that we oughtn’t to be rushing about together any more in that absurd way. It won’t do. Things keep happening—unexpected things—like last night. Still if he comes to San Francisco—if he asks again to ‘show me the sights’ I don’t see why I shouldn’t say yes—just to so small a favour—and to make up—in case his feelings are hurt.”

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In her heart she knew that his feelings were hurt. But had she not hurt her own?

There was a piano in the drawing-room part of the car. Sonia was singing to Falconer. They had forgotten Mrs. May, without whose martyred presence they could not have had this happiness. The soul of the Russian girl seemed to pour out with her voice, as upon a tide. The sorrow and pain of her past exile were in it at first: then it rose to the joy of new life in a new world. The sweetness of the voice and all that it meant of love after anguish stabbed Angela as she listened in the distance, like a knife dipped in honey.

XVII

SEVENTEEN-MILE DRIVE

Things were better at Del Monte. Mrs. Harland was there, and made a delightful hostess. It rather amused Angela to watch Theo Dene with Sonia Dobieski, and to see how delightful Falconer's sister was to both. But somehow she contrived that Miss Dene should not be of the motoring party for the Seventeen-Mile Drive. A young officer from the Presidio was produced, to compensate as far as could be for her frankly lamented "failure"; and Theo resigned herself to a second-best flirtation. It was consoling to think that Falconer had been in love with the Dobieski long before he saw her: and Theo could almost forgive the Russian, whom she considered plain and gawky compared to herself. She could not, however, forgive "Mrs. May" for having come into the party, and for being liked by the host better than she was liked. Judging another woman by herself, she thought that, out of revenge for one or two little things (such as the talk about Mrs. Gaylor and Nick Hilliard), Angela was trying to "take away" her California friends. If Theo had considered it worth while, she would have broken her word, and told who "Mrs. May" really was; but that would be worse than useless, as it would only make Angela seem of more importance than at present. However, on hearing that Mrs. May might decide to "run up to Shasta and the McCloud River," she promised herself a certain amount of fun. She had reminded Mrs. Harland so often about writing to Mrs. Gaylor, that at last the letter had been sent. The lady who was supposed to have a claim upon Nick Hilliard was asked to visit Rushing River Camp, as Falconer's place was called; and a telegram had been dispatched by Falconer himself to Hilliard at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, whither he was bound. If they all came—yes, Theo would have her fun.

She thought of this, as she flirted with the officer from the Presidio, and promised to make him the hero of her next book. But the party in Falconer's motor thought of her not at all.

Angela was enchanted with the peninsula of Monterey. In the dark arbour of the cedar forest Falconer kept ordering the chauffeur of a hired car to slow down, or stop. The

practically minded young man believed that this great gentleman and the three ladies must be slightly mad. It was so queer to stop a car when she was going well just to stare around and talk poetry about a lot of trees.

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One of the ladies, the prettiest and youngest, with yellow hair under her gray motor-bonnet, said they weren't trees but people—either nymphs or witches—and the rest of the party humoured her, talking nonsense about Greece and goddesses. He thought the pleasure of a motor trip was "going some"; but his passengers seemed to have other ideas. They were idiots, of course, but they seemed mighty happy.

Angela, however, was less happy than the others, less happy than she tried to seem. She had a dim idea that, if she had come with Nick, she would have thought this the most beautiful place on earth, and that she had found the ideal spot for a home. As it was, in spite of all the loveliness, she was not sure of herself, or what she wanted. This made her ashamed. She was as self-conscious as Nick had been yesterday, and in sheer panic fear lest "they" should think she was pining for Hilliard, or grieving over some stupid quarrel, she said that she would certainly buy land in the forest. She must not lose such a chance. If for any reason she should change her mind, she could always sell, couldn't she? On this point Falconer reassured her. "You can sell to me," he laughed in the light-hearted way that surprised the chauffeur. "You build a house and furnish it, and take all the trouble, and I'll buy it from you—to live in myself when I want to imagine I'm in Greece or Sicily, as I do sometimes when I'm too busy to go there." And he looked at Sonia.

Though he laughed, he was in earnest, and Angela began to feel that she might want to keep her house—if she built it. She saw herself walking under the strange dark trees to the gray rocks, to look at the seals. Nick was with her.... She hurried to think of something else. Nick would not be here. They would have forgotten each other by the time her house was built. Perhaps he would be married to his Mrs. Gaylor.

[Illustration: "Angela was enchanted with the peninsula of Monterey"]

After all it did not seem so romantic to have a place where she could go and look at some seals, alone. Stupid! Because she had come to California on purpose to have a place where she could be alone.

"How absurd women, are!" she thought, irritably. "As soon as we can have what we want, we don't want it. I suppose it must be that. Now I long for all kinds of new things I can't possibly have, which would be very bad for me if I could."

After lunching at the wonderful Club House built of logs, they went back by way of Monterey, and in the sleepy old town which holds more California history than any other they wandered about, "seeing the sights," one after another. They paid their respects to the monument of Father Juniperra Serra, who landed at Monterey with his soldiers a hundred and forty years ago—a long time in America, where life moves quickly. Then, next in interest, came the verandaed Custom House, built under Spanish rule, and looking just the place to spend a lazy afternoon

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in gossiping about lovely ladies, and pretending to do important business for the Crown. There was the oldest Court-house in California, too, and the oldest brick house, and the oldest frame building—"brought round the Horn"; the oldest theatre, glorified by Jenny Lind's singing; and, indeed, all the oldest old things to be found anywhere in history or romance. But, though Angela dared not say so, she wondered what had become of the really old things, new in the beginning of the seventeenth century when Don Sebastian Viscanio landed to name the town—in honour of Philip the Third—-Monterey or "King of the Mountains."

That night they all walked together under the great trees of the park at Del Monte. A lake (where black swans threaded their way like dark spirits among white water-lilies) drank the last light of day, and little waves the swans made were ruffled with dim silver. Above, the sky was another deep blue lake lilied with stars; and as darkness fell, hot and sweet-scented as the veil of an Eastern woman, slowly the boundaries were lost between forest and garden. Outlines faded and blended into one another. The fuchsias, big as babies' fists, the poppies like dolls' crepe sunbonnets, the roses large enough for nightingales' nests, lost their colour, and seemed to go out in the dark, like brilliant bubbles that break into nothingness. Here and there yellow light flashed near the ground, far from the walkers, as if a faint firefly were astray in a tangle of flowers. Chinese gardeners, deft and mysterious as brownies, were working at night to change the arrangement of flower-beds so that the dwellers in the hotel should have a surprise by day.

Theo Dene talked of Carmen Gaylor, telling stories she had heard of the rich widow from people whose acquaintance she had first made at Del Monte. "I am longing to meet the woman," she said; "I think she must be an interesting character, typically Spanish, or Mexican—or, anyhow, not American—from what they all say. A beauty—-vain and jealous, and a fearful temper. I shouldn't like to interfere with a woman of that sort in what she thought her 'rights,' should you?"

[Illustration: "*They weren't trees, but people, either nymphs or witches*"]

"One can't interfere with a person one has never met, can one?" Angela remarked, pretending not to understand.

"Maybe not, in real life," Theo agreed. "I'm always losing myself in my books, and forgetting that the world outside isn't like *my* world, made of romance. But you can understand, can't you; here where it's so beautiful that even a *married woman*—who has, of course, left love far behind her in Europe—must feel some faint yearning to be the heroine of a romance?"

Princess di Sereno wondered why she had ever been nice to Theo in Rome.

XVIII

LA DONNA E MOBILE

Angela stood at her hotel window, looking down over the gilded hills and purple valleys of the most romantic city in America—San Francisco, the port of adventure; away to the Golden Gate, where the sea poured in a flood of gold under a sea of rosy fog—a foaming, rushing sea of sunset cloud, beneath a high dome of fire away to the fortified islands and to Mount Tamalpais.

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She had arrived only a few hours ago, after two days spent at Del Monte, and was waiting for Nick.

There had been a note sent up the day before, and she had not been in the hotel twenty minutes when he had telephoned. It had been good to hear his voice, so good that Angela had felt obliged to stiffen her resolution. Would she let him call? he asked; and she said: "Yes, come before dinner." Her impulse was to say, "Dine with me," but she would not. Instead, she added, "I dine at eight." It was now after seven, and she had dressed to be ready for Nick. He might arrive at any minute. Angela's heart was beating quickly—but perhaps it was the glory of the sunset that made her blood run fast. She was listening for the bell of the telephone, yet when the sharp sound came it went through her nerves with the thrill of the unexpected.

"A gentleman, Mr. Hilliard, has called," announced the small impersonal voice at the other end of the wire.

"Ask him to come up," Angela answered, feeling virtuously firm in her resolve that really had not weakened once in the last five days!

The pretty white room was full of rose-coloured twilight, so pink, it seemed, that if you closed your hand tightly you might find a little ball of crushed rose-petals there when you opened it. It would be a pity to shut out so much loveliness by switching on the electricity, so when Nick came he found Angela, a tall, slim black figure, with a faint gold nimbus round its head, silhouetted against a background of flaming sky. Standing as she did with her back to the window, he could hardly see her face, but the sunset streamed full into his as he crossed the room, holding out his hand.

His dark face and deep-lighted eyes looked almost unearthly to Angela seen in this wonderful light. No man could really be as handsome as he seemed! She must remember that he had never been so before, never would be again. It was only an effect. "It's like meeting him transformed, in another world," was the thought that flashed through her head. And the immense height of this great house on a hill, the apparent distance from the veiled city beneath, with its starlike lights beginning to glitter through clouds of shadow, all intensified the fancy. For an instant it was as if they two met alone together on a mountain-top, immeasurably high above the tired, struggling crowd of human things where once their place had been.

Strange what fantastic ideas jump into your mind! Angela was ashamed; and her embarrassment, mingling with admiration of Nick which must be hidden, chilled her greeting into commonplace. Yet she could hardly take her eyes from his good looks.

Nick had dressed himself for evening in some of those clothes bought in haste, ready-made, to please a woman who had laughed at them and at him, during his abbreviated visit in New York. The woman did not laugh now. She forgot that she had ever laughed;

and the thought was in her mind that the large white oval of evening shirt set off his head like a marble pedestal.

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“How do you do?” she said, giving him her hand, and holding it rather high, in the English way, which seemed excessively formal to Nick. “I’m glad to see you again.”

Nick’s heart went down. Her voice did not sound glad. This was just what he had expected, though not what he had hoped. She had changed toward him the day they parted, and though she had flung him a word of encouragement, evidently she had gone on changing more and more. There seemed little good in asking what he had come to ask; but he had to get through with it now.

“I guess I don’t need to tell you I’m glad to see you,” he said. He looked at that nimbus round her head, as she stood with her back to the window. He could say no more, though he had meant to add something.

“What are you thinking about?” she questioned him almost sharply.

Nick laughed, embarrassed. “I was thinking some words that sound like poetry—or no, they were thinking themselves. Night in her eyes, morning in her hair! Because standing like you do, Mrs. May, a kind of gold powder wreath seems to be floating around your head.”

She laughed too. “You must have been reading poetry since I left you!”

“No, that came out of my head. But I’ve been thinking a whole lot. About a good many things—only most of them were about you, or came back to you if they didn’t begin there. Don’t you know how one idea can sort of run through all your thoughts?”

“I know,” said Angela. Just so had the idea of him been running through all her thoughts these last few days. “But,” she added with an effort, “why should you have been thinking of me? We’re such—*new* friends.”

“Yes,” Nick admitted, “but you can’t always account for your thoughts.”

“Of course not. And I’m grateful for a few of yours. Have you been enjoying San Francisco? Do sit down. And would you mind putting on the electricity?”

“Must I? It’s beautiful like this.”

“Very well. Leave it so.”

She sat on a sofa, still with her back to the window, and Nick took a chair facing the light.

“I’ve had a feeling on me of waiting,” said Nick. “Just that. I haven’t gone around much, though this is the first time I’ve been in San Francisco, except for a day, since the city’s

grown up after the fire. I was waiting to see if you'd let me show you things, as you ——"

"As I—what?" Angela asked, when he paused.

"I was going to say, as you partly promised. But that wouldn't be fair, because you didn't really promise anything."

If he had claimed a right, it would have been easy to say that it didn't exist, but he made things harder by claiming nothing. Still, she went on: "No, of course, I couldn't promise. As I'm situated now, it's difficult to make plans. However, if you've really waited for me, it was kind, and there's no reason why I shouldn't ask you to show me San Francisco.

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Already, even though I haven't gone about at all, except just 'taxying' up to the hotel, I can see it's wonderful. From this window, it's like looking out on Rome, with all its hills—Rome transplanted to the sea. And I know you, and don't know Mr. Morehouse, who's my only other resource here. Besides, he's a busy man; and if you're busy, you pretend not to be."

"I'm having a vacation," Nick explained.

"All the nicer of you, spending some of it on me. But I mustn't let you spend too much. Besides, I have as little time as you have for running about the country. Everything has changed with me since I saw you last."

"I was afraid so!" Nick exclaimed, before he could stop to think.

"Only because I've bought land," Angela said hastily. "Some of California—five acres on the peninsula of Monterey—is mine! I must decide on an architect. Isn't that exciting? Then, while he's working out our joint ideas, perhaps I'll make a visit to Mrs. Harland. I'm rather tired, and I believe it will do me good."

"I expect it will," said Nick bravely.

"Think of the journey I've had from Europe, and not a day's rest since," went on Angela, with the air of excusing herself.

"It must have been mighty hard on you," Nick agreed. He flushed faintly, as if he deserved reproach for inconsiderateness.

"Not that I felt the need of rest till—till now," she hurried on. "It was delicious sailing along with your Bright Angel. When I'm at Rushing River Camp I shall think of her again, wondering who is spinning about with you in my place. For you'll often take your friends out when you're at home?"

It was on the tip of Nick's tongue to answer, "Bright Angel was bought for you; named after you, and I can never bear to take anybody else, now you've finished with her—and me." But that, like claiming a promise half made, "wouldn't have been fair." If he hinted that the car had been got for her sake, she would be distressed. Some men in his place would have said—whether meaning it or not—"No other woman shall ever go with me in that auto." And the wish to say this was in Nick's mind, but he knew that it would be in bad taste. Besides, there was a woman who would want to try his car, and it would be unfriendly to deny her. So he said, "There *is* one friend I must take: Mrs. Gaylor. I've talked to you about her. She'll be interested in Bright Angel when I get home."

"Yes; of course," replied Angela. It was extraordinary how much she disliked the picture of Nick and a beautiful dark woman together in the car where *her* place had been by his side. Could it be that Theo Dene was right? Was Nick's interest in her—Angela—less than, and different from, his interest in Mrs. Gaylor? She had no right to know, no right to want to know, still less to try to find out. Yet she felt that not to know very soon would make her lose sleep, and appetite, and interest in daily life.

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Silence fell between them for a moment. The rose of sunset burned to ashes-of-rose. A small clock on the mantelpiece mentioned in a discreet voice that it was a quarter to eight. Nick got up, rather heavily for a man so lithe as he.

“Well, I must go,” he said. “Thank you for letting me take, you around San Francisco. May I come to-morrow morning?”

“Oh, do. About half-past nine.” She got up also, feeling miserable, though, as she pointed out to herself, for no real reason.

“I’ll be prompt.” He put out his hand, and she laid hers in it, looking up to his face with a smile which would not for the world have been wistful. Suddenly his fingers gripped hers convulsively.

“So it’s all over!” he whispered.

“No, no; not all over,” she contradicted him. “There’s to-morrow.”

“Yes, there’s to-morrow,” he echoed.

“I told you at first,” and she tried to laugh, “that ’sufficient for the day was the trip thereof.’ Nothing was to be planned ahead.”

“It’s all right, Mrs. May,” Nick answered.. “I want to be glad you’re going to have that McCloud River visit. And, of course, you’ve got your new place to think of. No wonder you’re sick of travelling and want to settle down. It’s all right, and there’s to-morrow, as you say.”

He shook her hand, moving it up and down mechanically, then dropped it, and turned to go. Another second and the door was opening. Then it was shutting behind him. He had gone! And though he was coming to-morrow for a little while, nothing would ever be as it had been between them. It was now, not to-morrow, that she was sending him definitely out of her life; and he understood.

Never had Angela thought so quickly. She trembled as she stood staring at the shut door. Her cheeks burned, and a pulse beat in her throat, under the string of pearls. She clasped and unclasped her hands, and they were very cold.

“He *shan’t* go to that woman, and take her out in my place in the Bright Angel!” she said out aloud, and flew to the door.

“Mr. Hilliard!—Mr. Hilliard!” she called.

Everything seemed to depend—though this was nonsense!—on his not having got to the elevator. She stood in the doorway, waiting to see what would happen, her blood

pounding as if she had taken a really important step; which, of course, was not the case.

He had turned a corner of the corridor and was out of sight, but her voice reached him, and he came back.

“Was there something you forgot to tell me?” he asked. Perhaps she was going to say that after all she would not go out to-morrow.

“No, not that I forgot—something I *want* to say. Come in again.”

She whisked the tail of her black chiffon dress back into the room. He followed her, wondering and silently anxious.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she said in a low voice. (There! He had known it. She was not going.)

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"*Would* you still care to be my 'trail guide' in the Yosemite Valley?"

"Would I care?" echoed Nick.

"Then we'll go. I'll give up the McCloud River. I'll telephone Mrs. Harland—she's in San Francisco till day after to-morrow. I'll find an excuse—I haven't had time to think it out yet. But I don't care *what* happens, I won't change again! I'm going to the Yosemite if you'll take me."

He looked at her searchingly. "Because you're kind-hearted, and afraid you've hurt me ——"

"No—no! *Because I want to go!*"

Women are strange, and hard to understand, when they are worth taking the trouble to understand; and even then they cannot understand themselves.

XIX

THE CITY OF ROMANCE

Angela was ridiculously happy next morning. She had no regrets. Nick had stayed to dinner after all, and they had made plans. There was nothing in this, really, she reminded herself, laughing five times an hour; nothing at all. But it was about as wild and exciting as if—as if it were an elopement: to have given up everything she had almost decided upon, and to be going to the Yosemite Valley—with Nick, whom she had intended gently to put in his place—at a distance from hers.

"There will never, never be anything in my life again like this," she said. "I've never lived. I've never done the things I wanted to do. There was always some one or something to keep me back. Now, for a week or a fortnight, I shall live—live! nothing and no one shall keep me back." She knew how absolutely contradictory this was, after taking so much pains to "let the 'forest creature' down gently," and begin all over again. But she did not care. Nothing mattered, except that she could not send him to Mrs. Gaylor. As gaily as she had embarked upon the "little adventure" at Los Angeles, did she now face the great one.

Nick, too, was violently happy, happier than he had ever been or supposed it possible to be. At Los Angeles he had hardly dared to hope for anything beyond the pleasure of having this woman by his side for a few hours. Since then, his feelings had, as he expressed it to himself, been running up and down, like a thermometer in changeable weather; but they had been "mostly down," and during the last few days had mounted little above freezing-point. Now the sudden bound bewildered him. He did not know why Angela had changed again at the very moment when she had seemed most cold;

but she *had* changed, and almost fiercely he determined now to fight for her. He loved her, and she must know what was in his heart. She could not do what she had just agreed to do unless she liked and trusted him: and he would make the most of all the days to come. He would keep her forever if he could.

Her sudden throwing over of her own plans, for his sake, seemed too good to be true, especially after her strange conduct at Paso Robles; but like a boy who dreams he has all the Christmas presents he ever coveted in vain, and wakes to find them his, he reminded himself that it was true—true—true!

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Angela did not tell Nick the excuse she offered Mrs. Harland for giving up her visit. It was enough for him that it was given up. He would have been even more proud and pleased, however, if he had known how frankly she confessed her real intentions.

To do that seemed to Angela the only way. To have fibbed a little, or even to have prevaricated whitely, would have spoiled everything.

“I find, dear Mrs. Harland,” she said in her letter, “that I can’t tear myself from San Francisco. If I go with you to Shasta and the McCloud River, and come back in a week or a fortnight to do my sightseeing, nothing will be the same. I believe you will understand how I feel. My impressions will be broken. Besides, Mr. Hilliard is here now, and willing to show me what I ought to see. I’m afraid I seemed to repay his kindness by being rude to him at Paso Robles. After San Francisco, he volunteers to be my ‘trail guide’ through the Yosemite Valley, and if I put off that trip too long I mayn’t get so good a guide. Mr. Morehouse has advised me to take him, and says these things are done in this Western World, where gossip is blown away like mist by the winds that sweep through the Golden Gate. Besides, why should any one gossip? There is no cause; and I am nobody, and known to few. I’m not worth gossiping about! But I wonder if you’ll ever again invite me to Rushing River Camp? I hardly dare expect it. Yet I hope!”

Already Mrs. Gaylor had been invited, and had accepted; but Angela was not thinking of Mrs. Gaylor at the moment, and she was doing her best to keep Nick’s thoughts from his “boss’s widow.” He and “Mrs. May” went about San Francisco together like two children on a holiday.

The place was a surprise to Angela. Her father’s stories had pictured for her a strange, wild city, of many wooden houses, a tangle of steep streets running up hill and down dale, a few great mansions, a thousand or more acres of park in the making. But the San Francisco which he had known as a boy had greatly changed, even before the fire. Angela was aware of this, though she had not been able to realize the vastness of the change; and though she knew that the city was reborn since the epic tragedy which laid it low, she had expected to find it in a confused turmoil of growing. The work done in six or seven years by men who loved the City of the Golden Gate—men who gave blood and fortune for her, as men will for an adored woman—was almost incredible. “Rome was not built in a day” she had often heard; but this great town of many hills, so like a Rome of a new world, seemed to have risen from its ashes by magic.

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The place began to take on in her eyes a curious, startling individuality. She began to think of the city not as a town, but as a person. A woman, young, lovely, and beloved, who had gone gaily to bed one night to dream of her lovers, her jewels, and her triumphs. While she lay smiling in her beauty sleep, this woman had been rudely aroused by a cry of fire and shouts that warned her to fly. Dazed, she dressed in wildest haste, putting on all the gorgeous jewels she could find, for fear of losing them forever, and wrapping herself in exquisite laces. But in her hurry, she had been obliged to fling on some very queer garments rather than not be clothed at all; and, losing her head, had contrived to save a few worthless things. All this the woman had done, laughing through her fear of death, because nothing could conquer her brave spirit and because she knew that, scared and destitute, near to death, she would be rescued at last, loved better than ever for her sufferings, and by and by would be more regal than before.

Now, here was this vital creature, rewarded for her faith by the worship and the prowess of her lovers. What matter if she still wore some of the odd things she had picked up in a hurry? Gowns better than she had ever boasted were being fashioned for her; and the contrast between a tiara showing under a sunbonnet, a scarf of rose-point covering a cotton belt, and diamond-buckled shoes slipped on to torn stockings, made her beauty more piquant, as she sat watching the work of her lovers, on her throne by the sea. No wonder that the men who adored such a woman were brave as she! generous and reckless as she, and on fire with energy and courage.

“But the beautiful woman worked, too, to help her lovers,” Nick answered Angela’s little allegory. “When she was wounded, she said, ’Just give me a hand up and I won’t die. You shall have a big reward for all you do—only hurry, for I can’t bear to be seen like this by any one but you.’”

“And what did her lovers say?” Angela asked.

“‘We’ll die for you, gladly. You have our hearts. You can have our hearts’ blood.’” And his eyes spoke to her of himself.

* * * * *

The first day was tiring, nevertheless Angela went out to Oakland that night to the Greek theatre, where a classic tragedy was to be performed; and next day it was the Presidio and Golden Gate Park. They lunched at the Cliff House, and fed the barking sea-lions on the seal rocks. Then came a few hours’ rest: and Chinatown was saved as a *bonne-bouche* for the evening. They dined in the most stately and expensive of the Chinese restaurants—“no chop suey house,” as their waiter said, where they entered through the kitchen to see cakes being baked, and pots of rice in the act of cooking. Upstairs the walls were adorned with golden flowers, panel paintings by artists of China, and strange dragons, and Buddhas that nodded on shelves. There were open-work

screens, and tables and chairs of black, carved teakwood. Angela would have been aghast had she dreamed that the queer dinner, which she liked and laughed at, cost Nick more than a hundred dollars, but luckily she was not initiated in the rarity of bird's-nest soup or other Chinese delicacies.

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It was half-past eight when they finished dining, the hour when Chinatown begins to be most lively, most ready to amuse itself and, incidentally, strangers. Therein lay the kernel of the nut, the blossom of the clove: that this bit of the old, old East, inlaid in the heart of the new West was not an “exhibition” like “Japan in London,” but a large, busy town, living for itself alone. The big posters in Chinese characters, pasted on the walls, were for Chinese eyes; not meant to amuse foreigners. The two or three daily papers printed in Chinese, and filled with advertisements, were for the Chinese; the bazaars, crammed with strange Eastern things, were meant to attract women of the Orient, little flitting creatures in embroidered silk jackets and long, tight trousers, who passed and gazed, with dark eyes aslant; let European women come, or stay away, as they pleased, there were plenty of Chinese husbands whose purses were full enough to keep the merchants of Chinatown contented. The tiny, dressed-up Oriental dolls—boy and girls—who strolled about with pink balloons or butterfly kites, in the short intervals between “Mellican” school and Chinese school, were not baby-actors playing parts on the stage, but real flesh and blood children, who had no idea that they were odd to look at in their gay-coloured gowns and tiny caps.

They did not even know that the streets through which, they toddled were any more strange than the “Mellican” streets outside Chinatown, which they doubtless considered extremely dull, made up of huge gray and white buildings like mountains or prisons; whereas the tortuous ways and blind alleys of their home-town were full of colour; balconied house fronts, high and low, huddled together, painted red or blue, and decorated with flowers, or shaped like Chinese junks or toy castles and temples. It was all new, of course, this town of theirs, since the fire; at least what was above-ground and known to foreigners was new; but it had been built in imitation of past glories. The alleys were as blind, there were as many mysterious, hidden little courts, and packing-case houses and bazaars as ever, so that the children saw no difference; and already a curious look of age, a drugged weariness, had fallen upon the seven-year-old Chinatown.

Angela walked beside Nick through the lighted streets, enchanted with the flowerlike lanterns that bloomed in front of balconied restaurants or places of entertainment, and with the crowding figures that shuffled silently by in felt-soled slippers or high rocker shoes. Tiny, elaborate women, young and old, slim youths with greeny-yellow faces like full summer moons, little old men with hands hidden in flowing sleeves, and dull eyes staring straight ahead, were to her ghosts of the Far East, or creatures of a fantastic dream from which she would soon awake.

When they had “done” the principal thoroughfares and Angela had bought ivory boxes, jade bracelets, and a silver bell collar for Timmy the cat, Nick said that the time had come to join their guide. He had engaged a man supposed to know Chinatown inside and out, and the rendezvous was at 9:30 in Portsmouth Square, the “lungs of Chinatown”—close to the memorial statue of Robert Louis Stevenson.

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It was quiet there, and pleasant in the starlight, faintly gilded by the street lamps. The young moon of the sixth month, which had sunk with the sun when Angela was in Monterey, had not yet dropped beyond distant house roofs. Its pearly profile looked down, surrounded by a clear-cut ring, like the face of a pale saint seen through the rose-window of a cathedral. Soon the guide came, a little dark man with a Jewish face, a German name, an American accent, and the polite manner of an Oriental.

“What would you like the lady to see?” he asked.

“Everything you advise,” said Nick. “We’ve dined in a Chinese restaurant, and seen the things everybody sees. Now we’ll do a few barber shops and drug stores, and anything else queer you can think of.”

“There’s an old fellow,” suggested the guide, “who used to be head musician in the big Chinese theatre. He has a place of his own now, about four storeys underground, where he tinkles on every sort of Chinese instrument. Probably the lady would like to visit him. And I know a house where children sing and dance. It’s underground too; and the poor little brutes, who go to two kinds of schools till nine o’clock, are at it till midnight. But the lady needn’t mind. If she doesn’t go, somebody else will, so the kids are kept out of their beds all the same—the more money the merrier. You may get to see a Chinese funeral too, though I ain’t sure of one to-night——”

“I guess the lady wouldn’t enjoy butting in at a funeral,” said Nick.

“No, she wouldn’t!” Angela added hastily. “But I should love to see them playing fan-fan—isn’t that what they call the gambling game?—and—and smoking opium.”

“Afraid the gambling can’t be managed,” said Mr. Jacob Schermerhorn, sadly shaking his head, as if the good days were gone. “But you’d like a little curio store I’ll take you to—owned by an American lady married to a Chinese, and wearing the costume. They sell relics of the fire. And a joss-house is interesting——”

“But the opium smoking——” Angela persisted, suspecting that he meant to slide off the subject.

“That’s not easy. Opium smoking’s forbidden, and——”

But Angela grew obstinate. “I shan’t feel I’ve seen Chinatown unless I’ve seen that. The books say it goes on.”

“It does, on the quiet—*very* quiet! But they’re scared to death of being found out. Besides——”

“Besides—what?”

“Well, ma’am, your husband said when he engaged me he thought it would be best not to try and get you into any such place. It might hurt your feelings.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Angela. Her “feelings,” if not hurt, were in commotion. “He—he *isn’t* my husband.”

Then she wondered if it would not have been better to have kept silence, and let the man think what he pleased. He would never see or hear of her again. She laughed to show Nick that she was not embarrassed, and then hurried on. “I *must* see them smoking!”

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“It would make you feel mighty sad, Mrs. May,” said Nick. “I went once, and—it kind of haunted me. I thought to myself, I’d never take a woman who had a heart——”

“I haven’t a heart,” laughed Angela, piqued. “I’ve only a will. But—you’re my host, so I suppose I shall have to give my will up to yours.”

To her surprise, Nick did not yield. “We’d better begin with the singing children,” he said to Schermerhorn, “and then we won’t feel we’re keeping them up late.”

The guide led them through Dupont Street, the street of the bazaars, and another smaller, less noisy street, where fat, long-gowned men, and women with gold clasps in their glittering edifices of ebony hair, chaffered for dried abalones, green sugarcane, and Chinese nuts. In basements they could see through half-open doors at the bottom of ladderlike steps, earnest-faced men, with long, well-tended queues of hair, busily tonsuring sleepy clients. Stooping merchants, with wrinkled brown masks like the soft shells of those nuts which others sold, could be discerned in dim, tiny offices, poring through huge round spectacles as they wrote with paint brushes, in volumes apparently made of brown paper. Here and there, in a badly lit shop with a greenish glass window, an old chemist with the air of a wizard was measuring out for a blue-coated customer an ounce of dried lizard flesh, some powdered shark’s eggs, or slivered horns of mountain deer. These things would cure chills and fever; many other diseases, too, and best of all, win love denied, or frighten away bad spirits.

By and by they turned out of the street into a dim passage. This led into another, and so on, until Angela lost count. But at last, when she began to think they must be threading a maze, they plunged into a little square court, where a lantern over one dark doorway showed faintly the blacks of irregularly built houses. Several small windows which looked upon the court were barred, and there was a door with a grated peephole, where Angela fancied that she caught the glint of eyes as the lantern swung in a light breeze. But there was no such *grille* in the low-browed door which the guide approached. It stood ajar, and he pushed it open without knocking.

“Follow, please,” he said, “it’s better for me to go first.” And Angela followed, with Nick close behind her, down a narrow flight of steps, more a ladder than a stairway, which descended abruptly from the threshold. One, two, three flights there were, so steep that you had to go slowly or tumble on your nose, and then down at the bottom of the third ran a long passage, where a greenish yellow dusk from some unseen lamp prevailed. The walls were of unpainted wood, made of slips as thin as laths, and several doors were roughly cut in it. At the end, one of these doors gaped open, music of a peculiar shrillness floated out. Also a smell as of musk and sandalwood drifted through the crack, with small, fitful trails of smoke or curling mist.

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On the other side they were burning incense inside; a Chinese man and a woman, two tiny children like gilded idols, and three or four Europeans. The latter were evidently tourists, with a guide. They sat on a rough bench, their backs to the door; and the Chinaman was perched on a smaller, higher seat, in front of a rack hung with several odd, brightly painted Chinese musical instruments. He was playing solemnly and delicately on an object like a guitar gone mad—so thought Angela—bringing forth a singing sound, small and crystalline; but, glancing over his shoulder as the newcomer appeared, at once he snatched up another curious object, smiling at Angela, as much as to say the change was a compliment to her. The instrument was of the mandolin type, covered with evil-looking snake-skin, and having only a few strings, which the player's fingers touched lightly. Each gave out a separate vibration, though all blended together with a strange, alluring sweetness, and, underneath, Angela thought that she could hear, faintly, a wicked impish voice hissing and chuckling, as if something alive and vilely clever were curled up inside the instrument—perhaps the spirit of the snake whose skin had been stolen.

The fat man nodded to the children who stood opposite on a piece of matting, their silk-clad backs against the wooden wall, which was panelled with paintings, very cheap, and not beautiful like those of the restaurant. But the colours were harmonious; and on a low table stood a blue dragon vase, holding in its mouth a single mariposa lily, such as Angela had never seen before. Nick, standing beside her, whispered the name of the white-and-crimson-spotted butterfly flower, and she smiled her thanks, as the Chinese woman gave the boy's cap a pat, and tweaked the American ribbon bow which tied the queue of the little girl. Both children began to sing, keeping time with the snake-skinned imp.

The boy, who looked about two feet in height—no more—sang stolidly, with an unchanging countenance, and no expression in the black beads which were his eyes. He had on a primrose-coloured silk jacket, fastened across his miniature chest with a loop. His blue pantaloons were bound round his ankles, and his queue, mostly artificial, was braided with scarlet. The girl, however—still smaller than her brother, or perhaps her *fiance*—lifted her voice emotionally, singing very high, with the notes of a musical insect, or thin silver strings stretched tight. Her eyes rolled, she appeared self-conscious, though tired, and tinkled her silver bracelets and anklets. She saw Angela enter, and admired the newcomer's pearly skin and gold hair, which seemed to attract all the light in the mean room. The child stared at her intently, taking in every detail of the black hat and simple though perfect dress. But the singing insect was not alone in her admiration.

Suddenly Angela felt a touch on her arm. She turned, and saw a Chinese girl, who might have been sixteen or seventeen, smiling up at her. Angela smiled too, and the girl kissed her own fingers, dimpling with pleasure, her eyes sparkling. Then, with a nod of her head, and a gesture of the hand, she invitingly indicated the half-open door.

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Angela glanced at Nick. He was intent on the children and had not seen the girl. Again the pretty creature nodded and beckoned, and Angela's curiosity was fired. Apparently there was something which she alone was privileged to see. She was amused and childishly flattered. It would be fun, she thought, to steal away and give Mr. Hilliard a surprise when he turned round to find her gone. Then, just when he was beginning to be frightened, she would come back and tell him her small adventure—whatever it might prove to be.

Cautiously she moved to the door, which the girl as cautiously opened wider. Then, in a second, she was out in the dusky passageway, beside her smiling guide.

XX

THE DOOR WITH THE RED LABEL

"Mellican gell see ole Chineseman smokee opum pipe?" the girl asked.

"Why, you speak English!" exclaimed Angela, forgetting in her surprise that here was only a very little of China set in the midst of a great deal of America.

"I go school one time," said the girl. "Dis times I fo'get sometings. You come Chinese gell. You velly pletty."

Angela laughed, and went, guilty but excited. This was too good an adventure to miss. Schermerhorn must know the inhabitants and habits of this place, and he would guess what had become of her, when they found her gone. "So are you very pretty," she smiled.

"Yes," replied the girl, in her little metallic voice. "I like you. You like me. You give one dollah; I take you see Chinese man smokes mo' 'n all oddeh mens. He velly old—-knows ebelyting."

"Oh, I am to pay you a dollar! So it isn't all for love of my *beaux yeux*," murmured Angela. But she gave the sum, glad that she had spent most of her money in buying jade and ivory, which now encumbered Nick's pockets. The girl took first her dollar and next her gloved hand. Then, opening one of the unpainted doors in the long, dusky passage, she led her companion into a dark cellar.

"Where are you taking me?" Angela inquired, thinking with sudden longing of the lighted room of the musician, where Nick was perhaps beginning to look for her.

"Next-do'h house," replied the girl calmly; and Angela would have been ashamed to draw back, even had curiosity and a faint excitement not compelled her to go on. At one end of the cellar was a wooden stairway, very steep, going both up and down. She

and her conductor went down one flight, then along a short passage, then up some steps, then down a few more. Angela was enjoying the experience, but her joy was spiced with fear.

The two girls were in a very strange house, much stranger, Angela thought, than the one they had left. It was a rabbit-warren of tiny, boxlike rooms, threaded with narrow, labyrinthine passages, just wide enough for two slim persons to pass side by side. The rough wooden walls were neither painted nor stained, and the knot-holes were stuffed with rags. Here and there a rude door was open, hanging crookedly on its hinges, while the occupant talked with a friend outside, or prepared for an expedition, laden with kitchen utensils, coal and food, to the common cooking-place of the rabbit colony—a queer and dismal set of iron shelves, long and narrow, sticking out from a wall, and calling itself an oven.

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Each door of each tiny room, which housed an individual or a whole family, had the name of the owner upon it, in Chinese characters, black and sprawling, on a red label; and at one whose paper name-plate was peeling off, Angela's companion stopped. "Li Hung Sun; we makee visit," she announced, and opened the door without knocking.

Angela had seen furniture packing cases as big as that room, and extremely like it. On one of the wooden walls, above a bunk which took up nearly half the space, were a rough shelf and a few cheap, Chinese panel pictures and posters. Beside the bunk, and exactly the same height from the floor with its ragged strip of old matting was a box, in use as a table, covered with black oilcloth. On this were grouped some toy chairs and chests, made of tiny seashells pasted on cardboard; a vase with one flower in it; a miniature mirror, and some fetish charms and photographs, evidently for sale. But on the bunk itself lay a thing which made Angela forget all the surroundings. A thin, stabbing pain shot through her heart, as if it had been pricked with a needle. She was face to face with tragedy in a form hardly human; and though her plump little guide was smiling, Angela wished that she had listened to Nick's advice. For here was something never to be forgotten, something which would haunt her through years of dark hours, dreaming or waking. She knew that the thought of this box of a room and what she now saw in it would come suddenly to darken bright moments, as the sun is all at once overcast by a black thundercloud; and that in the midst of some pleasure she would find herself wondering if the idol-like figure still lived and suffered.

A little bag of bones and yellow skin that once had been a man lay on the wooden bunk, whose hard surface was softened only by a piece of matting. From the shrivelled face a pair of eyes looked up; deep-set, utterly tragic, utterly resigned. The face might have been on earth for sixty or seventy years perhaps. But the eyes were as old as the world, neither bright nor dull, yet wise with a terrible wisdom far removed from joy or sorrow. The shrivelled shell of a body was a mere prison for a soul to which torture and existence had become inseparable, and almost equally unimportant.

"Oh, we ought not to come in!" Angela exclaimed involuntarily, on the threshold of this secret.

The weary face faintly smiled, with a smile like a dim gleam of light flickering over the features of a mummy.

"Come in. Many people come see me," said a voice as old as the eyes, and sad with the fatal sadness that has forgotten hope. It was a very small, weak voice, almost like a voice heard at the other end of a long-distance telephone, and it spoke excellent English.

Silently Angela obeyed; and seeing a broken, cane-seated chair which she had not noticed before, dropped into it as the low voice asked her to sit down. She was not afraid now, but sadness gripped her.

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“You wish see me smoke opium, lady?” the old man asked, his tone monotonous, devoid of interest, his face a mask. The light of a tallow candle flared into his eyes, and wavered over his egg-shaped head, which was entirely bald save for its queue.

“Oh, no,” Angela answered, horrified, “I beg you won’t smoke for me!”

“Not for you,” he said. “I smoke all times. I must now. If not, I suffer too much. It is the smoking keeps me alive. I cannot eat, or only a little. My throats shuts up. But when I smoke, for a few minutes after I am happy. Then I wait a while, and bimeby I smoke again.”

“Surely—surely—you can’t smoke opium all day and all night?” Angela murmured, her lips dry. She seemed to know what he felt, and to feel it with him. It was a dreadful sensation, that physical knowledge, racking her nerves like a phase of nightmare.

“Nearly all day and all night, for I do not sleep much; perhaps two hours in twenty-four. Once, a long time ago, the opium made me sleep. I had nice dreams. Now it makes me wide awake. But I do not suffer, only for a few minutes. When it gets too bad, I begin again.”

“What is it like—the suffering?” Angela half whispered.

“Cramps, and aching in my bones. Maybe you never had a toothache—you are too young. But it is like that all over my body. I wish to die then. And I will before long. The death will not hurt much if I keep on smoking. My heart will stop, that is all. It will give me a chance to begin again.”

“In another world—yes,” said Angela. “But—couldn’t you stop smoking? Take medicine of some sort—have treatment from a doctor——”

“Too late, long time ago,” he answered, with a calm, fatal smile. But his eyes lit with a faint spark of anticipation, and his cheeks worked with a slight twitching of the nerves, for, as he talked, in short sentences, he was quietly rolling and cooking his dose of opium. Into a large pipe, which looked to Angela like a queer, enormous flute with a metal spout halfway down its length, he pushed a pill he had rolled, ramming it in with a long pin, and cooking it in the flame of a small spirit lamp. He did not speak again until he had pulled strenuously at the pipe a few times. Then he went on talking, his face unchanged, unless it appeared rather fuller, less seamed with the wrinkles of intense nerve strain.

“You see,” he said, “that is all I do. I was in a good deal of pain, but I am used to it. Now I’m contented for a few minutes. While I have this happiness, I feel willing to pay the price. But it is a big price. I warn the young men who come to see me not to begin opium smoking. It is so easy. You think you will try, to find out what it is like; and then

you will stop. But you do not stop. Four weeks—six weeks—and it is finished for you. You are on the road where I am. That was the way with me. It is the way with every one who starts on that road and goes not back before the turn. Better not start, for the dreams are too good at first."

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His resignation to the chains forged by himself seemed to Angela the saddest part of all. He was beyond help, and knew it, did not even think of it.

She had a strange burning behind her eyes, as she listened, though she was not inclined to cry.

“It is awful,” she whispered. “Such days—such nights—such years. But—you do not lie here always?”

“Most of the time,” he answered, the little spark of physical contentment beginning to dim in his eyes already. “I am very weak. I do not walk, except when I go down the passage to cook a little coffee once a day. Or sometimes I crawl out in the sun. But soon I come back. I can stand only a few minutes. I am too light in the head, when I get on my feet. When I was young I was tall and large. But a man shrinks small after the opium gets him.”

“How you must regret!” Angela sighed.

“I do not know. Why regret when it is too late? I regret that it is hard to find opium. It is forbidden now, and very dear. I sell the cleanings of my pipe—the yenshee, we call it—-so I keep going.”

“How can you bear to sell to others what has ruined your life?” Angela could not help asking.

“I would do anything now to have opium,” he said calmly. “But it is the old smokers who smoke the yenshee, not the young ones. So I do no harm.”

Angela sprang up, shuddering. “Is there nothing I can do to help you?” she pleaded, her eyes turned from him, as he began to cook another pill.

“You can buy something I sell. That will help. Do you like this?” And he pointed to a little painted china group of three monkeys, one of which covered its ears, another its eyes, and the third its mouth. “You know what it means? ‘See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.’ It is the motto of our people.”

“Yes—I’ll buy that. It’s a good motto,” Angela stammered. Taking up the little figures, she laid a five-dollar gold piece on the box table, knowing only too well what it would buy.

“You wish to see me smoke this other pipe?” and he put it to his toothless mouth.

“No—I can’t bear it.”

She pushed past the Chinese girl, hardly knowing what she did. She felt faint and sick, as if she must have fresh air. As her hand fumbled for the latch, the door was pushed violently open, and Hilliard came in, with Schermerhorn at his back.

“Thank Heaven!” Nick stammered. He was very pale.

“You gave us a pretty bad scare, Miss,” added the man, who had been informed that Nick was “not her husband.”

“Lucky I thought of this house, and this old chap.”

“But—there was no danger,” Angela defended herself. “Nothing could have happened.”

“Most anything can happen—in Chinatown,” mumbled Schermerhorn. “Did you ever read a story by Norris called *The Third Circle?*”

“Not yet,” said Angela. “I bought the book, but——”

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“Well, read that story when you get home to-night, Miss, and maybe you’ll know what your young gentleman here went through.”

Her “young gentleman!” But Angela did not smile. A thing would have had to be very funny to strike her as laughable just then.

“No, don’t read it to-night,” said Nick. “Wait till another time.”

“Will you forgive me?” she asked, looking at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t suppose you’d mind much.”

“I was in—Hades for a few minutes,” said Nick, hastily qualifying the remark he had been about to make.

XXI

“WHO IS MRS. MAY?”

Only one letter had Nick written to Carmen Gaylor—the one he had promised to write, telling her of his arrival in New York; that he was “pretty lonely, and didn’t know how long he could stand for seeing no home sights.” It never occurred to him to write again; and Carmen was not surprised at his remissness. She knew that Nick was not the sort of man who likes to write letters or can put his feelings upon paper. But when she received her invitation to visit Rushing River Camp, she could have sung for joy.

“We are hoping that an old friend of yours, Mr. Nickson Hilliard, may be with us when you come; as well as Miss Dene, the authoress,” Mrs. Harland said in her note. And Carmen believed that she had Hilliard to thank for the compliment paid her by Falconer and his sister.

She knew that he had met Falconer and admired him; and putting two and two together, she fancied that already Nick must have come West, meaning to surprise her by his sudden appearance; that he had fallen in with Mrs. Harland and Falconer on the journey, perhaps been invited by them, and suggested, or at least hinted, that she should be asked to join the house-party at the same time.

“Otherwise, I don’t believe they’d ever have thought of me,” she told herself, with a humility which would have had an element of sulkiness if she had not been half out of her wits with happiness over the idea that Nick was near, and wanting her. If he had not wanted her, he would not have schemed to have her with him at Rushing River Camp.

All the anxieties and suspicions of the past weeks were forgotten. She telegraphed her acceptance, and began thinking what to wear during the visit. She admitted in her mind that Mrs. Harland was a “bigger swell” than she, and knew more of the world and

Society. But she determined that the hostess should not outdo her guest in the way of "smart" dresses, hats, and jewellery.

Carmen broke her journey at San Francisco, staying there two days at the Palace Hotel. On the first of these days, as it happened, Nick and Angela motored to Mount Hamilton, and stayed late at the Lick Observatory. On the second day they went to Mount Tamalpais, lunching at the delightful "tavern" on the mountain-top, and rushing madly down the wondrous steeps at sunset, in the little "gravity car" guided by the landlord.

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So it was that Carmen got no chance glimpse of the two together, and had no suspicion that in the hotel register of the St. Francis was inscribed the name of Nickson Hilliard. She shopped contentedly, and enjoyed looking at the prettily dressed women, because she saw none whom she thought as good-looking as herself. Then, on the second evening, just as Angela and Nick were tearing down the rocky height known familiarly to San Francisco as “the mountain,” Carmen left for Shasta Springs.

It was early next morning after the long journey north, that the white pinnacle of Mount Shasta appeared floating in the sky above dark pines, and the rushing stream of the Sacramento, fed by eternal snows. But Carmen hardly glanced out of her stateroom window at the hovering white glory, though her maid mentioned that Shasta was in sight. Mrs. Harland and Falconer were both coming to meet her at the Springs station, and would motor her to Rushing River Camp by the fifty-mile road over the mountains. Carmen hoped that Nick might be with them, though nothing had been said about him in the telegram they had sent. In any case, her one care was to be beautiful after the night journey. She took no interest in mountains and rivers. Her whole soul was concentrated upon the freshness of her complexion and the angle of the mauve hat on her dark waved hair. Never a good sleeper, she had been too feverish at the prospect of seeing Nick to do more than doze off for a few minutes in her berth; consequently, there were annoying brown shadows under her eyes, and her cheeks looked a little sallow; but Mariette was an accomplished maid, who had been with Carmen ever since the old theatrical days, and when Mrs. Gaylor was ready to leave her stateroom at Shasta Springs station she looked as bright-eyed and rosy as if she had slept without dreaming. This effect was partly due to liquid rouge and bismuth, but largely to happy excitement—a woman’s greatest beautifier.

Her heart was beating fast under embroidered, dove-coloured chiffon and pale gray Shantung, a dress too elaborate for a railway journey; and she had no eyes for the fairylike greenness of the place, the mountain-side shadowed by tall trees, or rocks clothed in delicate ferns and spouting forth white cascades. The full, rich summer she had left at home in the South was early spring in the cool North. The earth was like a bride, displaying her trousseau of lace, fall after fall of it, on green velvet cushions, and the gold of her dowry, the splendour of her wedding gifts, in a riot of flowers. No money coined in mints could buy diamonds such as this bride had been given by her mother—-Nature; diamonds flashing in river and cascade upon cascade. But Carmen Gaylor had no eyes for them. She had merely a pleasant impression that Shasta Springs seemed to be a pretty place, and no wonder it was popular with millionaires, who built themselves houses up there on the height, in the forest! But it was only a passing thought, as he alighted from the train in the welcoming music of many waters, which she hardly heard. Her attention was centred on picking out Mrs. Harland and Falconer among the people who were waiting to meet friends, and on seeing whether Nick Hilliard was with them.

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There was a crowd on the platform. Pretty “summer girls” with bare heads, over which they held parasols of bright green, or rose-red, that threw charming lights and shadows on their tanned faces: brown young men in khaki knickerbockers, shaking hands with paler men just coming from town, and little children in white, laughing at sight of arriving “daddies”.

Soon Falconer, towering over most others, appeared with his sister by his side, and Carmen was pleased to see that Mrs. Harland’s clothes could not compare with hers. Having no idea of suiting her costume to the country, she thought herself infinitely preferable in her Paris gown to Mrs. Harland in a cotton frock, and shady straw hat. But no Nick was visible, and Carmen’s pleasure was dashed.

The brother and sister met her cordially, took her to look at the bubbling spring in its kiosk, and then up the height on the scenic railway. Presently they landed on the level of the parklike plateau, where a big hotel and its attendant cottages were visible, with many golden dolomitic peaks and great white Shasta itself peeping through the trees. Still nothing had been said about Nick; and Carmen dared not ask. She feared some disappointment, and shrank from the blow.

Mariette had brought coffee to her mistress’s stateroom very early, but Carmen was not averse to the suggestion of breakfast at the hotel before motoring over the mountains. As they ate, they talked of impersonal things: the colony under the trees; the making of the mountain road; and Falconer told how Mount Shasta—long ago named by Indians “Iska, the White”—was the abode of the Great Spirit; and how, in old, old times, before the Indians, the sole inhabitants of the country were grizzly bears. Carmen listened to the unfolding of the tale into a fantastic love-story, saying, “Oh!” or “How interesting!” at polite intervals. Always she asked herself, “Where’s Nick? Hasn’t he come yet? Is it possible he’s been prevented from coming at all?” She tried to brace herself against disappointment and not show that she cared, but she turned red and white when Mrs. Harland said at last, “We’re so sorry Mr. Hilliard couldn’t be with us. We both like him so much, and it would have been very nice to have him too, while you are at Rushing River Camp.”

“Oh, he couldn’t come!” Carmen echoed dully.

“No. Isn’t it too bad? We thought you’d know—that he might have written——”

“Perhaps he has, and I’ve missed the letter,” Carmen broke in, hating to let these strangers think her slighted by Hilliard. “I’ve been in San Francisco two days. But—-where is he? On his way home?”

“I don’t quite know,” replied Mrs. Harland, rather evasively, it seemed. And then she changed the subject.

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Carmen had never seen anything like that winding road over the mountains, with the white, phantom glimpses of Shasta at every forest turning. Falconer's big automobile, which he kept at the "Camp," ran up the steep gradients without appearing to know that they existed, and Carmen strove to be cheerful, to look as if she were enjoying the drive. But her heart was a lump of ice, though she talked and laughed a great deal, telling Mrs. Harland about the rich or important people she knew, instead of drinking in the sweet air, and giving her eyes to the wild loveliness. It was bad enough that Nick was not coming, but the air of reserve or uneasiness with which Mrs. Harland had said, "I don't quite know," touched the situation with mystery. She realized that, if there were anything to hide, she would not find it out from her host or hostess; but when on the veranda of the glorified log-house overhanging the river she saw Theo Dene, Carmen instantly said to herself with conviction, "If *she* knows, I'll get it out of her!"

And seeing Miss Dene at Rushing River Camp she was almost inclined to be glad that Nick was not there. She admired Theo's splendid red hair and dazzling skin. She saw that, though the young woman's clothes were simple, their simplicity was Parisian and expensive; and she saw also that Theo was a flirt—a "man-eater," as she put it to herself, her dark eyes meeting the green eyes in a first understanding glance.

Miss Dene was far from unwilling to be pumped. In fact, she meant to be pumped; and that afternoon, while Mrs. Harland was writing letters and Falconer was with his secretary, whom he could not escape even in the country, she invited Mrs. Gaylor to sit with her on the broad veranda, beneath which the river ran singing a never-ending song.

The two pretty women, the one dark the other fair, made a charming picture, and neither was oblivious of the fact; but it would not have occurred to Carmen that her self-appreciation might be put into words. However, she laughed when Theo said:

"What a shame there aren't any men to admire us! We're both looking too adorable, aren't we? I should love to snapshot you in that Indian hammock, though the picture would lose a lot without colour. And it's very unkind of you if you wouldn't like to have a picture of me in my green rocking-chair on the scarlet rug."

This gave Carmen a chance to touch upon the subject in her heart without, as she thought, arousing any suspicion.

"You look awfully pretty," she said; "and this balcony is lovely, hanging over the river. It's quite different from my home; though mine's nice, too. And we have got one man—Mr. Falconer."

"He's engaged," said Theo.

“Oh, is he? I didn’t know that. Well, and Mr. Hilliard will come, perhaps. Have you met him?”

“Yes,” replied Theo promptly; “at Santa Barbara. He was motoring with Mrs. May. I thought him one of the handsomest men I ever saw. But I’m afraid he isn’t coming. She isn’t either—of course.”

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Carmen's face crimsoned; then her colour died away and left her sickly white, all but the little pink spots of rouge she had put on in the morning.

"Motoring with Mrs. May!" she repeated, harshly, then controlled her voice by a violent effort. "Was Mrs. May expected here?"

"Was expected," Theo echoed with emphasis. She was enjoying herself thoroughly; literally enjoying "herself." This was almost as good as if Hilliard had not refused the invitation and Angela had not basely slipped out of the engagement after practically accepting. "She won't come. I suppose she thinks she's having more fun where she is. Though if Mr. Hilliard had come I haven't the ghost of a doubt that she would. Do you know Mr. Hilliard well?"

This in a tone as innocent as that of a little child talking of its dolls.

"Pretty well," answered Carmen, moistening her lips. "Who is Mrs. May? I heard of her once. She's a friend of the Morehouses."

"She's a new importation," replied Theo lightly. "So far as I can make out, she and Mr. Hilliard met in New York."

"Is she—pretty?"

"Yes, very. Fair hair and gray eyes that look dark. Mourning is becoming to her."

"Is she a widow?"

"She—gives that impression," Miss Dene smiled. This Carmen Gaylor was like a beautiful, fiery thundercloud. Teasing her was delightful. Theo felt as if she were in a play. It was a dreadful waste of good material not to have an audience. But she would "use the scene" afterward. She remembered hearing a great actress tell how she visited hospitals for consumptives, and even ran up to Davos one winter, when she was preparing to play *La Dame aux Camelias*. Theo would have done all that if she had been an actress. She was fond of realism in every form, and did not stick at gruesomeness.

"A grass widow?" exclaimed Carmen eagerly.

Theo shrugged her shoulders. "Really, I can't tell you."

Carmen supposed that she knew little of Mrs. May, and had met her for the first time at Santa Barbara with Nick. With Nick—motoring! The thought gave Carmen a strange sensation, as if her blood had turned to little cold, sharp crystals freezing in her veins.

“Not very young, I suppose?” she hazarded, her lips so dry that she had to touch them with her tongue. But that was dry, too.

“Oh, about twenty-three or four, and looks nineteen.”

There was no hope, then! Nick was with a woman, beautiful, young, presumably a widow, and evidently in love with him, as Miss Dene said that she would be here at Rushing River Camp if Nick had come. A deadly sickness caught Carmen by the throat. Her love for Nick was one with her life, and had been for years. Always she had believed that some day she would be happy with Nick, would have him for her own. Anything else would be impossible—too bad to be true. Even when he went East without asking her to marry him, though she was free, she had assured herself that he loved her. Had he not as much as said that the anniversary of her husband’s death was not a lucky night to choose for love-making? Carmen had made certain that she was the only woman in Nick’s life; and he had laughed when she hinted that “some lovely lady” might persuade him to stay in New York.

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“Where is Mrs. May now?” she asked sharply, past caring much whether or no Miss Dene saw her agony.

“In San Francisco—unless she’s gone to the Yosemite Valley with Mr. Hilliard.”

“With him! Why should she go everywhere with him?”

Theo laughed. “Because she likes his society, I suppose, and he likes hers. He is supposed to be her unpaid, amateur guide, I believe, and she trots her maid about with her, to play propriety. Also a cat. Don’t you think a black cat a charmingly original chaperon?”

Carmen did not answer. Anguish and rage in her heart were like vitriol dashed on a raw wound. No wonder Nick had not written! And she had been happy, and trusting, while he forgot his debt of gratitude, and ignoring her existence, travelled about the country with another woman. Only this morning Carmen had dreamed of meeting him here, and that he had asked for her invitation, as a favour to himself. She could have screamed, and torn her flesh, in agony. She suffered too much. Some one else would have to pay for this! Nick would have to pay, and that woman, that love pirate sailing from strange seas to steal the treasure of others.

Her one uncontrollable impulse was to go and find them both, to do something to part them, she did not know what yet, but inspiration would come. She felt unable to bear any delay. Somehow, she must find an excuse to get away from this place. She would have to go San Francisco, or perhaps even to the Yosemite Valley, and find Nick and the woman together.

It occurred to her that she might contrive to telegraph to Simeon Harp, telling him to wire her that something had gone wrong on the ranch, that she must return home at once. Mariette could find out how to send telegrams from here—there was sure to be a way—and get the message off in secret.

* * * * *

That night a telegram came for Mrs. Gaylor, announcing that there had been a fire on the ranch. She was needed at home. She showed the bit of paper to Mrs. Harland and Falconer, and there was much sympathy and regret that her visit must be broken short.

Next morning she left, having been but twenty-four hours at Rushing River Camp. And late that night, she arrived in San Francisco. But she was in no hurry to obey the summons from the Gaylor ranch.

XXII

THE BOX OF MYSTERY

Again Angela was expecting Hilliard. They were to dine, and then she and Nick and Kate and the cat were going by train to El Porto, the gate of the Yosemite Valley. Angela was waiting in her sitting-room, as on that first evening there, when she had changed one decision for another all in a moment; but now she was in travelling dress, and a week had passed since that other night. It had been, perhaps, the happiest week of her life; but the week to which she was looking forward would be happier still. Afterward, of course, there would be an end. For the end must come. She was clear-sighted enough to realize that.

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As she thought these things—and quickly put away the thoughts, since nothing must spoil this hour—there was a rap at the door, and she went to throw it open, confident that she would see Nick smiling at her, saying in his nice voice, “Well, are you ready?”

But it was not Nick. A bellboy of the hotel had brought up a large cardboard box which had arrived by post. The address was printed: “Mrs. May, Fairmont Hotel, San Francisco,” and there were several stamps upon it; but Angela could not make out the postmark. She found a pair of scissors and cut the string. The box was tightly packed with a quantity of beautiful foliage, lovely leaves shaped like oak leaves, and of bright autumn colours, purple, gold, and crimson, though spring had hardly turned to summer.

She plunged her hands into the box, lifting out the gorgeous mass, looking for a card or note, but finding none. It was a pity that this mysterious gift had arrived just as she was going away. However, she was keeping on her rooms, and would leave instructions with the chambermaid to take great care of the beauties.

Some one else was tapping at the door now, and this time it was Nick. Angela’s hands overflowed with their brilliant burden as she called aloud, “Come in!” and he came with the very words she had expected: “Well, are you ready?”

But they died on his lips, and it seemed to her, in the waning light, that his face grew pale.

“Drop that stuff, quick, Mrs. May!”

He flung the words at her, and Angela, bewildered and amazed, threw down the coloured leaves as if a tarantula hid among them.

“Have you got any ammonia?” Nick asked sharply.

“Yes.”

“Go wash your hands in it while I use your telephone. Don’t be frightened, but that’s poison-oak, and I want to prevent it from hurting you.”

“Can it—kill me?” Her face quivered.

“No. And it shan’t do you any harm if I can help it. But be quick as you can. Keep your hands in the basin till I get what I’m sending out for.”

Without another word Angela ran into the next room, and so to the bath. As she poured ammonia into the marble basin, feeling a little faint, she could hear Nick’s voice at the telephone: “Send to the nearest drug store for some gamgee tissue, a bundle of lint, and a pint bottle of lime-water. This is a hurry call.”

Angela's heart was thumping. It was horrible that there should be some one in the world—a lurking, mysterious some one—who planned in secret to do her dreadful harm. The incident seemed unreal. Whom did she know, on this side of the world, who could hate her so bitterly? She was afraid, as of eyes that she could not see, staring through the dark.

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Nick called from the sitting-room: "How do you feel? Are you all right?" And when she answered "Yes," tried to reassure her. It began to look as if there were much to fear. Luckily he had come in time. Was she sure she hadn't held the leaves near her face? No. Then she might hope that there would be no trouble now. Already he had bundled the bunch of fire into a newspaper and it had been taken out of the room to be destroyed, like a wicked witch. Luckily there were people who could touch poison-oak and suffer no harm. Nick told Angela he "felt in his bones" that no evil thing could have power over her.

Soon, almost before she could have believed it possible, the messenger arrived with a strange assortment of packets from the chemist. Nick shouted that all was ready, and she went back to the sitting-room, her hands dripping ammonia. Kate had been summoned, and having just appeared, was about to empty a large flower bowl, which Nick had ordered her to wash. The Irish girl was pale, and looked dazed. She knew nothing yet of what had happened, but guessed at some mysterious accident to her mistress.

A great bouquet of roses which Nick had sent that morning now lay on a side table, and into the flower bowl they had adorned he poured the lime-water. In this he soaked the gamgee tissue (Angela had never heard of the stuff before), and bade her hold out both hands. Then he bound them quickly and skilfully, intent on what he was doing, though his head was bent closer to Angela's than it had ever been before, and the fragrance of her hair was sweet, as in his dreams of angels. As for her, she felt a childlike confidence in his ability to cure her, to save her from harm.

Over the tissue, wet with lime-water, Nick wrapped bandages of lint; and the operation finished, Angela was as helpless as if she had pulled on a pair of tight, thick gloves whose fingers would not bend.

"Does this mean that we aren't to go to-night?" she asked mournfully.

"I hope it doesn't mean that. But we can't be dead certain yet," answered Nick. He looked at her searchingly, his face drawn and anxious; but it relaxed as if he were suddenly relieved from some great strain as his eyes travelled over the smooth, pure features, and met her questioning gaze at last with assurance.

"If we are not certain soon, it will be too late to start, and I can't bear to put off going. I'm looking forward to the trip so much!" she said. "Shall we dine here? You'll have to feed me, I'm afraid." She laughed; but a slow flush crept up to Nick's forehead.

"Would you let me?"

"Yes. Why not? If you don't mind. Anything rather than miss our train—unless some horrid symptoms are coming on that you haven't the courage to tell me about. Ring for

dinner, Kate. And you can go and have yours. We'll do everything exactly as if we expected to start."

"Sure, ma'am, don't make me leave the room till I've heard what Mr. Hilliard has to say. I'm that worried till I know the worst," Kate pleaded.

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Angela smiled. “I’m just beginning to learn,” she said, “that it’s a mistake to think of the *worst*. I used to make a point of doing it, and it generally happened. Now—I expect the best!” She spoke to Kate, and looked at Nick. “But tell me what poison-oak can do.”

Nick shivered. For an instant, a picture of that adored young face hideously disfigured turned him sick. And even her little white hands—no, it did not bear thinking of! But he controlled himself and tried to speak coolly.

“Why, it affects some people so their faces and hands swell up, and—and get red and spotted. Of course, that doesn’t last many days: but—it isn’t nice while it does last, and I—couldn’t bear the thought of its happening to you. I just couldn’t bear it! It isn’t going to happen, though,” he added hastily, seeing the colour leave her lips. “By this time you’d have begun to feel mighty bad, if you were in for trouble. You can’t be easy to affect, for if you were, the poison might have gone to your face, without your even touching the leaves. Your hands don’t burn, do they?”

“Only a little—from the ammonia.”

“That saved them. If you feel all right in an hour more, you can have the bandages off, and the danger’ll be over for good. Then we can start, unless the shock’s been too much for you?”

“I’m too bewildered to be shocked,” said Angela.

“Who could have played such a horrid practical joke on me? It’s a little bit like—in a ridiculous way—the play of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, where a woman is poisoned by a bouquet of flowers sent by a jealous rival. Only I haven’t a jealous rival!”

Nick’s face hardened. “I’m going to find out who did send the stuff. While you were in the other room I was looking at the wrapper of the box. I can’t make out the postmark; but I reckon there are those who can, and I won’t rest till I know.”

“What can you do to find out?” asked Angela.

“I can put the best detective in San Francisco on to the job. He shall follow up the clues like a bloodhound, and hang on to them when he’s got ’em, like a bulldog.”

“Oh, but don’t let’s put off our journey!” Angela exclaimed. “I feel, if we do that, we’ll never go. It has always——” she half-whispered, “seemed too good to come true.”

“I’d rather do ’most anything than put off the trip,” said Nick. “But there’s time for everything. We don’t leave the hotel till after nine. Dinner won’t be ready for a bit; and if you’ll let me, I’ll go out now and see a man I’ve heard of—a very smart detective.”

But Angela begged him to wait. She hated the thought of being left alone till she was sure that no ill effect need be feared from the poison. So Nick stayed, not unwillingly, and a simple dinner was ordered in haste.

Kate was sure that after what had happened she would have no appetite for dinner; but, like a true Irish girl, she was romantic to the core of her heart; and because she was deeply in love with her Tim, she had the “seeing eye” which showed her clearly what was in Nick Hilliard’s heart for Angela.

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Of course, he was not good enough for her lady; no man could be. But Kate had a sneaking kindness for Nick, the splendid giver of the golden bag, and would not, by offering her services as cutter-up-of-food for the queen, rob him of the privilege.

So Kate slipped out unobtrusively, and the privilege in question became Nick's. It was a joy, even a delirious joy, but it was also an ordeal; for as he fed her, Angela smiled at him. Each time that he proffered a spoonful of soup or a morsel of chicken she met his gaze with laughing eyes, roguish, under dark lashes, as the eyes of a child. The difficulty when this happened, as it did constantly, was to keep hands steady and mind calm, as if for the performance of a delicate surgical operation; because to drop a thing, or aim it wrongly, would have been black disgrace. And to ensure perfection of aim, attention must be concentrated upon the lady's lips as she opened them to receive supplies. It was to watch the unfolding of a rosebud into a rose while forbidden to touch the rose. And even monks of the severest brotherhoods may pluck the flowers that grow beside their cloisters.

Nick did not leave Angela until Kate had come back; then he and the Irish girl together unwound the bandages. There was a moment of suspense, but the hands were satin-smooth.

"It seems to be written that you shall save me always from horrors—ever since the night of the burglar," Angela said, when Kate had gone to the next room to dispose of the lint.

"I shall be like a child learning to walk alone when my journeyings with you come to an end."

There was his chance to say, "*Must* they come to an end?" But Kate was near; and besides, a snub from Angela might stop the "journeyings" then and there. So he answered with a mere compliment, as any man may, meaning nothing at all or a great deal. To save her from danger, it was worth while to have been born, he said. And he remembered, as he had remembered many times, how clear had been the call he had heard to go East; a call like a voice in his ears, crying, "Nick, I want you. Come." He was tempted to be superstitious, and to believe that unconsciously, in some mysterious way, Angela had summoned him to be her knight. To be even more, perhaps, in the end. Who could tell—yet?

It was a good sign, at all events, that she was reluctant to give up the trip; and Nick decided not to risk confiding in the police. Put the affair of the poison-oak into their hands, and they would lasso every one concerned, with yards of red tape! In that case, he and Mrs. May might be detained in San Francisco. No! A private detective would do the trick; and Nick had the name of one pigeon-holed in his brain: Max Wisler, a shrewd fellow, once employed with success by "old Grizzly Gaylor" when there had been a leakage of money and vanishing of cattle on the ranch. Nick went in search of Max

Wisler now, in a taxi, and found him at the old address; a queer little frame house, in a part of San Francisco which had been left untouched by the great fire.

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Wisler was at home, and remembered Hilliard. He was fair and fat, with a manner somewhat cold; unlit by enthusiasm; yet as he listened a gleam flashed out from his carefully controlled gray eyes, which hinted at hidden fires. He heard Nick to the end of the story, in silence, playing always with the leaves of a book which he had been reading—a volume of Fenimore Cooper's. Still he went on fingering the pages for a minute, when Hilliard paused expecting questions. Then he looked up suddenly, seeming literally to catch Nick's eye and hold it by force.

"What woman is jealous of this lady—Mrs. May?" he asked.

"I don't think she knows any woman in California, except Mrs. Falconer's sister—and a Miss Dene from England, an authoress who is travelling about with Mrs. Harland in Falconer's car."

"Ah! Mrs. Harland's out of the running. And that Miss Dene's gone East. I happened to see her start, yesterday. She had a collection of people giving her a send-off. Of course, she could have employed some one else to do the job, and keep out of the way herself. But—I guess we must look further. Now see here, Mr. Hilliard, a patient has got to be frank with his doctor if the doctor's to do any good. Are you engaged to marry Mrs. Gaylor, the widow of my old client?"

"Good Lord, no!" exclaimed Nick, scarlet to his forehead. "Such an idea never entered my head."

"Humph! Rumour's wrong, then. But that isn't to say it never entered her head. Does she know Mrs. May?"

"No," said Nick. "Surely you're not hinting——"

"I'm not hinting anything. I'm feeling my way in the dark."

"It isn't quite dark. You've got the paper that was round the box. I saw you looking at it, through a magnifying glass, just now."

"That postmark means the longest way round that we can take. Do you think any one with an ounce of brains would send poison from a place where she—or he, if you like—-was known? No. She—or he—would go a long way, and a roundabout way. Or send a trusted messenger. Tell me straight, Mr. Hilliard, has Mrs. Gaylor got in her employ a confidential maid, or man?"

Nick, distressed and embarrassed, angry with the detective, yet unwilling to offend and put him off his work, knew not what to answer. There was Simeon Harp, of course, who would do anything for Carmen. But Nick could not, would not, play into Wisler's hands by mentioning the name of Harp, or telling of the old man's doglike devotion to his mistress. It was a detestable and vulgar suggestion which connected Mrs. Gaylor with

this affair—detestable for every one concerned; for Carmen, for Nick; above all, for Angela.

“Mrs. Gaylor hasn’t a servant who isn’t loyal,” he returned at last, evading Wisler’s eye. “But you’d better get this notion out of your mind, to start with, or you’ll find yourself on the wrong track. Mrs. Gaylor and I are good friends, no more. She doesn’t know anything about Mrs. May; and if she did, there’s nothing to make her jealous, even if—if we were warmer friends than we are.”

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“Sure she never heard of the lady?”

Nick hesitated. “I don’t see how she can have heard. I haven’t written to her since I—-met Mrs. May.”

“Ah, you haven’t written to her since then. H’m! Does Mrs. Gaylor know Mr. Falconer and his sister, and their authoress friend Miss Dene?”

“Not Miss Dene. Come to think of it, I heard Miss Dene say she’d like to meet Mrs. Gaylor. She asked questions about her. But that’s nothing.”

“Perhaps they’ve been visiting back and forth since then.”

“If they have, it hasn’t come to my knowledge.”

“Women do a lot of things that don’t come to men’s knowledge. That’s one reason detectives exist. Well, you don’t seem much inclined to help me, Mr. Hilliard, though you say you’re anxious to get to the bottom of this little mystery as soon as possible.”

“I am anxious. And if I don’t help you, it’s because I can’t. I don’t want you to lose yourself in the woods, and have to find your way back, to begin all over again.”

“No. I don’t want that, either,” said Wisler, smiling his slow smile. “It’s a long time since I got lost in the woods, and I’ll do my best not to lose my reckoning this time. I must worry along without you, I see. But I’m not discouraged. When you’ve finished up this trip that you seem to think so important, I may have news for you, of one kind or another.”

Nick looked at his watch. It was time to go back to the Fairmount if he meant to take Angela away that night.

XXIII

THE HAPPY VALLEY

In thinking of the Yosemite, Angela had, half-unconsciously, pictured herself and Nick Hilliard alone in the valley together, separated from “mere tourists” by a kind of magic wall. But down it tumbled with her first moment at El Portal; and behold, on the other side of the wall were hundreds of eager young men and women who no doubt resented her existence as much as she resented theirs.

The huge veranda of the log-built hotel, on the hill above the railway, swarmed with brides and bridegrooms. It was extremely early in the morning, and everybody was sleepy, even those who had passed their night in the hotel, not in the train;

nevertheless, though good-natured, one and all wore an air of square-chinned, indomitable determination which puzzled Angela.

Something was evidently about to happen, something of immense importance, for which each man with all his feminine belongings intended to be ready if possible before any one else. Angela watched the silent preparations with impersonal interest while she waited for Hilliard to come from the office and tell her about the special carriage for which he had telegraphed.

By this time a hasty breakfast had been snatched, and in a crowded dining-room full of laughter and chattering she had resigned herself to the falling of the magic wall. Other people had a right to enjoy the Yosemite and she must not grudge them their place. “I suppose,” she said to Kate, who stood beside her on the veranda, “that all these nice girls and men are going off for different excursions. They seem a good deal excited. I wonder why?”

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Just then a stage drawn by four splendid horses drove up the veranda steps. Something was shouted. Angela could not catch the announcement, for she had all she could do not to be carried off her feet in the general rush. A dozen of the firm-faced men and resolute girls made a dash for the box seat. With no malice in their eyes, they fought and wrestled with each other; and it was a case of the best man wins. Those worsted in the struggle with the utmost good-nature contented themselves with the next best places; and so on to the back seat, into which the weakest fell, almost before the driver had brought his horses to a full stop. Away tore the stage with its laughing load, and another vehicle whirled up to the hotel steps, to be filled in a breathless instant.

As Angela stood watching, fascinated yet appalled, Nick came out to her, with the air of a general who has lost a battle.

“How glad I am,” she whispered, “that we haven’t got to fight for our lives like that. I simply couldn’t do it.”

“Mrs. May, we *have* got to!” he groaned. “I’ve failed, after all my boastings of what I could do for you in the Yosemite. A private carriage can’t be had, and they’ve made a rule that no one’s allowed to book a seat in advance. When the stage for the Sentinel Hotel comes along, I shall swing you on to the box seat, if I kill ten men.”

Angela rebelled. She pitied herself so intensely that she had no compassion left for Nick. “What—dash people away, and push ahead of them? I’d rather—yes, I’d rather turn back to San Francisco.”

“I don’t see myself letting you turn back,” said Nick. And said it so firmly that Angela, never opposed by him before, looked up in surprise. He was not smiling. Evidently he was in earnest, deadly earnest. She knew that what he told her she would have to do, and, oddly enough, she grew quite calm.

“When our stage comes along,” he said in a low voice, “I shall get in before any one else, and keep a place for you. Don’t hesitate a second, but be ready for a jump. I’ll have you up by my side before you know what’s happened. Kate must be close behind, and I’ll try to swing her up to the next seat.”

“Why shouldn’t *we* have the back places, since somebody must?” Angela questioned meekly.

“Because I want you to have the best there is, and I’m going to get it for you, that’s the only reason,” Nick explained, leaving no room for further argument. “It’s the least I owe you, after failing to keep my other promises.”

She said no more; and round her the fight for places went on, desperate, yet extraordinarily good-natured. People tried with all their might to grab what they coveted,

but if somebody else snatched it from under their noses, why, blame Kismet! The rule of the game was to make no moan.

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Always, as a new relay surged forward, Nick by some insidious manoeuvre edged Angela and Kate nearer to the front. At last he got them wedged behind the foremost row of travellers who were waiting to spring upon and overwhelm an approaching stage. Those who had won the way to the front and achieved safety, unless defeated by an unexpected rear attack, wore an appearance of deceitful calm. Two extremely big young men, who had the air of footballers in training, did what they could to form a hollow square round a couple of fragile but determined girls. The party, while in reality bent upon securing the two best seats at any cost to life or limb, pretended to be looking at an illustrated newspaper. This feint was intended to put others off their guard; and the four concealed their emotions by discussing the pictures on the uppermost page.

A name spoken by one of the girls was an electric shock for Angela. In an instant the veranda, the crowd on it, and the stage whose turn would come next, vanished from before her eyes like a dissolving view.

“Prince di Sereno! What a romantic name. And say, *isn’t* he handsome? I wonder if he’s as good-looking as that, really?”

“She’s handsome, too,” the other girl added. “I do hope they won’t be killed.”

“Come along, kids—look sharp!” said the two young men. And before others who hoped to annex the box seat could breathe after an interlude of footballing, the conquering four secured what they wanted. Those less fortunate were tumbling up as best they could; and Angela had scarcely time to realize that she had not dreamed the incident, when the stageload had bounced away.

She was left dazed, and blushing deeply, so deeply that Nick, quick to notice lights and shadows on her face, wondered what match had lit that rosy fire.

Angela’s first thought was that somehow she had been found out. Then she remembered that the girls had seen the name in a newspaper. Also they had been looking at Paolo’s picture. And he *could* be handsome—in a picture. But of whom had they said, “She’s handsome, too?” Could it be that her own photograph had been published with Paolo’s? If so, who had dared to reproduce it, and why? What if Nick should come across the picture and recognize the face as hers? She did not want him to know that she was the Princess di Sereno until, for her own reasons and in her own time, she should choose to tell him the story of her life. Once she had thought there was no reason why he need ever know; that they would part, and she would remain in his memory as Angela May. Now, however, she began to see that the moment must come when she would not only need, but wish, to tell him all, so that he might know why. But she never quite finished this explanation in her mind. It was too fond of trying to finish itself without waiting to be put into words.

She was a little frightened now, lest by chance there should be a premature revelation, for in the rush to get away the girls dropped the paper they had been reading. It lay on the veranda steps, and though the cover was turned back, and only an advertisement page could be seen, Angela discovered that it was the *Illustrated London News*.

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Perhaps the page which lay face down was the page of the photograph. She half longed, half dreaded that a flutter of wind or a passing foot might turn the paper over. What could the girl have meant by saying, “I hope they won’t be killed?”

Could Angela have read Theo Dene’s mind the day at Santa Barbara, this picture and paragraph would have been less mysterious to her. “I wonder if Mrs. May *knows about the Prince*?” Theo had asked herself.

“There’s an English paper on the step,” said Nick, following the direction of her eyes. “Does it make you homesick? If it does, I’ll put in a claim to it. There may be time for you to glance it over before the right stage turns up.”

“No, no,” said Angela, hastily. “I don’t want the paper. And oh, look, it says ‘Sentinel’ on this stage that’s coming.”

The next thing she knew, she was swaying between earth and heaven, over heads that surged beneath her. Somehow, Nick had got that place on the box seat, and he was beside her, resolutely helping Kate on to the high step. Suddenly, however, Timmy’s covered basket flew open. Kate had been playing with the cat, and had forgotten to fasten Tim in. Resenting the confusion, Timmy made a leap, Kate screamed and jumped down from the stage, carrying not only the cat’s basket, but a small dressing-bag of Angela’s—all she had brought, except a suit-case containing a dress or two for the journey. Some one else had, of course, scrambled into the coveted seat so miraculously vacated, and the stage, with its full complement of passengers, went swinging down the road, with Kate and Timmy and the dressing-bag left behind.

“Shall we try to stop?” Nick began; but Angela cut him short, her face now as determined as those of the square-chinned girls who had passed triumphantly on their way. “No!” she said. “I can’t go through that again! Kate will have to come on later.”

“There’ll be another ‘Sentinel’ stage in about an hour, I guess,” announced the good-natured driver. “She’ll be all right.”

“She knows where we’re going,” said Angela. “She’s a quick-witted girl, and I shan’t worry. I mean to be happy in spite of everything—and *because* of everything!”

So the stage rolled on into the gate of the Yosemite and Kate remained on the veranda of the hotel at El Portal, consoling herself, when she had retrieved Timmy, by looking at the pictures in the *Illustrated London News*, an old number of a fortnight or three weeks ago. She found it so interesting and absorbing, one page in particular, that when the next coach bound for the Sentinel Hotel came along, she forgot to fight for a place until it was too late to fight. There was not another stage bound for that destination until to-morrow. And to-morrow Mrs. May and Hilliard were going on somewhere else. Kate could not remember where.

Seeing her dismay, the manager of the hotel took pity on the pretty Irish girl. “Never mind,” said he. “You can ’phone from here to the Sentinel. When your lady arrives there this afternoon, she’ll find your message and know what’s happened. Then she can ’phone back what she wants you to do.”

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“But I won’t get to her to-night, will I?” wailed Kate.

“No, you won’t get to her to-night,” he echoed. “But I guess she ain’t so helpless she can’t do up her back hair without you, is she?”

“Her blouse buttons up behind,” Kate murmured, as one murmurs in a painful dream. “And, oh, by the powers, if I haven’t got her nightgown in this dressing-bag!”

Naturally the manager was not deeply interested in Mrs. May’s nightgown. As for Mrs. May herself, she was not yet conscious of the loss of it. She was thinking, at first, about the pictures which she had not seen in the *Illustrated London News*, and the girl’s exclamation: “I hope they won’t be killed!” Then, later, of the valley through whose door she had just entered with Nick Hilliard, the hidden valley which Indians knew and loved long before a few cattle-seeking American soldiers ferreted out the secret.

The voice of the Merced drowned the dull voice of the past which had suddenly called to her. It was a gay laughing voice that sang among the tumbled rocks sent down to the river for playthings, by her tall brothers the mountains; and the voices of pines and cedars answered, all singing the same high song in the same language—the language of Nature. Only, they sang in different tones and different keys—soprano and contralto, tenor and bass. The song was so sweet that no one could think of anything else, unless it might be of love; for the song told of love, because nature is love.

As the sun rose higher and warmed the air, the valley was like a great box full of spices, such as the three Wise Men of the East carried for an offering when they followed their Star; a secret, golden box was the valley, high-sided, with a lid of turquoise and sapphire, which was the sky itself.

The deep, still trout-pools of the Merced—bravest and strongest river of the valley—-were coloured like beds of purple pansies; or they were vivid green, glinting with sparks of gold, like the wings of a Brazilian beetle. Far down in the clear depths, Angela caught glimpses of darting fish, swift as silver arrows shot from an unseen bow. And close to the sky, high on the rocky sides of the Yosemite treasure-chest, were curiously traced bas-reliefs, which might have been carved by a dead race of giants: heads of elephants, profiles of Indians and Titanic tortoises, most of them appropriately and whimsically named by ancient pioneers.

“The Yosemite!” Angela said, over and over to herself. “I’m in the Yosemite Valley!”

Once, in the heart of a forest, a deer sprang out on to the road and stood alert, quivering, as the stage lumbered heavily toward it through sparkling red dust like powdered rubies. Then, suddenly, when the horses were almost upon it, the delicate creature bounded away, vanishing among the shadows which seemed to have given it birth, as a diving fish is swallowed up by water and lost to sight. This vision lingered in

Angela's memory as one of the loveliest of the day; but the great cataracts did their startling best, later, to paint out the earlier pictures.

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Even the first slender forerunners of the mighty torrents were unforgettable, and individual. Long, ethereal, floating white feathers drooped from the heads of tremendous boulders that were gray with the glossy grayness of old silver. Cascades were everywhere; and the weaving of many diamond-skeins of water behind a dark foreground of motionless trees was like the ceaseless play of human thought behind inscrutable faces whose expression never changed.

Yet these silver tapestries, pearl-embroidered, were but the binding for the Book of the Valley, the great poem of the waterfalls; and as the stage brought them near the home of the mighty cataracts, Nick and Angela noticed that the atmosphere became mysteriously different. The sky rolled down a blue curtain, to trail on the floor of the valley, like a veil suspended before an altar-piece. Through this curtain of exquisite texture—bright as spun glass, transparent as star-sapphires, and faintly shimmering—-their gaze travelled toward soaring peaks and boulders, which seemed to rise behind the sky instead of against it. Then, suddenly, out gleamed the dome of the Bridal Veil, bright and high in the heavens as a comet sweeping a glittering tail earthward.

Later, as the stage wound along the road and brought them under the wall of the cataract, the rainbow diadem that pinned the topmost folds of the veil glittered against the noonday sun; and in the lacy woof of moving water, lovely kaleidoscopic patterns played with constant interchange of flowery designs. Invisible fingers wove the bridal lace, beading with diamonds the foliage of its design; or so Angela thought when first she saw the falls. But presently she made a discovery—one which Nick had made years ago, and kept the secret that Angela might have the joy of finding it for herself.

“Why, it isn’t a veil, after all!” she exclaimed.

“I know,” said Nick. “That effect’s only for the first few minutes, like a stage curtain hiding the real thing.”

“And the real thing is only for the elect, like us,” said Angela, conceitedly. “Outsiders can’t get behind the curtain. Let me tell you what I see.”

“And if we see the same thing?”

“Why, it would be a sign that we’d been—friends in a former incarnation, wouldn’t it?” But this was a question to leave unanswered, and she went on quickly to describe what she saw behind the “stage curtain” of the Bridal Veil. “A white witch falling——”

“Yes, from the saddle of a black horse——”

“A winged horse, like those the Valkyries ride. Oh, now the witch has turned her face to me, as she falls. She’s putting me under a spell. I feel I shall never escape.”

"I hope you never will," said Nick. "So we *did* see the same thing in the Cascade! I found the falling witch when I was here before; but I came under the spell with you."

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He watched her face fearfully, as he ventured this, never having dared as much before; and seeing that she turned away, he drew her attention to El Capitan, grandest of the near mountains. Nick had been reading *The Cid*, trying to "worry through it in the old Spanish," he explained; and the idea had come into his head that the mountain might have been named by some Spaniard for "El Gran Capitan." "You see, it's too big and important for an everyday Captain. But it's just right for El Gran Capitan: don't you think so?"

Angela did think so, as he suggested it, though she remembered next to nothing about *The Cid*. But Nick's knowledge of history, which had amazed her once, pleased without surprising her now. She began to take his knowledge of most things for granted. Here in the Yosemite Valley he could teach and show her much that she might have missed but for him, and his similes showed habits of thought with which a few weeks ago she would not have credited the ex-cowboy. He made the mountains take shape for her as gods and heroes of Indian legends; he told her of the Three Graces, and the Three Brothers, grim as gray monks, who threw glances over their round shoulders at the Graces; and there was no drama or tragedy of the valley that he did not know from its first act to the last.

In the afternoon the stage rushed them past a charming camp in the woods, to the Sentinel Hotel, at the foot of the Yosemite Falls. Angela was given a room opening on to a veranda, and waiting for Nick to bring her some word from Kate, by telephone, she stood looking up at the immeasurable height of the cataract, which loomed white across a brown sweep of trout-haunted river. "It's like a perpendicular road of marble going up to heaven," she thought; and as she gazed, down that precipice of snow came tumbling a white shape as of a giant bear, striving desperately to save itself, hanging for an instant on the brink of the vast gulf, then letting go hopelessly and plunging over.

Angela stepped out on the veranda to talk with Hilliard when he came, and though shocked to hear that Kate could not arrive that night, was glad to know her safe. Nick had arranged that Kate should meet her mistress at Glacier Point next day. "And so," he said, "there's nothing to bother about, if you can do without her for this one night. I hope you don't mind much, for I feel it was my fault. I ought to have managed better."

"I don't mind in the least," Angela was beginning to console him, when suddenly she broke off with an "Oh!" of dismay, clasping her hands together.

"What's the matter?" Nick questioned anxiously.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"But there is something, Mrs. May. You must tell me, and I'll try to make it right."

"What shops are there here?" she asked by way of answer.

“Oh, you can buy photographs and souvenirs, and candy and drugs, I expect.”

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Angela shook her head. “I don’t want to buy them. Do you think—I could find—a—a—-nighty?”

“A ’nighty’?”

“A nightgown. You see, I’ve just remembered—the cascades and mountains made me forget—my dressing-bag was left behind with Kate. I’ve a frock or two, and the new khaki things for to-morrow, in my suit-case, but—nothing else. Brushes and combs and so on, I can get here I’m sure. But—would the shops—if any—run to nighties?”

“No,” said Nick, gloomily. “I’m afraid they wouldn’t, anyhow not the sort that deserves a nice pet name like that. But—*I’ll* get you one.”

“You can’t,” said Angela. “You can’t create a ‘nighty’ or call it from the vasty deep.”

“That’s what I mean to do: call one from the vasty deep; hook it up like a rare fish.”

She laughed. “What bait will you use?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’m going to find out. And you shall have the ‘nighty,’ as you call it, by the time you want it.”

“You’d better not pledge yourself.”

“I do. I’ve failed you often enough since we started! I won’t fail this time, you’ll see. The thing you want must exist somewhere within a radius of ten miles, and I’m going to lasso it.”

“But you didn’t engage as a lassoer of nighties. You engaged as trail guide.”

“If anything is wanted along the trail, why then it’s the business of the trail guide to get it. Don’t you worry about your arrangements, Mrs. May.”

“I don’t. Meanwhile, I may find some kind of a garment lurking on a forgotten shelf of the candy-drugs-grocery shop.”

“If you do, it wouldn’t be worthy of you. But you can try,” said Nick dubiously. And after a late luncheon, she did try, in vain. Other necessaries were forthcoming, but nighties were things that you had to bring into the Yosemite Valley, it would seem, or do without. Angela said nothing of her failure. She supposed that Nick would forget her plight if she made little of it; but she did not know him thoroughly yet. They took a walk, and the momentous subject was not mentioned: nevertheless, it pressed upon Nick’s thoughts. As he talked, the “nighty” that was not, and must be, weighed upon his mind as heavily as though it were a coat of mail instead of the gossamer creation he imagined.

“Now I’ve got to concentrate and figure out what’s trumps,” he said to himself, when Angela had gone to rest before dinner. “I’ve dealt myself a mighty queer card, but there’s no good bluffing in this game.”

The desired garment declared itself even to the untrained masculine intelligence as a dainty and dreamlike thing, which, to deserve its name and be worthy of a fastidious wearer, must be delicate as the outer petals of a white rose.

How then to obtain for this despoiled goddess such a marvel in a remote village, lost among Yosemite forests? There was the rub; a vaguely groping “rub” with no Aladdin’s lamp to match.

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Nick's thoughts ramped in the cage of his mind like a menagerie of hungry animals awaiting food. Where was that food—in other words, an inspiration—to be got? Then of a sudden it dropped at his feet.

He had been pacing uneasily up and down his room; but now, with all his customary decision, he touched the electric bell. A trim chambermaid of superior and intelligent appearance answered the call.

"Are you a Californian?" was the first question flung at the neat head, in place of an expected demand for hot water. She had brought the water, and was equally prepared for a want unforeseen. "Yes, sir," she said. "I'm a Native Daughter."

"Hurrah!" said Nick. "Then I know you won't fail me."

She was too well trained a girl to stare. "Are you a Native Son?" she ventured, seeing that a lead would be useful.

"No; but I ought to have been. My parents were Californian, and my heart is and always will be. I have to ask help from a Californian now, for the honour of California."

Usually, when gentlemen clamoured for help from this young person it was to find a collar stud. But not even the most cherished collar stud could concern the honour of the State. She waited, looking sympathetic; for Nick's eyes would have drawn sympathy from a stone, and Jessy Jones had not even a pebble in her composition.

"As a Californian, I'm showing California to a lady," he explained. "She's from Europe, and I don't want her to think the old civilization can produce anything better than ours."

"I should think not!" retorted the Native Daughter. "What is she looking for that *we* can't produce, I'd like to know?"

"A nightgown," confessed Nick, boldly. "You see," he hurried on, "she's lost the bag she had it in."

"Oh, if that's all, I——"

"Have you seen the lady, over in the annex, in number twenty-three?"

"Yes," said Jessy. "One of the girls told me there was a regular beauty there, English or something, so I made an errand that way. So *she's* the lady? Well, that makes it harder! 'Tisn't everything would do for *her*. I guess she's rather special."

"I guess so, too. That was what worried me. Because it's for the honour of California that a foreigner should be supplied, even at a moment's notice, with something as good as she could get at home."

“If not better,” Jessy corrected him.

“If not better. Of course, if an American lady lost her baggage she’d make allowances, being at home. And if she couldn’t get what she wanted, she’d be good-natured and want what she could get. Well, this lady’s good-natured, too; but it’s no compliment to the Yosemite for her to expect little and have what she expects.”

“No. We must surprise her.”

“Exactly. For the honour of California. Let’s mingle our brains,” said Nick.

“I guess they’ll be more useful kept separate, sir; each along its own line.”

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“Does yours keep a line of the right thing?”

“It begins to see its way there. We’ve a lady staying in the hotel, Mrs. Everett, from San Francisco, who’s got what we want. Mrs. Everett’s a Native Daughter, too. Oh, yes, she’ll spare one—her prettiest. Don’t you worry, and don’t you say a word to your friend. I and Mrs. Everett will do the rest. When that lady from Europe opens her door to-night she’ll see lying on her bed something that’ll keep her from knowing the difference between the Yosemite Valley and Paris. Trust two Native Daughters.”

“I will,” said Nick devoutly. And he shook hands with Jessy Jones. He knew better than to offer money at this stage of the game; for he, too, was a Californian, and honour was concerned.

That night, her spirit illumined by the unearthly glory of a lunar rainbow, Angela went to her room with a faint sense of anticlimax, in the discomfort she expected. Then, making a light, she saw foaming over the coverlet a froth of lace and film of cambric. Almost it might have been woven from the moon-rainbow. But pinned on to a sleeve-knot of pale pink ribbon was a slip of paper; and on the slip of paper were a few words in a woman’s handwriting: “Compliments of California to Mrs. May.”

XXIV

THE BEST THING IN HER LIFE

A faint fragrance of roses haunted the mysterious “nighty,” filled the room, and mingled with Angela’s dreams. All night long she walked in a garden of sleeping flowers, “sweet shut mouths of rosebuds, and closed white lids of lilies”; and it seemed but a short night, for in her dreams she had half the garden still to explore—in searching for Nick, it seemed—when a rap, sharp as the breaking of a tree branch, made her start up in bed. A dim impression was in her mind that a voice had accompanied the rap, and had made an unsympathetic announcement which meant the need to get up. But the only really important thing was to run back into the garden and find Nick Hilliard, as otherwise she might miss him forever. So Angela shut her eyes, and hurried down dim labyrinths, where she had been wandering before, and called to Nick: “I’m here again. Where are you?”

The rosebuds and lilies were still there, fast asleep, yet somehow the garden was different and not so beautiful. A handsome woman, with black hair, was gathering the flowers, pretending not to see Angela, and Nick had gone. A girl’s voice somewhere was saying, “Prince di Sereno! What a romantic name.”

It only seemed a minute since the first knock, but now there came another; and this time the announcement was even more disturbing: “Breakfast’s ready!” Immediately after, as

if to show that no arguing would avail, steps went clanking along the veranda, heavy at first, fainter with distance, and at last a convulsive banging on the door of some other unfortunate.

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Now Angela wished no longer to return to the garden of sleep. She was glad to get up, bathe in haste and dress breathlessly, for she had asked to be called at five in order to breakfast before six. In a strenuous quarter of an hour she had arrived at the blouse-fastening stage of her toilet; and, as luck would have it, the blouse concerned was one which did not approve of hurry, and tolerated no liberties. It was of fine cambric, hand-embroidered, fastening at the back, where on one side lived a quantity of tiny pearl buttons, made to mate with an equal number of loops on the other side, very little loops of linen thread. As works of art these were admirable, but they liked to be waited upon respectfully by an experienced lady's maid. Missing such attentions, not one would consent to yoke itself with its appointed button.

Angela grew warm and flurried. She rang, but no one answered the bell, for it was not yet six o'clock; and only a few of the hotel servants had come on duty.

What should she do? Last night she had looked forward with interest to dressing this morning, for Nick had got for her a costume suitable for riding a trail pony, and fortunately she had it in her suit-case. It was of khaki, with a divided skirt, and a peculiarly fetching jacket. But the jacket must be worn over a thin blouse; and she could not go out to breakfast with that blouse unbuttoned from neck to waist. No doubt by this time Nick was waiting. A large party would start from the hotel to drive to Mirror Lake, and they two were to be in the crowd—though not of it—finding their trail ponies later. She might, of course, keep her "forest creature" waiting indefinitely. He was inured to that treatment and would not complain; but the others?

"Are you ready, Mrs. May?" Nick's voice inquired apologetically, outside the door. "I hope you won't mind my bothering you, but I thought perhaps your call had been forgotten, so——"

"*Can* you do my blouse for me? Because I can't! And if you can't I shall cry," moaned Angela in a voice of despair. She dashed the door open, and stood on the threshold, in the sweet dawn, the river laughing at her plight.

Nick did not laugh.

There was his Angel, in her short khaki skirt, and the thin cambric blouse that would not button. Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling with that dress-rage than which no emotion known to woman is more fiercely primitive. She was in an early morning "I don't care *what* happens now!" mood; but Nick cared.

In the first place, as his eyes took in the situation, he was overwhelmed with a sense of vast responsibility. If he could not "do" the blouse, Mrs. May had threatened to cry, and she looked as if she would keep her word. So "do" the blouse he must, if the sky fell. And if he couldn't, it had better fall!

Angela stood with her back to her victim, and the rosy light of sunrise turned a small visible slip of white skin to pearl. A ring or two of bright hair, moist from her bath, curled out from the turned-up mass of gold, and hovered like little glittering bees just over the top buttons of Mrs. May's collar, which Nick must now attack. What if some of that shiny hair was twisted around the buttons? Good heavens! On closer inspection it was!

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The man's heart, which was beating fast, seemed suddenly to turn to water—wild, rushing water, like that of the river below the fall.

"Can you do it?" asked Angela, anxiously.

"I sure will," answered Nick, with a hundred per cent, more confidence than he felt. A confidence somewhat increased, however, by last evening's success. "Do I begin at the neck or the waist?" he inquired in his most matter-of-fact voice, as if he were about to cord a box, or nail up a crate of oranges.

"At the neck," Angela instructed him.

The stricken young man had a curious sensation, as if his hands were swelling to an immense size. He seemed to have as much control of his fingers as though he wore a pair of boxing gloves.

He took hold gingerly of the delicately embroidered collar, a thumb and finger on either side. "I guess it won't meet," he ventured, tentatively.

"Oh, yes, it will. Just pull it together firmly."

Nick pulled with resolution.

"Ugh! You're choking me!" she gurgled.

All that water which once had been his heart trickled vaguely and icily through the wrong veins, upsetting his whole system.

"Forgive me this time!" he implored. "It's going to be right, just as soon as—as—I find the buttonholes."

"There aren't any. They're loops."

"Oh, those tiny little stick-up things, like loosened threads?"

"Yes. You'll see it's *quite* easy, after the first."

Oh, was it indeed? Nick suppressed a groan, not at his task, but at his own oxlike awkwardness (so he anathematized it) that made a torture of a delicious privilege. Evidently it was a much harder thing to lasso one of these little pearl atrocities with its alleged "loop" than to rope a vicious steer. And there were those tangling threads of gold. If he should hurt her!

The ex-cowboy almost prayed, as, with the caution of a man treading upon knife-blades on the edge of a precipice, he unwound the two little curls from the top button of the

collar. And perhaps his unconscious appeal for mercy had its effect, for the tendrils yielded graciously to coaxing. He would have given a year of his life to kiss one of those curls; a comparatively worthless year it would be, since, in all probability, it would be empty of Angela May! Yet no—now that he had touched her like this, now that he had come so near to her, he felt with all his soul that he could never let her go. He would have to keep her somehow.

“She may think there’s a dead line between us,” he told himself; “but before we leave the Yosemite Valley together I’m going to do my best to cross that line, if I get shot for my cheek. It’s better to dare the dash and die, than not to dare, and lose her.”

Never, perhaps, was so desperate a resolve cemented while fastening a woman’s blouse; but there was a hint of triumph in Nick’s voice as he announced, “I’ve done it!” His signal success in two operations of extreme difficulty seemed to him like two separate good omens.

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Angela lightly thanked her knight for his services and bade him wait on the veranda while she put on her jacket and hat. A minute later she came out again, ready for breakfast; and now, having a mind released from buttons, she saw that Nick was good to look upon in his khaki riding-clothes.

“Am I all right?” she inquired modestly.

“Better than all right,” he allowed himself to answer.

“I do think this hat of Hawaiian straw is a success. And you—well, I’m rather proud of my trail guide. Used you to dress like that in your cowboy days?”

Nick laughed. “Great Scot, no! I’d have been in rags in no time. Didn’t you ever see a cowpuncher’s ’shaps’?”

“No; I don’t even know what they are. Have you kept your cowboy things?”

“Oh, yes. They’re knocking around somewhere. I have to put them on once in a while.”

“If I accept your invitation to come and see your place, will you ’dress up’ in them?”

“Of course, if it’d please you. But I’d feel a fool rigging myself out just to show off, like an actor.”

“Yet, that’s the bribe you’ll have to offer if you want me to pay you a visit.”

“It’s settled then. I hope the moths haven’t got my ‘shaps’ since I had ’em on last.”

They both laughed and went to breakfast. What a good world it was! Angela told Nick the tale of the mysterious apparition of a beauteous “nighty,” and wondered how she could ever have felt unhappy, or depressingly grown up.

The others who were going to Mirror Lake were almost ready to start, and the “buckboard” which was to take Nick and Angela had come to the hotel door. But these two, at all times small eaters, were exhilarated by the wine of life, and a little milk and bread sufficed them. They did not keep the party waiting, and so they were regarded with favour—the handsome young man and the lovely girl about whose relations to each other people were quite good-naturedly speculating. Angela saw that she was regarded with interest, and that eyes turned from her to Nick. But she was “only Mrs. May, whom nobody knows.” After the drive on the buckboard she and Nick would be separating from the rest. That night, at Glacier Point, she would find Kate, already arrived from El Portal; and then she would never see any of these pleasant questioning-eyed young people again. The most reckless part of the adventure would be over with this day—and she was rather sorry. After all, she did not much regret the wave of fate

which had swept her and her maid-chaperon temporarily apart. There was a certain piquancy in travelling alone with this knight-errant.

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Mirror Lake—well-named—was asleep still, and dreaming of the mountains which imprisoned it as dragons used to imprison princesses in glass retorts. There was the dream, lying deep down and visible under the clear surface; and when every one else had gone off to the trail ponies, Nick and Angela stayed to watch the water's waking. It was a darting fish which, with a splash and a ripple, shattered the picture; but the ripple died, and the lake slept again, taking up its dream where it had been broken off, as Angela had tried to do. She had failed, for her picture had changed for the worse when she found it again; but the second dream of Mirror Lake was fairer than the first. Into it there stole a joyous luminance which made saints' haloes for the reflected heads of mountains. The sun rose, and stepped slowly into the water's dream. It flung the lake a golden loving cup, thrilling it to the heart with that bright gift.

A little farther on, by the Happy Isles—small, lovely islands of rock in the river's whirl—-Nick and Angela found their trail ponies waiting in charge of a boy. But Nick knew the trail well, and was to be the sole guide, as they had always planned. He put Angela up on an intelligent brown bronco, which had to be ridden Mexican fashion; and they set off together, the boy looking after them as if he, too, would have liked to follow the trail.

Far ahead they could see the procession of their lost companions, just rounding a sharp corner. They were an admirable cavalcade in khaki, the men wearing sombreros, the girls with brilliant blue or green veils tied over big hats, and scarlet silk handkerchiefs knotted at their necks. The gaily coloured figures on horse or mule back fitted the picture as appropriately as if they had been Indians; and Angela gazed at them with pleasure; but she felt no wish to join the band.

Nick led; she rode close behind, sometimes mounting, sometimes descending the narrow trail toward Glacier Point. By and by Hall Dome, one of the great granite mountains, began to dominate the world; but though the cascades were in his kingdom they could not be governed by him, because spirits are not ruled by earthly kings. There was Vernal Fall, gentle in majesty; and Nevada, a wild and untamed water spirit; and retrospect glimpses of the Yosemite Falls.

Close to Nevada, they reached a famous viewpoint, and Nick took Angela off her pony that she might stand near the edge and see the white torrent plunge over an unthinkable abyss. Always she had hated to look down from heights, because they made her long to jump and end everything. But to-day she was in love with life, and the leap of the waters quickened her heart with a sense of power. On the pony again, as they went up and up, or down steep rocky ways on the verge of sheer abysses, she had no fear. She seemed to be learning a lesson of peace, a lesson such as only unspoiled nature can teach.

[Illustration: "*The world was a sea, billowing with mountains*"]

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From the high levels they had reached, they looked down on clouds that glittered silver-white as snow-capped mountain-heads. Among the rocks, where the ponies' hoofs picked their way, wild flowers sprang, strange and lovely blossoms such as Angela had never seen; but Nick knew most of them by name. Bird notes dropped like honey from fragrant shrubs and trees that hid the singers. Squirrels with plumed tails, and chipmunks striped white, gray, and brown, raced across the trail, or peered with the bright beads they had for eyes from piles of dead wood that lay gray as skeletons among the living green of the mountain forest. Far below, Silver Apron Fall splashed into the Emerald Pool and turned its green jewels to diamonds. The near forests and faraway waters sang in the different voices the same song other waters and forests had sung yesterday; but this song of the High Sierra had wilder notes, above and beyond all knowledge of fleeting episodes such as human lives and civilizations. For the song had not changed since the world was young. The air was not mere air, but seemingly a conscious mingling of Divine Ether with the atmosphere. Though they ascended always, it was as if they rode through the depths of a crystal sea, unstirred by their presence, a sea as deep and as high as heaven, a blue that took the solidity of turquoise between tree-trunks and paled to opaline fire across the canon. Angela knew that never again, after these spacious days, could she go back to her old self. She felt that she had mounted one step higher on the stage of development, and gained an ampler view. It was easier now than it had been to see how Nick Hilliard had become what he was. Nature, on the grandest scale and with the "grand manner," she thought, had given him his education; had been for him at once schoolmistress, guide, and companion. And no college built by man could give, for money, such knowledge as sky and wide spaces had given Nick for love.

Early in the afternoon the ponies brought them to the high plateau of Glacier Point, where, looking down, the world was a sea billowing with mountains, foaming with cataracts.

Angela was deliciously tired; and the long low hotel, built of logs, with a huge veranda, seemed to promise the welcome she wanted: a cool, clean room, a warm bath, and afterward luncheon. Also, she expected to find Kate. Nick had wired, or telephoned, she was uncertain which; and though no answer had been received, Kate's silence might no doubt be easily explained later. Angela felt confident that she would have precisely the room she pictured; she rather hoped it would be white and green.

The manager met them on the veranda, but it was not the manager Nick had known.

"My name's Hilliard," Nick began.

"Oh, yes. I 'phoned an answer to you at the Sentinel Hotel this morning. Something wrong with the wire between us yesterday."

"We must have started before you 'phoned."

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“Well, I’m sorry. You wanted two rooms. But the best we can do for you and Mrs. Hilliard is one.”

“Great Scot, you don’t know what you’re talking about!” gasped Nick. “This is Mrs. May.”

“Beg your pardon, Mr. May. I thought you said your name was Hilliard.”

“It is. But hers isn’t. We—I—I’m only her guide,” stammered Nick, so deeply embarrassed for Angela’s sake that for the moment he lost his presence of mind. “It’s the last straw,” he thought. “She’ll never forgive me.” And he dared not look to see how she had taken the blow, until she surprised him by laughing. She was blushing a little, too.

“Do you remember the laundry in New Orleans?” she asked. “I’m afraid it will have to be the laundry for you again, or else a refrigerator.”

Nick was of opinion that the refrigerator would better suit the state of his complexion, which needed cooling, but his relief at seeing Angela amused, not offended, was too great for words. He mumbled something vague about any cupboard or cellar being good enough, and began to recover himself; but his confusion had been contagious. The hotel manager caught the disease, and hoped Mrs. Willard would excuse him—no, he meant Mrs. Day—no, really he began to be afraid that he didn’t remember rightly *what* he meant! He’d got Mrs. Milliard and Mr. Hay mixed up, and would they sort themselves, please? Once he had them straightened out in his mind, he’d try to keep them straight.

“Has my maid come on from El Portal?” Angela thought this a propitious moment for a question on some other subject.

“Your maid? No, Mrs. Hill, she hasn’t.”

“And no message? How strange!”

“Nothing that I’ve heard of. But I’ll let you know. If Mr. Mayard—Mr. Mill, will come with me to the ’phone, when you’re in his room—I mean, when you’re in yours—we may get on to El Portal.”

Angela was still laughing to herself, when word was brought by a chambermaid that Kate had telephoned from El Portal. She had hurt her ankle in getting into the stage (Angela could quite imagine that!), and had not been able to proceed. It was not, however, a regular sprain. She was in bandages, but better; and it was now settled that, without fail, she was to meet Mrs. May at Wawona to-morrow. “And your husband wants to know,” added the chambermaid, “what time you would like to have your lunch.”

“He is not my husband,” said Angela.

The young woman froze.

“We are friends.”

The scandalized muscles relaxed. There was a high nobility in friendship. The chambermaid herself had a friend, who talked a great deal about Plato, in the cheap edition.

“And will you please say I shall be ready in twenty minutes?”

Standing on the hotel veranda together, after luncheon, “Mrs. Mill and Mr. Hayward”—-he restored to calmness—could look thousands of feet down to the floor of the valley. Exactly how many thousands of feet there were Angela refused to be told, for the distance seemed illimitable, and cold facts might dwarf imagination. They saw the Yosemite Falls, a quivering white vein on a dark wall a million miles away. Mirror Lake was a splinter of glass on a pavement of green tiles. Nevada and Vernal Falls were pale yet bright as streaks of stardrift, in the blue haze of distance.

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If it had not been for the episode of Mrs. Hilliard and Mr. May, Nick might have felt tempted to try his fate, and dare the dash across the “dead line,” that evening of moonlight on the mountain-top. But it might, he thought, seem like presuming on what had happened; and having come, more or less safely, round an awkward turning, he was thankful to find himself on a narrow ledge of security. The moonshine, that turned mountains to marble and sky to pearl, was cold as it was pure; and in its bleaching radiance Angela seemed less woman than spirit. He dared not let that angel know how hot was his heart.

“I’ll wait till we’re among the Big Trees,” he said to himself. “They’re great, as great as the mountains in their way, but they’re friendly and kind, as if they might help. That’s where I’ll risk it all: in the Mariposa Forest, the place I like better than any other in the world. So whatever happens, we shall have seen the best there is together, and all that will be mine to remember, if I lose everything else.”

The next day was a day of forest and flowers.

They were not travelling this time in an ordinary stage, for Nick had secured a buckboard for themselves alone, with a driver who knew the country, with its beauties and legends, as well as he knew his big muscular gray horses.

Those never-ending, cathedral-forests of America’s. National Park were wilder than any that Angela had imagined. She hardly believed that the great redwoods which she was to see to-morrow could be grander than these immense fluted columns of cedar and pine. In the arms of the biggest and most virile trees, many slender sapling shapes, storm-broken, or tired of facing life alone, lay helplessly. But the driver’s heart was proof against a romantic view of this situation, as sketched by Angela. “It oughtn’t to be allowed,” he said, sternly. “Think of the danger in fire. That’s what is called by the foresters, ‘extra hazard,’ as I guess Mr. Hilliard knows.”

Oh, yes, Nick knew. But, seeing with Angela’s eyes, he envied the lover-trees their peril. He, a lonely tree, had already taken fire, but he would gladly risk the “extra hazard.” What if—and his thoughts ran ahead to the day in the redwoods, that day set apart by his mind as the *clou* of the excursion—what if the thing her eyes seemed to say to him should be true? What if she could love him, and give up her world, that world which he saw vaguely, as a dazzling vision? What if, to-morrow, she too should know the thrill of “extra hazard”?

No wonder, then, as he dreamed, that the glacier meadows encircled by green walls of forest primeval should seem like fairy rings, visible to mortal eyes only as a special privilege. In the sunlight-gold, the sheets of azaleas, cyclamen, and violets, were embroidered tapestries of pink and purple; the bright rivulets of melting snow that bathed the wild flowers’ roots became a network of diamonds.

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Here and there, under the huge coniferous trees, lay patches of snow still unmelted, though the month was June. Indian fire glowed red on the white expanse, blood on marble, and scarlet snow-plant sent up lurid spouts like flaming fountains. The tree-shadows were painted pools of lupin, azure lakes; or they were purple seas of larkspur. Mountain-roses and wild lilac tangled in a maze of pink and white and gold. Bear-clover crowned the bald gray heads of rocks, or shone out like star-white strawberry blossoms from under a thicket of deer-bush. Wild asters burned rosily, like small Catherine wheels half extinguished. Small, mottled tiger lilies blazed among the pale young fronds of growing bracken: the air was scented with wild roses and the spicy fragrance of manzanita trees—the breath of California. But loveliest and strangest of all things were the gardens chosen for their own by the mariposa lilies. The trembling winged flowers hovered airily just above the earth, like a flock of alighting butterflies; and overhead poised real butterflies, of the self-same delicate tints hardly strong enough to be named as colours; silvery white, faint lilac, and a sunrise-hint of rose. Ground butterflies and air butterflies seemed kin to one another, those rooted to the ground longing for wings, those to whom earth offered no permanent foothold envying their half-sister's rest and peace.

Here in the mountains it was spring, though down below in the valleys full summer had come; and toward evening Angela and Nick descended once again to the summer world.

The valley of Wawona was laid out on the plan of those fairy rings, *alias* glacier meadows, which they had seen in higher places, only this was a fairy ring on a grander scale. It seemed so hidden by a belt of mountains that its green lawns, its gardens, its fountains and flowers might have been originally discovered only by some happy accident. But the discoverer being of a practical turn of mind, he or his descendants had built a delightful though unobtrusive hotel on a spot which might still have been warm from the fairies. On the veranda of the hotel was Kate, beaming with smiles of welcome as the buckboard coming down from Glacier Point brought her mistress in sight.

"Oh, it was a lovely place!" said Kate. And sure, how happy she and Timmy were to be there at last. She had arrived hours ago, and was nicely rested, yes, thank you, ma'am.

There were saucers of white violets, and vases of iris and Washington lilies in Mrs. May's bedroom. Here were no embarrassing complications connected with "Mr." May and "Mrs." Hilliard. All was peace; and as the dust which had turned Angela's golden hair to silver was being brushed away by Kate, the tale of the maid's adventures was unfolded. Yet Angela, smiling gently, as she inhaled the sweetness of violets, hardly listened. She was glad that Kate was almost well and that Timmy was restored to the bosom of his family. But it seemed to her that no one except herself had had any adventures worth the name. No one else could ever have adventures half as good!

Even she—no, not for her could their like come again. She began to grudge the passing of the hours, wishing that she had the power to stop all the clocks of the world.

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XXV

THE BROKEN MELODY

“I want to write things in my diary,” said Angela. “Now, lest I forget or they change colour. I want to write here, so that afterward, when I read the page I may see the pictures.”

They were in the palace of the giant redwoods, she and Nick, and several robins and chipmunks. They had been there all day, and soon it would be sunset. Then the moon would come to light them home. They would leave the palace, and the Best Day would end.

They had lunched and dined with a huge fallen log for a table, and squirrels for their honoured guests. Now they had come back (carrying out a plan made in the morning) to sit under the Grizzly Giant, king of the great Sequoias, and there watch the sun setting. The Giant seemed to know all they were doing and saying. Not only that, but what they were thinking, too. He had great deep-set black eyes, which some foolish people might mistake for knot-holes, and with these he looked down gravely, perhaps benevolently, on the dark head and the golden one.

That was his human aspect; but he had others, and it was about one of them that Angela wished to write—just a few words which she might like to read again some day.

In the gray *suede* receptacle which had temporarily and publicly superseded the gold bag, she carried a small book. It was one of three volumes. Two had been filled since her arrival in America, but this was just begun. There was not much in it yet. It began with El Portal. Where would it stop? Already she was wondering. Maybe she would never write any more after to-day. Or the story might go on for a little, and end when this trip with her “trail guide” ended. Or it might continue, more perfunctorily, just long enough to lay the foundation of her new house, the plans of which were now materializing in an architect’s brain. Her interest in those plans had fallen asleep. Everything outside this vast cathedral of a thousand fluted red columns seemed far away and unreal. The heart of the world was throbbing here, like the music of a muffled organ, with only Nick Hilliard and herself for audience.

“I didn’t know you kept a diary,” said Nick. “Somehow you don’t seem the sort who would.”

“I don’t ‘keep’ one,” Angela explained. “When I was a little girl and went abroad with my mother, I used to write things about the days to please my father at home. I loved him very much. But—he never saw the book. After he died I wrote no more, until—I came to California. Now” (she spoke hastily), “I write about things, not people. I make

pictures for myself to look at afterward; for I can't bear to think that my impressions may grow dim, even when I'm old."

"I suppose I mustn't ask to see what you write to-day?" Nick ventured. By and by he meant to ask a thing so much bolder and bigger that he wished to try his feet on the difficult path.

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“I must read it myself before I can judge,” Angela smiled, surprised at the suggestion from one who never put himself forward; who had never begged for concession or favour since offering himself as “trail guide.” “Now don’t speak to me for a while. I want to call the whole day back.”

But though his lips were closed his eyes were not; and they seldom wandered from the bent head—gold against a dark tree-trunk; and the cameo profile—ivory-white upon a red-brown background.

Angela was sitting under the generous shade of the Grizzly Giant. Nick lay resting on his elbow, just near enough to touch with his shoulder the soles of her small, dusty shoes, crossed one over the other.

After all, it was not as easy to write as Angela had expected, with Nick lying silent, and so close to her that it seemed, if she should listen, she might hear his thoughts, like the ticking of a watch under a pillow.

She began by noting down commonplace things, as though by way of sorting out her impressions.

“We left Kate this morning at Wawona. What dear people keep that hotel! In Europe one never thinks about hotel-keepers. If everything is right, one simply takes them for granted, as one breathes good air. It’s different here in the West of America. They—-these charming, kind people—lent us their own ’buckboard’—a glorified one; and their two horses, Cash and Credit, who are famous. Darling animals they are, and understand every word that’s said to them. When they die, generations of California horses ought to be named Cash and Credit to preserve their memory.

“We started early, just after the morning had been born, so as to miss nothing. And first of all we had a quick rush through the flowery valley of Wawona—a kind of prelude to the music of the great redwoods. And I think it helped me to appreciate and understand them. We saw Stellar Lake, named by inspiration, for it looks a blue sky half full of stars; and I had my first sight of a fish hatchery. I’d no notion it could be so exciting to watch the career of trout from the egg stage up to rainbow maturity. Never shall I forget grabbing a handful of tiny wriggling fish out of the trough of water where they lived, and holding them in the hollow of my palm for an instant! They looked like big silver commas, and interrogation points, oh, but punctuations of all kinds; and they felt like iced popcorn. I don’t think I shall ever eat trout again. It would be so treacherous, now that I seem to have known the creatures from the cradle to the grave.

“But about the Big Trees, which at this present moment are to me the most important things on earth. I’ve seen a good deal of the earth, but nothing so good, nothing so glorious. No wonder Mr. Hilliard says, ’Why need people build churches in this part of

the world, when they have the redwood cathedral built by God, full of the sound of His organ music?'

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“All through the Yosemite there is music. You hear the forest talking, and think it is the river. You hear the river, and think it is the wind giving a signal to the trees, that they may begin speaking; for trees and river and wind have lived so long together—like people married happily since early youth—that thoughts and words and tones have come to be the same. But among the redwoods is the noblest music of all, different from that of any other trees. And only think, yesterday I hardly believed they could be taller and grander than some of the others I had seen, all those great conifers that would have been gods in Greece! Even this morning, driving through forests that line the way to the Sequoias, I still believed that—poor me! The big sugar-pines and the yellow-pines loomed so huge, towering above delicate birches and a hundred other lovely creatures, which they guarded as Eastern men guard the beauties of their harems. But the moment I saw the two first giants—the ’Sentinels’—stand on the threshold of their palace, or cathedral, whichever it is (but it’s both, and more) I knew how mistaken I’d been about the others. These are super-trees.

“We drove on slowly, along a wide aisle paved with gold and sprinkled with gold-dust. The pillars holding up the sky-roof are fluted deeply and regularly; and they are rose-red, these tree columns, seeming to glow with inward fire—the never-dying fire of life which keeps their hearts alive when common trees perish. Theirs is no ruined cathedral or palace. All is perfect now, as in its beginning; walls and dome of blue which can never crumble; and the doors are never shut, though jealousy guarded by the Sentinels.

“In some of the trees are shrines. At first glance they appear to be empty shrines, but they are not empty, really. What one finds there depends upon one’s self. I wish I could live in this palace for weeks. I should make wonderful discoveries.

“In old houses, whose roofs are supported by great beams of oak, I know they call the stoutest and most important the ‘king beam,’ for without him the roof would fall. Just so, the Grizzly Giant is the king tree of the Mariposa Forest. There are other trees more beautiful and graceful, yet he is indisputably, undisputedly king, among lesser royalties and royal highnesses. All are crowned. These Sequoias aren’t clothed with green, like other trees, but crowned with it, having also, here and there upon their breasts, green decorations and medals. Their bark folds and drapes them in mantles of royal purple, and their high crowns mingle gold with green. The Grizzly Giant’s crown is of a strange shape, and very wonderful. He is alive, and looks at you, but he does not wish you to know that; so, if you are too curious, he often pretends to be a castle, ornamented with quantities of fantastic gargoyles. The castle has a theatre, into which you can see; and it is fitted up with extraordinary scenery. There is a museum of strange statues, too; headless torsos, and arms thicker through than a man is long.

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“The princes and princesses, who are the Grizzly Giant’s family and help him reign over his subjects, have to go and stand at a good distance, or they would lose their majesty in comparison with him. When we had left the horses (near a fascinating log-cabin in the woods), and Mr. Hilliard had arranged for their comfort, we walked about, picking out the princes and princesses and knowing quite well from the look of them which was which. Some of the trees are commandingly masculine; others, though as immense, graciously feminine.

“It sounds rather confusing to call the trees sometimes columns of a cathedral or palace, sometimes royal people; but any one who has come to visit them even once would understand. If I were to be here longer, I should see them in a great many other different phases, I’m sure. And I may perhaps see them again. But nothing will ever be the same. I have had such thoughts to-day! I wanted to put each idea, small and big, on paper, to remember; but I find that they won’t let themselves be written down. They are as intangible as the incense in this cathedral, as impossible to put in black and white as it would be to jot down in notes the music that pours out from the pipes of the unseen organ, or to paint the light that streams through the cathedral windows. And what a magical light it is! There are other trees in this forest, besides the Sequoias; but it is on the redwoods alone that the light concentrates, just as limelight is turned upon the leading characters of a stage drama. They burn with their own ruddy fire, while their neighbour trees (overgrown with golden-green moss that makes sleeves for outstretched arms, and gold embroidery for dark drapery) gleam out among the redwoods’ flaming pillars like lighted candelabra. I shall see those lights behind my eyelids to-night, as I saw the sunset light on Stonehenge; the moon touching the Giralda of Seville; and my first alpenglow. But what Stonehenge is to England, the Giralda to Spain, and the Alps to Switzerland, that, I think, is the Mariposa Forest of giant Sequoias to California.

“If I had been an atheist, I believe I should suddenly have been taught the lesson of God among the great redwoods. And nobody could be heavy-hearted here, or frivolous. I feel that the same light which burns like fire in these trees burns in my veins; a vast wave of life, vitalizing all creation and making it kin. I am a poor relation of these wonderful giants. Also I am a cousin of the robins and chipmunks that shared our picnic luncheon, and the dinner we finished a little while ago. I am nearer than I was yesterday to all humanity, and to——”

Angela’s pencil stopped its weaving back and forth across the small white pages, pausing as if of its own accord. She looked at the last words she had written and shut the book. Yes, she was near to all humanity; but nearer than any to *one* who was all the world to her. Suddenly she felt, with poignant intensity, the nearness not only of his body to hers, but the nearness of their souls. Her spirit and his touched in the silence of the forest. She did not look at him yet, but she knew that he was looking at her, and that his heart was in the look, calling to hers. And she could not shut her ears to the call.

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So she sat for a long moment, her eyes clinging for safety to the little volume in her hands. Her fingers pressed it tightly, almost spasmodically, and upon them she seemed to feel, even to see, Nick Hilliard's hands, brown and strong. It was only her fancy; but it was not fancy that they burned to clasp hers. She felt that longing of his, so vital, so passionate, creating the picture it desired. Always before, when the thought had flashed into her mind, "He is beginning to love me," she had thrust it away, shutting her mind against it. But that was before her spirit was keyed to the high music of river and forest in the Yosemite Valley. Since then she had passed from the twilight of little society shams and convenient, conventional self-deceivings into the glory where only Truth was visible or audible.

At last she was forced to lift her eyes, compelled by his. She tried to look past him, straight into the sunset, a furnace that burned up human misgivings. But her gaze was stopped on the way by Hilliard's.

"May I read what you've written?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and gave him the book. While he read, she drew in deep breaths, gathering strength against an emergency, if an emergency were to come. But she hoped it would not. She wanted, oh, so much! to keep him for a comrade—for the comrade who had made this day the best day of her life. She did not want to stop playing, because if it had come to earnest, deep realities, as she was afraid it must come now, there would be no place for Nick Hilliard in her future—the future of Paolo di Sereno's disillusioned wife. "Still, here under these trees, I could tell him everything better than I could tell it anywhere else, and make him understand, and even forgive," she thought. "Without fear, I could let him know that I care for him, and that he has been the only man, except father, who has meant anything great to the *real* me. Almost, I wish he would speak—if he *does* love me. And *I* know he does."

But he lay reading the fancies she had written about the forest, and she could not guess how he was summoning his courage, as a general, surprised, summons his forces to battle. She did not know how deep was his humility in thoughts of her, any more than she realized how utterly her first point of view had changed toward him, the "forest creature," the "interesting, picturesque figure." So entirely was he a man, and the one man, that she had forgotten her old impersonal frame of mind.

He came to the last sentence in the book, broken short, where her pencil had stopped of itself.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm glad you feel those things about the forest. It's always been like that to me—sacred. If anything great and wonderful were to happen, I'd rather have it happen here than anywhere else. Would you?"

Yes, it was coming! Suddenly she half wanted it to come—this crisis in their lives; yet something made her push it away, just for a little while; not to have the end quite so soon, no matter how beautiful an end.

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“Oh, wait!” she exclaimed. “Don’t let’s talk of ourselves yet—not for a few minutes. Wait with me, and neither of us will say one word till the sun has set and the light has changed.”

“Till the light has changed,” Nick echoed, a shadow falling over his face. He raised himself higher on his elbow, his shoulder still touching her foot, and they looked toward the west.

The forest seemed to have been lit up for some great religious festival. Each towering tree was a Titanic candle, with a flame at the top, against the far-off sky. The deep-red, fluted trunks gleamed with a pale luminous rose, and long straight avenues of fire-dust stretched away to the end of the world. A flood of golden flame poured through the forest, like a tidal wave out of the sun. Then came an ebb, a pause. The wave receded. A faint purple haze, like smoke from burning heliotropes, crept along the ground. The torch of sunset broke into a million stars; blazing golden spiders swung from glittering webs among the treetops; the melting crowns of the redwoods dripped rubies. Red meteors fell and burst, and the wild glory faded suddenly into a subdued, reminiscent glow. It was as if a cupful of ruddy wine had been drunk at a gulp, leaving but a few drops to stain the crystal. The rosy radiance ran along the horizon, and all that lived of the sunset clung to the far edge of the world or caught the gold horns of the Grizzly Giant’s crown, which, like a high mountain summit, could hold the light of day while night purpled the plain below.

All day a concert of birds had filled the upper chambers of the trees with silver pipings, but now not a bird voice spoke. There was silence, except for a faint mysterious stirring, as of dryads beginning to wake and dress for their night-flitting when a moonbeam should tap on their shut doors. The lilac haze floated up from the ground, and slowly, very slowly, turned to silver touched with rose. Like a veil it spread among the trees tangling among their sharp branches, its lacy mesh tearing, to leave dark jagged holes. But unseen hands mended the rent and wove the veil into a curtain that screened the distance and was pinned up with stars.

The whole forest rustled with mystery in the strange pulsing luminance that was neither sunset nor moonrise, but the memory of one, and a hope of the other—the kind of light that a blind man might see in dreams.

“Now—Angela,” Nick half whispered, in awe at the name on his lips, the name of a goddess uttered by a mortal. (Extra hazard!—extra hazard!) At last he laid his hand on hers, warm and close, and her lips opened to break the spell, when a voice called to Nick in the distance:

“Nick! Nick Hilliard, where are you?”

Angela drew away quickly, the spell broken indeed. He sprang to his feet, his face, that had been pale, flushing.

“It’s Mrs. Gaylor’s voice,” he said, astonished and incredulous, as if at the call of a ghost.

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XXVI

AN INVITATION FROM CARMEN

Carmen had been following from San Francisco, a day late, because once, in losing the trail, she had lost twenty-four hours. To-day she had arrived at Wawona in the afternoon, and learning that Mr. Nickson Hilliard had gone to the Mariposa Grove, she asked for a carriage to take her there too.

“You’ll reach the woods just about the time he’s coming away,” she was advised. “He ought to be back by ten o’clock at latest, maybe earlier.” But Carmen insisted. She could not wait. Business made it necessary for her to see Mr. Hilliard as soon as possible, without wasting a moment. She looked sallow and hollow-eyed; for she had been travelling hard. Long ago now she had put away her widow’s weeds; yet in the warm June sunlight she had the aspect of a mourner. It was as if she had drunk the blackness of night, and it ran in her veins. In full sunshine she seemed to bleed shadow.

The name of Gaylor was well known in California; and here at Wawona—far from the Gaylor ranch as it was—those with whom she spoke were aware of her importance. Carmen had no fear that she would be gossiped about and misunderstood. She was Mrs. Eldridge Gaylor, the rich widow of old Grizzly Gaylor. Everyone knew that Nick Hilliard, of Lucky Star Gusher fame, had been her husband’s foreman, and that the land which had made his fortune had been sold to him by her. No one would doubt her or laugh behind her back when she stated that the need of a business discussion with Hilliard was pressing. People would think that perhaps another gusher had started into being, or that some question of investments must be decided. But even if her coming “made talk,” Carmen was in no mood to care. In her mind a searchlight shone fiercely upon three figures: her own, Nick Hilliard’s, Angela May’s. Others were as shadows. A buckboard and horses, with a good driver, were found for Mrs. Gaylor after a slight delay. But she had been wandering on foot among the great redwoods for half an hour when Nick heard her voice calling his name.

Mrs. May had not been mentioned at the hotel. Carmen had been informed simply that Mr. Hilliard was showing a friend through the forest, and that they had gone out in the morning with the intention of staying to see the sunset. But Carmen had found in the visitor’s book the name of “Mrs. May and maid.” She had been certain of finding them there, for she knew only too well that all three, with a “black cat for luck,” had left San Francisco together.

Every day since Theo Dene had told her of Angela May’s existence she had “cut the cards,” and had invariably come upon a “fair woman” close to the King of Hearts. Madame Vestris also had seen the “fair woman” in the crystal, and had described her.

“She is beautiful and young, and stands in the sunshine,” said the seeress, in whose visions Carmen had implicit faith; “but suddenly she is blotted out of my sight, as if by a dark cloud that swallows her up.”

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“Does she come back into the crystal?” Carmen had asked, eagerly.

“No. I can see you now. But she doesn’t come back.”

“And Nick? Do you find him?”

Madame Vestris knew very well who “Nick” was.

During the last three or four years she had replied to a great many questions about Nick Hilliard, and her answers had brought her a goodly number of ten-dollar bills. For crystal-gazing her charge was ten dollars: with a trance in addition, twenty-five.

“I see a man standing beside you. But he is in deep shadow. I can’t make out who it is.”

Carmen revived. “It must be Nick. There’s no other man I can think of I would let come near me.”

When she called to Hilliard in the Mariposa Grove, and his answering call told her where to look, Carmen was even more anxious to see what Mrs. May was like than to meet Nick himself, though it seemed years since the night when she bade him good-bye, full of hope, believing he would come back to her.

The two were standing under the Grizzly Giant when she came up to them, Nick a few steps in advance, because he had started to meet his old friend, and a sickly pang shot through Carmen’s heart as she saw Angela, tall and white in the rose-and-silver twilight. She had to admit the enemy’s beauty; and with a sharp stab of pain she remembered Nick’s description of “the angel of his dreams.” Yes, this white, slender creature was like a man’s idea of an angel. Here was Nick’s ideal made human. Carmen wished that the Grizzly Giant might fall on the angel and crush her to death, a lingering death of agony; because nothing less could satisfy a woman’s longing for revenge. Nor was death enough to atone Carmen would have chosen to see Angela die disfigured, so that Nick should remember her hideous through the years to come. Desiring this eagerly, and all other evils, Mrs. Gaylor was, nevertheless, polite and pleasant to Mrs. May. She came out from the tragic shadow which had enveloped her like a mourning mantle, and wondered at herself, hearing the sweet tones of her own voice. She began by explaining to Nick that she had not been well; that her doctor had recommended her to try a change of air, and that she had thought of the Yosemite. “I’ve always wanted to see the valley ever since you came back and talked so much about it,” she went on.

“Then, when I got to Wawona I heard you were there. I was surprised! Do you realize, you only wrote to me once, and never told me any of your plans? I should have thought you were in New York to this day if I hadn’t run up to the Falconers’ place on the

McCloud River not very long ago, and found out that you'd been in Santa Barbara. I suppose this lady is Mrs. May, a friend of that fascinating Miss Dene? She, or some of the people up there, told me that you'd promised to show her round California."

As Carmen waited to be introduced, she glanced sharply from one to the other, to see if they looked self-conscious, but they wore an air of innocence that made Carmen long to strike Nick and trample on the woman. How dared they act as if she had no right to resent their being here together? Yet she did not want them to know, just now, that she did resent it.

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Angela was almost as keenly interested in Carmen as Carmen was in her; and though Mrs. Gaylor was not at her best, she was excited; her eyes shone, and dusk softened her hard look of fatigue. Angela thought Nick's old friend one of the handsomest women she had ever seen. Also, she was jealous, more sharply and consciously jealous than when Theo Dene had gossiped about Mrs. Gaylor and Nick Hilliard, on the way back from Santa Barbara Mission. Angela had never before known the sting of jealousy; had never thought, till that day, that she could feel so mean a passion; yet now she suffered as Nick once had suffered, and was ashamed to suffer.

A few minutes ago she had been sure that Hilliard loved her, and she had keyed herself to tell him nobly why he must forget her, why she must forget him. But, having seen, Carmen, she began to wonder if Nick did care, and whether after all, he had meant to speak of his love, here in the forest. Perhaps she had been conceited, and mistaken about his feelings. Maybe Nick had merely been chivalrous and kind, like all California men, and wanted nothing of her except friendship. Maybe if he had meant to tell her anything, it had been about this beautiful Mrs. Gaylor.

Nick introduced them to each other, rather shyly and formally, and they were both extremely polite, even complimentary. Carmen said that she hoped Mrs. May wouldn't think it very queer of her, hurrying out to meet Mr. Hilliard the moment she heard he was near. Of course, she might have waited for him to come back to Wawona, they said he would be back by ten. But she was so impulsive! And she had wished to see the redwoods by sunset and moonrise. She knew Mr. Hilliard wouldn't want to bother about bringing her here next day, after he had just seen the trees himself, and for the second time, too. This had been too good a chance to lose. The trees were wonderful, weren't they? Would Mrs. May and Nick mind stopping a little longer now that she had come, and letting her see the moon rise? There was a sort of quiver over the sky as if it would appear soon.

All three sat down, but not in the place where Nick and Angela had sat together. He could not have endured that. While Carmen talked and the others answered—when they must—the moon-dawn came; and never would the Princess di Sereno forget the drift of stars behind the trees, and the fleecy moon-surf that beat on the high branches. Yet the music of the forest was silent for her, and the charm was broken.

"What are you going to do to-morrow?" Carmen asked. And Angela answered before Nick could speak: "Oh, my trip is over. There's nothing more to do but to go back—by a different way, of course. I have still to see Inspiration Point, of which I've heard so much. I'm looking forward to that."

"When you say 'go back,' do you mean San Francisco or the East?" Carmen tried to make her voice sound indifferent, though polite.

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“To San Francisco, for a while. I’m not going East, I hope. I’ve bought land near Monterey. I mean to build and make a home for myself in California.”

Carmen’s one lingering hope died. She had thought it just possible that this affair had been a travelling flirtation; that Nick, though infatuated, would return to his old allegiance when this witch-light, this will-o’-the-wisp, this love pirate, had gone. But the love pirate intended to drop anchor in California waters, it seemed! Luckily for Carmen that the daylight had faded. Changes on a woman’s face, if bent a little, could not be seen in the dusk.

“I wish you’d give me a chance to prove that California women are just as glad as California men to be nice to strangers,” she went on. “Your home isn’t ready yet, so you’ve nothing to tie you down. Won’t you come and see *my* home? It’s very pretty, if I do say so myself; and it might give you one or two ideas. Try and help me persuade her, Nick. You see, Mrs. May, I feel almost as if I knew you. They could talk of nobody else at Rushing River Camp! And meeting you in this wonderful forest makes me sure we ought to be friends, as if it was *meant*, you know.”

“You’re very kind,” said Angela, feeling distinctly guilty, because she did not like Carmen, and admired her only because she could not help it.

“I told you Mrs. Gaylor would want you to come to her house!” exclaimed Nick, trying to be cordial and forget his bitter disappointment.

He too was feeling guilty. He had been even more sorry than surprised to see Carmen, and wished her a hundred miles away. Something told him that, if she had not interrupted him just at the critical moment, when hour and place and mood had seemed propitious, Angela would have been kind. Such a moment as Carmen Gaylor had spoiled might never come again. But he felt that he was cruel and ungrateful to his loyal friend, his benefactress. It was not her fault, he reminded himself, that she had appeared at the wrong time. She could not have guessed that he loved Mrs. May. He ought to be flattered because poor Carmen had started out to meet him in the forest, instead of waiting at Wawona. The sound of her voice, with its deep contralto, reminded him how much he owed to Mrs. Gaylor. Her friendship and generosity had made him rich. If it had not been for her he would never have owned or been able to sell the Lucky Star gusher. And, after all, there would be other moments. Because Mrs. Gaylor had inadvertently robbed him of this chance with Angela, there was no reason to feel so gloomily sure that he would never have another. He would make one for himself! And now here was his kind friend, inviting Mrs. May to visit her, mostly to please him, of course. How like her! If only his angel would accept, he might be able to “cross the dead line” by and by, in his own country, and that would be the next best after the Mariposa Forest.

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Carmen bit her lip. So they had talked her over together, these two, and Nick had told this woman that she would be invited to visit the Gaylor ranch! Well, she would let them believe that she was good-naturedly playing into their hands. She wanted, yet hated, to have them think that.

“Why, of course, Nick knows how delighted I am to get pleasant visitors,” she forced herself to say. “I haven’t many—and I get few other pleasures. I’m awfully lonesome on my big ranch. Come for as long as you can—but even a few days will be better than nothing, if you can’t spare more. Nick can show you his gusher—or rather the gusher that was his; and Lucky Star City, which you’ll think queer and interesting, I expect, just as Nick does—though it seems vulgar and hideous to me. By the way, Nick, there’s a new school-teacher at Lucky Star. Oh, there’s *lots* of news since you went away! I shall have heaps to tell you. Won’t you come and visit me, and be shown around by Nick, Mrs. May?”

Angela was torn between several emotions, none of which she was able clearly to define. If she refused, it might seem ungracious, because already, half in earnest, half in play, she had partly promised Nick to go some time and have a glimpse of Lucky Star ranch and city. Yet, less than ever did she wish to be indebted for hospitality to Mrs. Gaylor.

“Could I go for a day?” she inquired.

“You could for two days and a night,” said Carmen, “if you couldn’t give us more time. You see, you’d have to travel all night from San Francisco to Bakersfield, or rather to Kern—which is the same thing. And my place is a good long drive from there, even in a motor, which I could easily hire.”

“You needn’t do that. I’ve bought one,” Nick cut in eagerly. “She’s in San Francisco. I was looking forward to showing her to you. But now I can do better. If Mrs. May consents, I’ll ship the auto by train in advance and send the shuvver—my assistant, I mean—on ahead, so as to look the car over and see that she’s ready to run us all out to your ranch after we arrive at Bakersfield in the morning. Now, aren’t you surprised at my news, Mrs. Gaylor—that I’ve got an automobile of my own? Or did they tell you that, among other things, at River Camp?”

“Yes, they told me,” answered Carmen, with the same praiseworthy calmness which she had been admiring in herself, and wondering at, as if it were a marvellous performance on the stage by an actress.

“Anyhow, I expect my yellow car will excite more interest at Lucky Star than a new schoolmistress,” said Nick, laughing, almost light-hearted again. But he did not give more than a thought to the schoolmistress. Of what possible importance could she be to him?

“Will you run over from Kern to the Gaylor ranch in his yellow car?” asked Carmen, softly and kindly, seeing that the enemy hesitated.

“Yes—thank you both. I will go,” Angela said.

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“Then I’m rewarded for my long drive this afternoon.” And indeed Carmen felt rewarded. She thought of the crystal, and how Madame Vestris had seen the “fair woman” blotted out of the sunshine by a dark cloud. And after that she had not come into the crystal again. Carmen had been there with a man standing by her side.

“But what should I have done if the hateful creature had refused to visit me?” Carmen thought. “Everything depended on that.”

Next day they took the long drive together, Mrs. Gaylor, Angela, and Nick, and Angela’s maid—for Carmen had not brought Mariette to the Yosemite. Mariette was too talkative, and had been sent home from San Francisco. Carmen did not wish Nick to find out how hurried this journey of hers had been lest he should suspect that it was made in quest of him! She wanted him to believe that she had been travelling leisurely for the benefit of her health, as she had taken pains to explain.

Nothing could spoil the azure mystery of Inspiration Point: nothing could dim the brightness of the Bridal Veil, seen from a new point of view. So near that a strong wind might have driven the spray into their faces, they saw the white folds of the waterfalls, embroidered with rainbows, and the dark rocks behind its rushing flood, stained deep red, and gold and blue, as if generations of rainbows had dried there. Nothing could stifle the thrill of that wild drive, down steep roads that tied themselves ribbonlike, round the mountain-side, and seemed to flutter, as ribbons might flutter, over precipices. Yet the magic of four days ago was dead. Carmen, sitting between Nick and Angela, had killed it. Neither rivers nor trees sang their old song; and the white witch of the Bridal Veil had turned her face away.

XXVII

SIMEON HARP

Nick’s detective in San Francisco had no news; at all events no news with which he could be induced to part. “Wait a few days longer,” he said. “That’s the only favour I ask. Maybe by that time we shall both know where the poison-oak came from, who posted the box, who sent it, and why, and all the rest there is to know.”

“Haven’t you any suspicions yet?” Nick asked impatiently.

“I don’t go so far as to say that.”

“What—that you have, or you haven’t?”

“That I haven’t.”

“You mean you do suspect some one?”

“Well, my mind’s beginning to hover.”

“Tell me where.”

“No. I won’t tell you that, Mr. Hilliard.”

“You won’t——”

“Not while I’m hovering. Not till there’s something to light on. I may be doing an innocent person a big injustice.”

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And Nick could squeeze no more hints from Max Wisler. Herein lay one secret of the man's success; he had his own methods, and no one could persuade or bribe him to depart from them. This caused him to be respected. And Nick had to leave San Francisco with Mrs. Gaylor and Angela, tingling with unsatisfied curiosity. Mrs. May had forbidden him to speak to Carmen of the mysterious box, having grown sensitive on the subject. More than once she had asked herself if it were possible that some one very, very far away—some one whose photograph was in the *Illustrated London News*—-hated her enough to do her an injury: some one she had believed to be completely indifferent in these days. The thing savoured of the Latin mind, she could not help thinking, rather than the Anglo-Saxon. Perhaps Princess di Sereno was not quite forgotten in Italy, after all. And Mrs. May could imagine a motive, for in San Francisco she had been able to find a duplicate of that illustrated paper. There were three photographs in it: one rather bad one of herself, taken years ago in Rome; one of Paolo, dressed as an aeronaut; and one of a certain handsome young woman, very becomingly dressed to accompany the Prince for a flight in his new aeroplane.

Angela was not happy in this expedition to the Gaylor ranch, though she reassured herself from time to time, by saying that it was better to accept than refuse the invitation; and she was to be Mrs. Gaylor's guest only for a day, part of another, and one night. Still, she was vaguely troubled. The warm consciousness of being surrounded by kindness which had made the California sunshine doubly bright, was chilled. This visit would be like other visits which she had made in the past, before she was "Mrs. May, whom nobody knows." In Rome, in Paris, in London, Princess di Sereno had been obliged sometimes to go to houses of women whom she disliked or distrusted, and to have them in hers. Such obligations had been part of the inevitable disagreeableness of daily existence for the wife of Paolo di Sereno; but going to Mrs. Gaylor was the first false note in the music of this free, new world. Angela consoled herself by thinking of Lucky Star Ranch. She would like to see Nick Hilliard's home.

* * * * *

"Simeon, she's here," said Carmen, in a low voice, to the old squirrel poisoner.

They stood together in the grove of bamboos, where they had talked about Nick, and about "old Grizzly Gaylor," on the May night when Nick was leaving for New York. Counting by time, that was not long ago. But Carmen's whole outlook on life was changed. She felt and looked years older.

"That's all right then, my lady," Simeon Harp answered. "The whole thing's all right. Don't you worry."

"Oh, I do worry. Every minute I'm in hell," she groaned. "Oh, Simeon, what will become of me?"

“You’ll be happy, and marry the man you love, my lady,” the old man soothed her, the red-rimmed eyes, which had once been handsome, sending out a faint gleam of the one emotion that still burned in the ashes of his wrecked soul: devotion to the woman who had saved his life, who had given him a roof and food, and—above all—drink.

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“I can never be happy again, whatever happens,” Carmen said, with anguish. “He loves some one else. He doesn’t care for me.”

“He’ll learn to care. This slip of a thing that’s come between you and ’im, my lady, will fly away out of his mind like a bit of thistledown. When I’m done with her—she’s got rid of for good.”

“Oh, but the horror of it—the getting rid of her! It don’t weaken one bit, Simeon. I’ve brought her here for that, *just that*, and it shall be done. In some moods, for a minute or two, I rejoice in the thought of it. I want it. I’d even like to be there and see. Madame Vestris says that in my last incarnation I was a Roman Empress—that I used to go to the gladiator shows, and turn my thumb down, as a sign that the wounded ones who failed in the fight were to be killed by their conquerors in the arena. And that, once when I hated a Christian girl, I went to see her killed by lions. She—Madame Vestris—-watched the whole scene in her crystal. Very likely it’s true, what she says. I believe in her. She’s wonderful. But I’m softer in this incarnation than in the last, I guess. It frightens me and turns me sick when I think how I shall dream and wake up nights afterward—even if I’m married to Nick. Oh, it’s awful! But it’s the only way. He was meant for me! He’s mine. She’ll have to go. And I don’t care how much I suffer, if only I have him for my husband in the end.”

“You’ll have him,” said Simeon Harp. “It’s going to be. And there ain’t no need for you to dream bad dreams. *You* ain’t doing the thing. It’s me. It was me thought of it. It’s me who’ll carry it out.”

“Supposing you fail?” she whispered.

“I won’t, if you’ll do your part. Just the little part, my lady; we can’t get on without your doin’. You send her there, to the right place; that’s all. For the rest you can count on me.”

“Oh!” Carmen shuddered, and put her hands before her face. “To think it’s for to-day—-*to-day!* If only the *other thing* had gone through all right, and she’d been made so hideous that he couldn’t look at her, this horror might have been saved. I’d have wanted no more. Once he’d seen her face, that he thinks so angelic, red, and swollen and hardly human, he could never have felt the same toward her again. And it wouldn’t have hurt her much in the end. But evidently she isn’t the kind that’s affected by that stuff. I know there are some who aren’t. Those two haven’t spoken about the box to me, Simeon. I was afraid at first Nick might suspect, and be watching. But that’s nonsense, of course. And she wouldn’t be here now if the idea had crossed his mind.”

“Nobody’ll ever know,” said Simeon. “I went such a long way. I changed trains three times and walked miles in between. Besides, when I posted the box I was wearin’ something different from what I ever wear here. I was another man to look at.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure you did your part well,” Carmen said quickly. “It was Fate interfered. I felt it would. All the cards near me were black just then. I don’t know what I should do without you, Simeon—good old watch-dog! You shall be rich the rest of your life if you win me happiness.”

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“I’ve got all I want,” the squirrel poisoner answered. “It’s a pleasure to me to serve you. You don’t need to offer no rewards, except to keep me near you, my lady, and give me my bite and sup. You ought to know that by this time—*anyhow since a year ago*.”

“I know! And you’re clever, as well as faithful. I should never have thought of as good a way as—as this. No one could possibly prove it was anything but an accident. Did you—see her, Simeon?”

“Yes; I wasn’t far off when Nick’s big yeller automobile spilt you both out at the door. To my idea, she ain’t nothing to you. I was never one for blondes.”

“If you could see Nick’s eyes when he looks at her! Those are the times when I feel like the Roman Empress. I was glad he wouldn’t stay to lunch. Though I asked, I don’t think I could have stood having him. I’d have done something desperate, maybe, and spoilt everything. She’s lying down now. I made her promise she would till half an hour before lunch. Nick’s coming for us, with his auto, at five. He wanted it to be earlier, but I told him she was tired, and it would be too hot for her to walk around Lucky Star in the glare, where there aren’t any trees. It’s all got to happen and be over with before five, Simeon. She’ll never see Nick’s ranch she talks so much of.” Again Carmen shivered, and her eyes were wide and staring, curiously glazed. She knew that she was looking almost plain to-day, and had been actually terrified by her own face in the glass before she came out to keep the appointment with Simeon Harp. But it did not matter what she looked like before Simeon. When Nick came and saw her again next time there would be reason why he would have no eyes for her. And later, when all this was over, she would come back into her beauty again. She must!

“What time are you having lunch, my lady?” Simeon inquired in a matter-of-fact tone, his harsh voice sounding just as usual.

“At one.”

“And you’ll send her out?”

“At half-past two.”

“Right, my lady. That’ll bring her to the place I want about three or a little after.”

“Yes. You’re sure nothing can go wrong?”

“Sure as ever I was about a squirrel.”

“Oh!” Carmen shivered, and turning away from him without another word she went back to the house.

No one had seen them talking together; and even if they had been seen it would not have mattered. Mrs. Gaylor often chatted with the old squirrel poisoner, who was known to be devoted to her; a harmless creature who hurt nobody—except himself and the squirrels.

XXVIII

THE DARK CLOUD IN THE CRYSTAL

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When the musical gong sounded for luncheon, and Carmen came down from her room at one o'clock, she found her guest already in the garden, as lovely a garden as Angela had seen in her sleep. For a minute Carmen stood on a step of the brick terrace, looking at the slender figure in white. Angela did not hear the faint rustling of muslin. Her back was half turned to the house, and she was watching the aerial architecture of the fountain, delicate domes and pinnacles built of crystal. Carmen thought reluctantly that Mrs. May looked very young in her white frock, not more than eighteen or nineteen. She wondered if the love pirate enjoyed life very much, and whether she really cared for Nick and wanted to marry him or whether she was only flirting. Then the profile at which Carmen had been gloomily gazing turned into a full face. Angela smiled at Mrs. Gaylor. "You must have hypnotized me," she said. "Suddenly I felt I was being looked at by some one. Have you been taking a nap, too?"

"No," said her hostess. "I knew I couldn't go to sleep. I'm glad if you rested. You look very fresh."

Angela could not conscientiously return the compliment. Mrs. Gaylor might have been travelling for a week instead of one night.

Luncheon was in the pergola, where Carmen and Nick had dined together the night he went away; the night—as she expressed it to herself of late—when she had lost him. Angela had never seen a more beautiful place, and said so, trying to make conversation; for now that Nick was not with them she felt ill at ease with Mrs. Gaylor. "What a garden!" she exclaimed. "The other night in the Yosemite I dreamed of just such a garden—and I think, at the end of the dream there was a woman in it—rather like you. You must be very happy here."

"Yes, I'm happy enough," said Carmen. "Oh! I mustn't forget to tell you—Nick came back. Did you hear his automobile?"

"No. I must have been asleep."

"I thought you were. Besides, your room's on the other side of the house."

"It's beautifully quiet and cool. Did Mr. Hilliard come to change the plan for this afternoon?"

"Yes. He turned round before getting home, because he'd remembered something he had to do at six, something important, business with the men who've bought his gusher. They're to look at another one—smaller, but pretty good—and see if they want to buy it too; a new gusher that's burst out on the land Nick kept for his own. So he thought perhaps we wouldn't mind going over to look at the place a good deal earlier, after all, in spite of the heat. He won't let you be exposed to the sun more than he can help."

“I don’t mind the heat, if you don’t,” said Angela.

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“Oh, as for me, I’m half Spanish, you know. I’m like a salamander. Nick’ll come back between half-past two and three—soon after his lunch. He might almost as well have stayed with us. But, of course, as he’s been away from home so long, he wants to have a look around and be sure that everything’s all right for a stranger to see. I don’t wonder! I told him we’d meet him at the east gate. It’s a short cut, and though it isn’t much of a walk for us, and is in shade over half the way, it cuts off more than two miles of bad road for him—road that’s just being made. I thought you’d rather like a stroll through the bamboo grove, which everybody admires so much. The only part of the walk that will be hot is going across a bit of disused pasture land. But we’ll take green-lined parasols. I have a lot of them about the house, for visitors. We ought to start by two-thirty; and by three-fifteen, with the motor, we can be coming in sight of the Lucky Star Gusher, like a huge black geyser. You know Nick’s land was once part of mine, so his place is no distance, really. I hope you don’t dislike walking?”

“No, indeed. I’m very fond of it. I can easily do ten miles.”

“Well, you will have only a short mile to meet Nick and his motor this afternoon. I dare say I shall pick up a little by half-past two. I thought maybe lunch would make me feel better, but it doesn’t. Just the other way! I can’t eat. I’ve got one of the horrid headaches that turn me almost into a lunatic once in a blue moon.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Angela. “Hadn’t you better send Mr. Hilliard word that we can’t come to-day? You know, there’s most of to-morrow——”

“Oh, no,” Carmen broke in hastily. “I wouldn’t disappoint him for anything in the world. A cup of black coffee will do me good.”

But apparently it had no such effect. And at two o’clock Mrs. Gaylor said that she feared she must not venture out, after all, in the hot sun. If she tried she might faint, and that would be silly. “I’m so sorry, but you’ll have to go alone,” she finished, “and when I’ve had a little rest, I’ll come after you in a carriage, in time to bring you home. That will save Nick motoring here and back, and give him a chance to keep his engagement at six, with those men, and no danger of a breakdown with his car. He might burst a tire on that stony road, you see, and be delayed. Those men are important to him.”

Angela was genuinely sympathetic, and strove to regret that Mrs. Gaylor could not be with her. But she could not feel as sorry as she wished to feel. There was a spice of danger in being alone with Nick, danger that he might take up the thread dropped in the Mariposa Forest—if, indeed, he really cared to take it up. That was the question. Perhaps, even if he loved her, he would not think it best to tell her so under his own roof, where she would have to run away from him to escape, if she did not choose to listen. Whether he loved her or not, it must come to the same in the end. But she could not help longing to know the truth. The one thing she did already know was that she

was deliciously frightened, yet glad that she was to see Nick's ranch without Mrs. Gaylor.

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At half-past two she started out, Carmen giving her explicit directions, which she could not mistake, because, after passing through the bamboos, the way was straight as far as that stretch of disused pasture land of which mention had been made.

“You’ll be in shade of the orange-trees till you come to a big gate in a fence,” Carmen explained. “Shut it after you, please, because dogs might stray into the garden if you left it open. No cattle graze on that part of the ranch any more. They’re going to irrigate there and to plant alfalfa, the soil’s likely to be so good. But I’ve been weak enough to let gipsies camp on the place once or twice, and there might be some there now, with their dogs and horses, for all I know. As you go out of the gate you’ll see a kind of track worn in the grass; and all you’ve got to do is to follow it for about three quarters of a mile, till you come to a new road that’s just been finished. When the rest of it’s made right, motors won’t have any trouble between Nick’s ranch and mine.”

Angela said that she understood her instructions perfectly, and took the green-lined parasol which her hostess had found for her. Its outer covering was scarlet, and it was rather big and heavy. Angela made up her mind that she would not use it except for the hottest part of the walk, going across the disused pasture land.

“You’ll really be able to come on about five?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, I shall be a different woman by that time.” The contralto voice dropped oddly and suddenly with these words: an effect of the headache, of course. And the pallor of the dark face was almost ghastly. Angela thought that her hostess looked very ill. “You may expect me,” Carmen finished.

“I know Mr. Hilliard would be disappointed if you didn’t come. Good-bye till five, then.”

“Good-bye.”

Angela turned away; and Mrs. Gaylor, who had brought her guest as far as the beginning of the bamboo grove; stood watching the white figure flit farther and farther away, among the intricate green pillars of the temple. Then, when the elusive form became ghostlike in the distance, Carmen went back to the house. She walked slowly and with dignified composure while it was possible that she might be seen by some servant. But once in her room, with the door locked, she tottered to the bedside and flung herself down on her knees.

“O God—O God!” she gasped, her face hidden.

Then, lifting her eyes, with a look of horror, she whispered, “No, not God—*devil*. He’s the only one I can ever pray to now.”

Her eyes, glazed and staring, saw again the white figure passing from sunshine into shadow. So it had been in Madame Vestris's crystal. How soon would the dark cloud blot it out of sight now—and forever?

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Angela had some difficulty in opening the gate that led from an orange plantation into the disused pasture, for the fence was high and strong, and the gate, apparently, not often used. As for the pasture, it went billowing away mile after mile, seemingly, though at a distance she could see a wire fence, a long vanishing line. And beyond that—-safety shut away by the wire, she was glad to think—a large number of cattle grazing. They were so far off that their forms were all massed together, and they seemed very quiet. Nevertheless, she was glad that a wire fence separated them from her, for though she was not a coward and would not have stopped now if there had been no fence, there was something rather terrifying about a great drove of cattle in a lonely place.

“They’re much too far off to see my red-covered sunshade,” she thought. “But even if they did see it, and didn’t like it, they wouldn’t jump over a fence to get at me, I suppose!”

She walked on, along the track worn by the passing of feet, which had thinned and flattened the grass. She could not see the new road of which Carmen had spoken, but she must reach it sooner or later, going this way. For the present, several low hills, like grass-sown waves, billowed between her and it. But by and by, perhaps, she would hear the “teuf-teuf” of Nick’s motor coming along the new road, to fetch her and Carmen. Would he be glad or sorry when he found that she was alone? She hoped that he would be glad, but Mrs. Gaylor was so beautiful that it was hard to be sure. Suddenly, just as she reached the top of one of the billowing hills and caught sight of a rough road about half a mile away, she started at a sharp sound like a shot. It seemed to come from the direction of the cattle, and she turned to look toward them, vaguely disturbed. As she looked, her unformed fears turned to keen and definite terror. The shot, whether or no it had struck one of their number, had, in an instant, stirred the drove in panic. Their comfortable peace was broken. Horns tossed, dark forms reared, and hoofs descended on shining backs. A bull bellowed wildly. Others followed suit. There was a dreadful roaring, and a rushing of hoofs that sounded in Angela’s horrified ears like the beginning of an earthquake. The whole troop, hundreds of horned heads and humpy backs, massed and seethed together. It was as if an irresistible force from behind impelled them all forward in a pack. She stood still and watched the black wave of cattle, fascinated, appalled, her heart beating thickly. No, they could not stop now. Nothing could stop them, except some great obstacle which they could not pass. And, when they came to that obstacle, many would be killed by others’ trampling hoofs. They would fall and die, and their brothers would beat them down, not knowing, blind and mad and merciless. It was a stampede. She had read of such things happening among wild cattle in the West. Poor creatures,

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poor stupid brutes, how sorry, how sickeningly sorry she was for them! Who could have fired the shot, and why? Men on horses were in sight now—two, she thought—no, three, galloping fast, but far behind the drove. They could do no good. Only the fence would stop the rush, she told herself, through the poundings of her heart. Then—then—it was as if a loud voice cried the question in her ears—*Would the fence stop it?*

If not—"May God help me!" she heard herself saying. For an instant she stared at the oncoming black wave which swept on, faster and faster toward her, so incredibly, terribly fast now that in another second she knew they would break down the line of wire fence. The cattle, those that were not trampled to death, would soon pour through the gap, would sweep on and on, overwhelming this hill where she stood.

Strange, some lines of a poem were saying themselves in Angela's head. She had read them lately, since she came to America, the story of a stampede and a girl. Laska—-yes, that was the name—loved a man, and saved him from the rush of wild cattle by covering his body with hers, protecting it with her bleeding flesh from the blows of the iron hoofs.

Nick had given her the book. She had been in a train when she read the story of Laska. She saw herself sitting safely and cosily in a stateroom, all panelled satinwood and green velvet. Now——

Blindly she started to run. It was useless, she knew, for the fence was certain to go, and she could no more outrun that black billow of death than she could outrace one of Paolo di Sereno's aeroplanes. Yet instinct made her run toward the far-off road, away from the plunging, bellowing cattle. She thought of Hilliard, and how he would hate to hear of the death she had died. He would give his life for hers, as Laska had given her life for her lover.

XXIX

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Just as Nick was finishing a somewhat hurried and sketchy luncheon a telegram was handed to him. It was from Max Wisler, the San Francisco detective, and it said laconically, "Don't let A. M. visit C. G."

As Nick read, the blood rushed to his forehead, and he sprang to his feet, knocking over the chair in which he had been sitting.

Max Wisler had not been told by him that Mrs. May was to visit Mrs. Gaylor; but that must be what he meant. It had not occurred to Nick that it could be necessary to mention Angela's brief stay, in telling Wisler that he himself was "running up to Lucky

Star." The detective must have found out in some ferreting way of his own. And he had telegraphed, "Don't let A. M. visit C. G." What could be his reason? Then suddenly a dreadful explanation flashed into Nick's head; flashed there and stayed, as if printed in letters of blood on his brain.

Wisler had been right after all. He had found out who sent the box of poison oak. Those hateful questions of his, so much resented, had been justified. There could be no other explanation. Nothing else could excuse this warning. It seemed too hideous to be true that Wisler had telegraphed because there was danger for Angela, and yet——

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Nick did not wait to finish out the sentence in his mind. The Japanese servant, who was cook and valet and chamberman, had brought the telegram and the last luncheon dish at the same time. Now he was providing Billy the chauffeur with something to eat. But Nick did not wait or even think about Billy. The engagement with Mrs. Gaylor and Angela was for five o'clock, but that made no difference to Nick, with the telegram in his hand. Knowing what he knew—for he did know now, as if he had seen all Wisler's proofs—he would not trust Angela alone with Carmen for a single hour. He was going this instant to snatch her away, with no matter what excuse. He would think of something to satisfy Angela, for she must not find out the truth if he could help it—-anyhow, not while she was under Carmen's roof; it would shock and distress her too much. The principal thing was to get her out of the place quickly and quietly. As for Carmen—he could not decide yet how he should deal with Carmen. Loyal as he was by nature, and as he had shown himself to Wisler, modest as to his own deserts, and slow to fancy himself valued by any woman, he could not now help seeing, as Wisler had seen the one motive which could have tempted Carmen Gaylor to send Angela May a box of poison-oak. Many little things came back, in a flood of disturbing memory; things to which Nick had attached no importance at the time, or had misunderstood, owing to his humility, where women were concerned, and his chivalrous, almost exaggerated respect for his employer's wife and widow—the generous, disinterested friend that he had thought her. "What a fool—what a double-dyed fool!" he anathematized himself, as he got the motor ready to start, while Billy still ate apple-pie and cream on the kitchen veranda. In spite of Wisler's catechism he had let Angela accept Carmen's invitation, had even urged her to accept. If anything hideous happened it would be his fault. But no, surely nothing would happen. It was too bad to be true. If Carmen had committed the crime of sending the poison-oak, it must have been in a fit of madness, after hearing things—stupid things—from Miss Dene. By this time she must have repented. She could not be a woman and harm a guest—such a guest as Angela May and in her own house.

And yet it was odd—he had dimly thought it odd, even in his ignorance—that Carmen should have followed them out to the Big Trees from Wawona, there to make a "dead set" at Mrs. May. She had said that her choice of the Yosemite for rest and change of air was a coincidence; that she had not known he was in the neighbourhood until she heard the news at Wawona. But suddenly Nick ceased to believe that story. She had gone because he was there—with Angela May.

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As he thought these things he was starting the car, getting into the car, driving the car away from the house, to the Gaylor ranch. There was no bad patch of road. That was an invention of Carmen's for the plausibility of the plan she had sketched out to Angela. The road had been finished months ago, and Nick flew along it in the Bright Angel at a pace which might have got him into trouble with the police if there had been any police to spy upon him. The way ran through disused pasture land which was to be irrigated, enriched, and grown with alfalfa; and at a turn in the road he came upon a sight which flashed to his eyes like a spurt of vitriol. He saw the wild cattle break through the fence—the new "bunch" which Carmen had just got from Arizona. He saw them struggling, and trampling each other down, and sweeping through the gap like a wave through a broken dyke. He saw a figure in white running toward him, and knew it was Angela May—knew that she must die unless he could be in time to save her.

Nick turned the car, and sent it leaping off the road, to bound over the rough hummocks, billowing under the heat-baked grass. He looked like a dead man, with only his eyes and hands—his strong, firm hands—alive. The motor rocked on the green waves as if in a stormy sea, and groaned like a wounded bull—one of those who had died there at the broken fence, with their hearts' blood in their mouths.

It was almost on her now—the wild black wave—with death in its wake and death in its gift; but he reached her first, and leaning out while the car swerved—as many a time he had leaned from his galloping bronco in cowboy days, to pick up a hat or a handkerchief—he caught Angela up beside him. Then with a twist of the steering-wheel he gave the Bright Angel a half-turn that sent her flying along in front of the cattle, almost underneath the tossing horns and plunging hoofs. Thus he shot past the surging line of them, since he could not turn round sharply to run before the wave without risk of upsetting. As the automobile dashed past, the cattle surged on irresistibly; but Nick and Angela in the car were beyond the reach of hoofs and horns.

Three mounted cowboys saw the race won, and yelled a wild yell of triumph, but their duty was to the cattle. They went about their business knowing that the car was safe; and Nick neither saw the men nor consciously heard their shouts.

Angela was half fainting. Holding her up, he steered as he could, slowing down now lest the jumping springs of the car should break. He drove away from, not toward, Mrs. Gaylor's house. He would not take Angela back to Carmen even for a moment. Yet as she was alone and swooning she could not go to his house. He caught at the idea of a quick run into Bakersfield in search of a doctor. But when he saw at last that Angela was slowly coming to herself, drawing deep, sobbing breaths, her eyelashes trembling on wet cheeks, he eased the car down on a quiet stretch of road, under the shade of young walnut-trees and oaks. There he stopped for a while, in the cool tree shadows.

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“You’re safe, precious one, safe,” he whispered, as he might have soothed a child. “There’s nothing to be afraid of now.”

Angela opened her eyes and looked at him through her lashes as she had never looked before. “I—thought of you then,” she murmured. “I thought of you—I wanted you. Just when I expected to die.”

Her eyes, her voice, her words, broke down the last barrier that held him back; and he would have been more or less than man if he had not poured out, in a torrent, all his love and worship in a flood of words.

“Darling—heart’s dearest—do you think I’d have let you die so? I must have felt—I must have heard you call me. It had to be. I’d feel a thought of yours across the world,” he stammered. “If I were in my grave and you wanted me, my spirit would come back into my body to serve you. How I love you, love you, dear! It can’t be that such love can leave you cold. I’m not of your world, but come down to mine, or help me to come into yours. Give me a little love, just a little love, and I’ll give you my soul.”

“Don’t—oh, don’t!” faltered Angela. She raised her head from his arm and sat up, leaning away from him.

“I know I’m a wretch!” he said. “I ought to be shot for speaking of myself, when you’re all broken to pieces. The words came. I’ve been keeping them back day by day, but that’s no excuse. Forgive me!”

“No—you mustn’t use the word forgive—when you’ve just saved my life! It’s only this—I can’t let you go on.”

“Not now. I know. But some time——”

“No. Not ever. Don’t think I couldn’t care for you. It isn’t that. I could. I——But I *mustn’t* care. It’s all impossible! I ought to have told you long ago. The only thing is to forget—for us both. Oh, if I could have kept you for my friend! But I feel now that’s impossible, too. After this, we can’t be friends, can we?”

“No, we can’t be friends,” he echoed, very pale, suddenly weary and almost broken by the strain he had endured. “But are you sure——”

“Sure. The more I care, the more sure. Oh, Nick, my dear, my dear, I wish you had let me die!”

He looked at her strangely and very sadly, after his first start and stiffening of the muscles. “Would that have been better than caring for me?” he asked in a voice so low that she could just catch the words.

“Yes, it would have been much better,” she answered, covering her face with her hands to hide the tears that burned her eyes. She was too weak for the explanation she would have given at sunset among the redwoods. This was no time, and she was in no state for explanations. She could only feel and hide from him what she felt, or part of it; for if he but half guessed how she loved him and wanted his love, she would be in his arms, his lips on hers. There was no thought in her mind how terribly he might be misunderstanding.

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His lips were white. “Very well,” he said. “It’s better for me that you’ve been frank. All the same and all the more I want you to forgive me for speaking at a time like this. I won’t offend you again. Only I don’t take back anything. So now you know. Don’t try to talk, and I won’t talk much to you. I don’t think I could if I would. I’m going to drive you to Bakersfield. But shall I take you to a kind old doctor I know, who can give you something to pick you up, or would you rather I’d drop you at a hotel? For—I can’t explain, so please don’t ask—but I mustn’t let you go to Mrs. Gaylor’s again. There’s a good reason why. Maybe you’ll know some time, but I don’t believe it can ever be from me. I’ll fetch your maid and your baggage when you’re settled somewhere. And if you’re strong enough, the best thing will be to start for San Francisco to-night. When you’re there, see Mr. Morehouse, and let him take good care of you. For it’s true, as you said; you and I can’t go on being friends.”

Angela opened her lips to answer him, but could not. He started the car once more, and drove on faster.

“I’ll go to a hotel, thank you, not to a doctor,” she said when she could speak.

* * * * *

Soon the news of the stampede among the new bunch of steers from Arizona found its way to the house, and Carmen was told what had happened. The rush of the cattle had been stopped by the time she heard of it, but only at the brink of the big irrigation canal. Two fences had been broken down and a good many animals killed. Others had had to be shot.

“Anybody hurt?” Carmen asked in a queer, dry voice. She seemed to take little interest in the fate of the new cattle, though they had been a costly purchase.

So far as was known, nobody had been hurt. But it was too soon to be sure yet. And there was no one who could tell up to that moment how the stampede had been started. But some of the boys talked about a gun going off mysteriously. And a lady had been seen in the disused pasture. The boys had seen her running, and afterward being caught up by a man in a big yellow motor, what man they weren’t sure—they’d been going too fast and were too far off—but he was like Nick Hilliard.

And it was then that Simeon Harp came on to the terrace where Carmen was standing to hear the story. Seeing his face she knew that things had gone utterly wrong, and that all hope was lost.

“Nick will know what I did!” she told herself, as the death-stab of failure struck her in the heart. “Maybe he knows already. If that woman has told him how I sent her out alone, and how I lied about his plans being changed, and the men he had to meet, then he must guess. They’re sure to compare notes, and he’ll suspect about the poison-oak.”

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The ice of despair was a frozen dagger in her breast. Even before the chance came for a talk with Simeon Harp she made up her mind what to do. It would be a cruel wrench, but there was nothing else. She could not face Nick's look of loathing, even though gratitude for the past should close his lips upon his knowledge, and upon his secret thoughts of her. To go away, far away, this very hour, before he could come, would be a confession of guilt and of utter defeat; but to Carmen, crushed and hopeless and ashamed, it was the only thing to do. She would go and never come back. She would live in the East, or, better still, in Europe, and sell the hateful ranch. She had received many tempting offers since her husband's death, and through her lawyers she would accept one that was still open. Life here would be too hateful with Nick for a silent enemy; Nick married by and by, perhaps, to the other woman.

The excitement of her decision kept Carmen from a physical collapse. Quickly, if a little confusedly, she thought out a plan. There would, of course, be a question of insurance for the dead and injured cattle, she said to the elderly foreman who had taken Nick's place on the ranch. She would go to San Francisco at once. No use to point out that it was unnecessary. She wished to go. That was enough. And she gave directions to every one what was to be done in her absence, for she might be away some days. She would not take her maid. She preferred to travel alone. And when some question was asked later by one of the house servants about the guest, Mrs. May, Carmen answered: "She has been suddenly called away from here by telegram. I don't think she'll be coming back to the house. There'll be a message for that Irish girl of hers by and by, I expect. Anyhow, I can't trouble about them now. Their affairs must take care of themselves."

Mariette, Carmen's French maid, hurriedly and sulkily packed enough things to last her mistress for a week; and by the time the trunk and bag were ready the carriage was waiting to take Mrs. Gaylor into Bakersfield. Everybody knew that no train would leave Kern for San Francisco until night, but the imperious lady was in no mood to receive extraneous information. She had said something about seeing a lawyer in Bakersfield. If she chose to waste hours there it was her business, not that of the household.

But driving to the town, Carmen decided not to go to San Francisco by that night's train. She had had time to reflect a little, not only upon what had happened, but upon what was likely to happen. If Angela May suspected the truth—and Carmen's conscience told her that this was more than probable—she would not go back to the ranch. Nick would not let her go there, even if she wished it. He would send for or fetch the Irish maid and the luggage, while Mrs. May—already engaged to marry him, perhaps—-waited at his place, or at a Bakersfield hotel. In any case it was almost certain that "the woman" (as Carmen called Angela always, in her mind) would travel to San Francisco that night. And it seemed likely to Mrs. Gaylor that Nick would go with her and the maid. Carmen could not risk an encounter in the train.

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Arrived at Bakersfield, fortunately without meeting Nick in his motor, she hired a large automobile. And at the hour when Hilliard was being informed that Mrs. Gaylor had gone away for a few days, on business which had come up suddenly, she was travelling swiftly by road to San Francisco.

The car she had engaged was a powerful touring automobile, with side-curtains of canvas, and these she ordered to be kept down; for she had some wild fear that Nick might discover her plan, try to follow and find her during her journey, necessarily much longer by motor than by train. Always by daylight she was peeping out, nervously, from under her thick veil, but the Bright Angel never flashed into sight. She knew at last that it would not come, that Nick did not mean to follow; that she would not see him again this side the grave; for she did not intend ever to return to the Gaylor ranch. Where she would live she did not know yet, though she thought vaguely of some great city in Europe—Paris, perhaps, where there would be plenty of excitement which might help her to forget. Meanwhile, the thing was to get away—away, not only from California, but even from America—as quickly as possible, it hardly mattered how, for luckily—the one piece of luck she had left!—there was plenty of money. And the ranch could take care of itself.

The day Carmen reached San Francisco a ship happened to be sailing for Japan. She was able to engage a cabin, and went on board almost at the last moment. Among others who arrived very late was a bent old man, with a worn face which had once been handsome. Carmen did not see him till the third day out. Then, from the deck sacred to second-class passengers, a pair of dark blue, red-rimmed eyes looked up at her as she leaned listlessly on the rail, gazing down.

Madame Vestris had seen in the crystal a man standing beside her, a man in shadow. After all, it was not Nick Hilliard but Simeon Harp.

XXX

THE MAKING OF A GENTLEMAN

One evening, when July was beginning, Nick Hilliard sat on the veranda of his plain little house, which he had grown to love. Swinging back and forth in a big rocking-chair, he smoked a pipe and thought very hard. As he thought and smoked, he looked dreamily at a young owl in a big cage; the owl he had sent home from Paso Robles.

If he had been thinking about it, he could have seen, dark against the pale fire of the desert sky, the source of his fortune; the great gusher throwing up its black spout of oil, like tons upon tons of coal. For the famous Lucky Star oil supply showed no sign yet of giving out, though it had been playing like a huge geyser for many months; and already, since its mysterious birth, many younger brothers had been born, small and insignificant

comparatively, but money-makers. If Nick's thought had not drawn down a curtain in front of his eyes, he must have seen, across a

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blue lake and a black desert created by a rain of oil, a forest of derricks, like a scattered group of burnt fir-trees with low-hung bare branches. But instead of these his mind's eye saw a new road, shaded by walnuts and oaks, that marched in long straight lines between rough pasture and irrigated land. He saw in the tree-shadows a yellow motor-car drawn up by the side of the road, and in it a beautiful, pale girl, hatless, with disordered golden hair and a torn white dress. He saw a man with the girl, and heard her say that it would have been better to die than let herself care for him.

"Yet she *did* care for me," Nick told himself obstinately. "There's no getting over that. She said, 'You mustn't think I don't care.'" And even if she hadn't said it, there was that look in her eyes. Could he ever forget the look, or cease to thrill at the memory? No; he knew that he could not, till the hour of his death. "It was because I'm not of her world, that she couldn't bear to let herself go, and love me as she was beginning to love me, I know," he thought, as he had thought countless times before, in the weeks since he had quietly let her go out of his life. "I'm not what she's been brought up to call a gentleman," his mind went on drearily preaching to him. "I suppose I can't realize the bigness and deepness of the gulf between us, as she sees it. I've only my own standards to judge by. Hers are mighty different. I knew there *was* a gulf, but I hoped love would bridge it. She thought no bridge could be strong enough for her to walk on to me. I wonder if she thinks the same yet, or if the feeling I have sometimes, that she's calling to me from far off, means anything? I told her that day I'd feel her thinking of me across the world. Well—what if she's thinking of me now?"

Nick had often debated this subject, and looked at it from every point of view; for after the first blow over the heart, a dim, scarcely perceptible light of hope had come creeping back to him. Knowing from her words, and better still from her eyes, that Angela had cared a little, at least enough to suffer, Nick had wondered whether he might not make himself more acceptable to her than he had been.

He did not disparage himself with undue humility in asking this question. He knew that he was a man, and that honour and strength and cleanness of living counted for something in this world. But if he could become more like the men she knew—in other words, a gentleman fit to mate with a great lady—what then?

For Nick was aware that his manners were not polished. In what Mrs. May would call "society," no doubt he would be guilty of a thousand mistakes, a thousand awkwardnesses. If he did anything rightly it would be by instinct—instinct implanted by generations of his father's well-born, well-bred ancestors—rather than from knowledge of what was conventionally the "proper thing." If Angela had let love win, perhaps she might often

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have been humiliated by his ignorances and stupidities, Nick reminded himself; and for him that would have been worse than death, even as for her, according to her admission, it would have been worse than death to go on caring for him. Perhaps she had been wise. Maybe he was “impossible.” But, if ever she suffered a moment’s regret, now that they were parted, and if he could yet find a way of happiness for both, better than cold wisdom, was there no hope? It was of a way to reach her that he was thinking to-night; and abruptly the big chair ceased to swing and creak. “I’ll go and see that chap they call the Dook!” Nick mumbled on a sudden resolution, and knocked out the ashes from his pipe.

A minute later he was strolling through the hot purple twilight toward Lucky Star City, one of the queerest little towns on earth. It had not, however, the remotest conception that it was queer. On the contrary, it thought itself a gay and pleasant place, singularly up-to-date, and lacking nothing except water, which was now worth a good deal more than the fortune-giving oil of which it had too much.

The rough, mostly unpainted, wooden houses, shops, and hotels composing Lucky Star City were so near the great oil gusher which accounted for the town’s existence that the front rank of frame buildings was peppered all over with a jetty spray. This disfigurement had come when the gusher was at its highest, and its black, blowing spume had been borne by the wind for long distances. The earth seemed to have gone into mourning and to be spread with a pall almost as far as the boundary of the ranch which Nick had retained for himself; yet there was a strong dividing-line. He had kept some pasture land, for he loved cattle; but his great pleasure had been in irrigation; and literally he had made the desert “blossom as a rose.” Even the smell was different when he turned his back upon his own fragrant alfalfa fields, and drew in breaths laden with the fumes of crude petroleum. But he was used to the scent of oil and hardly noticed it.

He skirted round the desert lake and steered clear of another lesser lake, formed entirely of petroleum from the great gusher. By day its greasy blackness glared in hideous contrast to the blue though brackish water; but now night lent its ugliness a strange disguise. All the faint twilight that remained glimmered on the gloss of its surface like phosphorus in the palm of a negro’s hand; and as Nick passed on toward the town, stars shone out in its dark mirror. He could hear the thick splash of the gusher that rose and fell, like the beating of a giant’s heart, and from the brightly lighted town sounds of laughter and fiddling came to him.

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Lucky Star City had no suburbs. The whole place had grown up in less than a year, and, in fact, such buildings as had existed for six months were known as “old.” There was but one street, though a few ambitious landowners had run up houses in “gardens” at a short but haughty distance from the “business part”; and at night the town was seen at its best. The three two-storeyed, verandaed hotels—one painted white, another green, the third and noisiest not painted at all—blazed with lights. The drug store, the jewellery store (for there was a jewellery store, and a prosperous one), the grocery store—combining a large trade in candy—the post office, and the dry-goods store—where two extremes were made to meet with a display of hats and shoes in the same window—were every one open and crowded. Men in shirt-sleeves, and men in khaki, men of almost all conditions and nations, sat or lounged on the hotel verandas making music or listening to it, swapping stories and yelling with laughter. Away in the distance at one end of the long street—which had no pavement but yellow sand—there was a shooting gallery, and every second or two was marked off with a shot, or a shout of applause or derision. At the other end, equally far away from the populous centre of shops, was a variety theatre, a mere shanty, run up in a day; and as Nick took his way toward the green-painted hotel he could hear the shrill squalling of a woman’s untrained voice, shrieking out the latest comic song.

“Hello, Nick!” “How go things, High-pockets?” friendly voices saluted Hilliard as he marched through the cigarette-strewn sand. And he had a laughing word for each one. Everybody who was anybody had a nickname at Lucky Star City, and Hilliard was rather pleased with “High-pockets” —bestowed upon him because of his height and his long straight legs. “The Dook” was the sobriquet of the person he had come to see; and it was by this name that Nick inquired for him, gravely, of the landlord.

The man addressed chuckled. “I guess he’s gone over to Meek’s to try and borrow some cash off his dear country-man. I seen him strollin’ down that way. Hope Meek’ll fork out. The Dook owes me two weeks’ board, and I’ve give him notice to pay up or quit. London hotels may hand out free meals to the nobility and gentry for the sake o’ the ad. But this ain’t London. Nope!”

“Is he nobility?” inquired Nick.

“Blamed if I know. Puts on airs enough. Ain’t got much else to put on now, I guess. No one never told me you and he was chums.”

“No more we are. I never had a word with him; but I’m lookin’ for a few,” said Nick. “If he can make good, we may do some business together.”

“Huh!” grunted the landlord of the emerald-painted hotel, which had received its colour in honour and subtle advertisement of the owner’s name—Green. “I don’t see you two swappin’ canteens any, Nick, but it ain’t for me to bust into your game; and I guess if you sling him a roll o’ your good greenbacks, I’ll contrive to switch some o’ ’em off the

line into my pocket. That's to say, if you give him a job he can stick to his bunk and his grub in my hotel."

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Mr. Green was just about to round off his ultimatum with a spurt of tobacco-juice aimed at a passing cat, when he checked himself hastily at sight of a woman. What became of the tobacco-juice was a mystery or a conjuring trick, but the cat's somewhat blunted sensibilities, and the lady's—not yet blunted—were spared.

"Who's that?" Nick inquired in a low, respectful voice, when Green had touched the place where his hat would have been if he had had it on, and the young woman, bowing with stiff politeness, had gone by.

"What, don't you know?" the landlord of the Eureka Hotel replied with a question. "But I forgot, you ain't shown up around here much since you blow'd hack from the East. The fellers say Noo York's kinder got your goat, and you're sheddin' your feathers in these lonesome wilds, pinin' after the theayters and swell doin's in the Waldorf-Astoria. But I tell 'em 'nope, that ain't Nick Hilliard. He's true-blue to the Golden West."

"Right you are," said Nick. "All the same, I don't know who the lady is, and I'm sure I never saw her here, though I have a sort of feelin' I remember her face."

"Met in another world, mebbe?" Green chuckled. "She ain't no great looker, though, more's the pity for our young sparks that could do with a noo beauty at Lucky Star. She's no chicken, either; and her face is the kind of face that to see once is to forget twice, accordin' to your friend the Dook, who's great on what he calls epergrams, when he's feelin' well."

"Oh, is he?" Nick's hopeful expression lost some of its glow, for this trait of the Dook's did not strike him as attractive. "He ain't my friend yet. But you haven't told me who the lady is. Maybe her name will shake up my recollection box, for I've seen her somewhere, sure."

"She's Miss Sara Wilkins, the new school-teacher," Green replied, glad to impart information. "She was imported from the fur East while you was away; called on in a hurry to take the place of Mrs. Pears, who died on us, right in the midst of the last term, poor critter. She had no way with youngsters, Mrs. Pears hadn't, though she came recommended as a treasure: so p'raps it's just as well for us our treasure's laid up in heaven. We've got a surprisin' lot of children in this city, for such a young one; but our men are doin' that well they feel justified in sendin' fur their families. We're gettin' a mighty nice society: some o' our ladies from the East, as far off as Omaha; and 'twas the minister's wife stood out for this Miss Wilkins, an old school-fellow o' hern. Pity she ain't handsome, as we can't boast but two other unmarried gals in our set."

Nick reflected. Where had he seen that small-featured, conscientious little face? He seemed to associate it with some agreeable and not very distant episode; yet its intelligent insignificance was so overshadowed by the pleasantness of the episode itself, that he now tried in vain to identify it with a searchlight of recognition. "I give up,"

he said to himself discontentedly. “Maybe it’ll come to me later.” And then, suddenly, it did.

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The new school-teacher at Lucky Star City was the little woman who had arrived with the Native Daughters at the Santa Barbara hotel, and would have been swamped by them had not Angela taken pity on her. No wonder it had been an effort to label his impression, for no woman had a face worth the name of face for Nick when Angela's was to be seen. But perhaps Miss Wilkins had not had the same difficulty in disentangling him from among her impressions of the past, for she had flashed upon him a glance, bright with interest, before casting down her eyes decorously and passing on.

"Here comes the Dook now," remarked the landlord of the Eureka. "By the look of him I guess his country-man wouldn't part with anything 'cept a drink. If he keeps clear of the liquor belt, as a general thing, it's only because his fee-nan-shel situation don't run to it. I'll introduce you."

A man approached, wearing a shambling air of discouragement, until he saw that he was under observation; whereupon his muscles tightened, and he pulled himself together, straightening his narrow shoulders and throwing back his small head.

"Mr. Nickson Hilliard, this is Mr. Montagu Jerrold, *alias* the Dook, a blarsted Britisher," announced Green affably. "Dook, this is Mr. Nickson Hilliard, who wants to meet you, the Lord knows why; late owner of Lucky Star gusher and the whitest man and the biggest man we've got in this section. His other name is High-pockets, as I guess you hev heard, and it might be Full-pockets too, wuthout steerin' wide o' the mark."

Nick put out his hand to the newcomer who had a haughty beak of a nose, little forehead, and less chin. Wretched bit of flotsam and jetsam on the sands of life, one keen look into his self-satisfied light eyes was enough to learn the secret of his failure; failure which, go where he would, seek as he might, could never be turned into success. Nick's heart pitied the man, while it shut involuntarily against him.

Montagu Jerrold crooked his elbow and lifted the brown strong hand of High-pockets to a level with his own weak chin, before he deigned to shake it. He did so then with an air, and a drawled "How d'y' do?" which was the most English thing that Nick had ever met with off the stage.

"Little brute, I'd like to kick him if he wasn't such a duffer," was Nick's reluctant thought, for he had wanted to be favourably impressed by the Dook. If this were really anything like an English duke, give *him* a crossing-sweeper! But he must not be too hasty in his generalization. He was unhappily sure that Mrs. May's position in her far-off world (world for which he was deemed unworthy) associated her with dukes, earls, barons, counts, and all sorts of titled anachronisms of every nation. Repulsive as this draggled specimen appeared, it might know something worth his, Nick Hilliard's, while to learn; and he was not going to give up because of first impressions. He had not met Montagu Jerrold

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before, but had heard of him often during the last three or four months since the Englishman “blew into” Lucky Star City. He was a boaster as well as a waster, no doubt; for according to himself, he knew “everybody at home,” from the King down the whole gamut of the British peerage. Also he “claimed” to be an Oxford man, and it was that which, in this emergency, had focused Nick’s attention upon him.

The landlord, aware that Nick had a “proposition” to make, excused himself when he had brought off the introduction; and the two men were left more or less alone at their end of the hotel veranda. Nevertheless, so complicated was the nature of Nick’s business that he wished for greater privacy, and he suggested a stroll in the direction of the gusher.

“You’re an Oxford graduate, aren’t you?” he began.

“Ya-as, I went up to Oxford from Eton,” drawled Jerrold with an accent which Nick disliked, but was ready to believe in as well-bred, because few Englishmen to the “manner born” had happened to come his way. “All the elder sons of my family, since the days of Charles the Second, don’t you know, have gone in for the Army; and that’s what I should have liked, but my eldest brother has the money as well as the title, d’you see, and I’m only third son. I——”

“Yes,” said Nick curtly. “But you mustn’t worry to tell me all your private affairs unless you really want to. Because what I’m most interested in is the Oxford part. I never went to college, nor to any school for the matter of that, except a night one, but I’ve tried to make up a bit with reading all I could. I suppose I don’t know much about books, compared with you——”

“Oh, I was never much of a grind,” the other cut in hastily. “I went in for other things. I was cox——“.

“It’s etiquette I’m thinking of,” Nick confessed humbly. “You’d be born knowin’ a lot about that, I dare say, in your family. And then, being at Oxford, too! I always notice college men have a different way from those who haven’t been to any university. It’s hard to explain the difference, but it’s there.”

“Oh, rather,” agreed the Englishman. “You know our King himself will send all his sons to Oxford and Cambridge. Nothin’ like it, my dear fellow, what? Our family——”

“Could you give lessons, sort of object-lessons, in what to do and what not do in society?” inquired Nick, eager yet shy, not ashamed of his motive in asking, but fearful by instinct that he was not getting hold of the right man.

“Nothing easier,” returned Montagu Jerrold, the prominent gooseberries, which were his eyes, looking somewhat less thoroughly boiled. “I was thinkin’ of leavin’ this beastly hole, don’t you know. Nothin’ in it for a gentleman, what? But if you’ve somethin’ to offer worth takin’, why I might stick it out for a bit, I dessay.”

Nick longed to box the’ creature’s ears; but they were well-shaped and might be the ears of a man born with etiquette flowing with his blue blood, through azure veins. The shape of his nose wasn’t bad, but those eyes and that chin! They were, as Nick grimly expressed it to himself, the *limit*. Nevertheless, he would persevere, and try a course of lessons from the Dook.

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They began to discuss terms, and Nick did not bargain. Mr. Jerrold was to have an advance payment of twenty-five dollars, on account of fifty, for ten "lessons"; and he was to come to Nick's house every evening to "supper" at half-past seven, remaining until half-past nine. Hilliard was to be watched through the meal and corrected if he did anything wrong with his knife and fork, or his bread; and they were to have conversations and discussions covering various imagined emergencies.

Details were arranged, much to the satisfaction of Montagu Jerrold, whose real name was Herbert Higgins, and who had been a house decorator, employed—and discharged—by a small London firm. Never had he been inside an Oxford college: never had he seen the King—except on a post card. He returned joyously to his hotel, where, as Mr. Green was lying in wait, he had to part with most of his advance. And Nick tramped home torn in mind, fearing instinctively that he was about to jump from the frying-pan of ignorance into a fire of vulgarity at which Angela would shudder.

Every night for a week the Dook appeared promptly in time for Nick's substantial supper, which, by the way, he advised his host to transform into dinner. "You simply can't have 'supper' at half-past seven, my deah fellow. It isn't *done!* Dinner should be at eight, at earliest. Our royalties prefer it at nine. If you have supper it is after the theatre or opera, don't you know." But when Nick stolidly refused to be such an "affected donkey" as to call his evening meal by another name to make it sweeter, Mr. Jerrold did not scorn the meal because it lacked refinement.

On the seventh night, however, Hilliard gave his noble instructor notice.

"I'm real sorry," he remarked pleasantly, "but I can't help it. I'd rather go on as I am, and pin myself to a prickly pear, than shine in society by doing any of these monkey tricks you've been tryin' to put me on to. You say they're 'the thing' and the newest dope and all that, and maybe they're real nice for your sort, but I tell you they're not for mine! It seems to me you know a wonderful lot of fool things that ain't so, and I can't yoke up with 'em. What's more, I don't mean to. And now I see they're the only cards you've got in your hand I don't want any more dealt out to me—Hook up my little finger when I come to grips with a coffee-cup! No, thank you! I *see* myself doin' it or any other of the pussy-catisms you've been tryin' to unload on me. And you drop your 'g's' just as bad as I do. No, you'll have to switch off, doc; and after to-night you can go your way and I'll go mine, for there's nothin' doin' here for you except this little roll of bills. Good night, bud. That's all the trumps in the game!"

But the bills—which were the trumps for Jerrold—amounted to fifty dollars more than he had been promised for the whole course of lessons. So he had not done badly after all. And leaving Lucky Star City, which had no oil nor milk of human kindness for him, he drifted on somewhere else, as he will continue to drift until he stumbles into an ignominious grave.

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But Nick was angry and thwarted—angry with himself because he had been a fool, and thwarted because he remained as before, handicapped by his own ignorance. In spite of Jerrold's boasts, Nick's instinct had told him after the first words exchanged that the man was not only a cad, but a rank pretender. Still, in his desire for social knowledge, he had refused at first to listen to the voice of instinct and had been punished for obtuseness. The very thought of the little drawling outsider who had delighted in his sobriquet of "the Dook" made Hilliard feel sick, and he opened wide all the windows and doors when the contemptible creature went out of the house. "Wanted to turn me into a dry-goods clerk, did he?" Nick grumbled. And the episode was closed.

One afternoon, not many days after the expulsion of Montagu Jerrold, Nick kept a long-made promise, by going to call on the wife of the Presbyterian minister, the only professional purveyor of religion who had yet settled in Lucky Star City. Mrs. Kenealy was out, but was coming back soon, and Nick was urged by her small daughter to wait. This he consented to do, and found the school-teacher also waiting in the pleasant little "living-room."

The young man and woman were introduced by the child, who, then relieved of responsibility, left them to each other's mercy, and flew to a friend with whom she had been playing dolls on the back porch.

"I don't suppose you remember me," said Miss Sara Wilkins rather wistfully. "But I remember you very well."

"So do I you," Nick was glad to reply with truth; and his heart warmed to the wisp of a woman to whom Miss Dene had been catty and Mrs. May kind. "It was at Santa Barbara."

"Why, you *do* remember!" she exclaimed delightedly. "I never thought you would. I always think there's nothing about me that any one *could* recollect. Oh, would you mind telling me how that lovely lady is who was so good to me? I often think about her. She was the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my life."

Nick could have kissed her hands—little thin hands—kissed them even in their gray lisle-thread gloves; Needless to say, however, he did nothing of the sort. He answered quietly that it was now some time since he had seen Mrs. May, but he supposed she was well, and still in California, probably in San Francisco. She was planning to build a house near Monterey. Though his voice and manner were particularly calm, his eyes were as wistful, perhaps, as the school-teacher's smile had been. And just because Sara Wilkins knew well what it was to be wistful and try to hide it, perhaps she saw more clearly than a more attractive woman would. "Something had happened," she said to herself. That splendid young couple, about whom she had built up such a gorgeous romance, had been parted, and this handsome fellow with the kind smile and heroic shoulders was unhappy, far unhappier than Sara Wilkins had ever been, strange

as that might seem—he who had looked so fortunate! Sara wondered if the lovely lady were unhappy, too, or if she had been cruel; and because Miss Wilkins adored romance (having nothing more personally her own to adore), not because she was naturally curious, the little woman positively ached to know the story.

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They had nearly half an hour together she and Nick before Mrs. Kenealy returned, and in that time they had come close to the beginning of a friendship, each being secretly in need of sympathy, and dimly detecting the need in the other. Their liking for one another enchanted Mrs. Kenealy, who was a born matchmaker. To be sure, Miss Sara Wilkins was not pretty, and would never see twenty-nine again, but she was a good girl, clever and affectionate, and would make Nick Hilliard the best of wives if only he could be brought to see it. She sat between them, chattily telling each one nice things about the other, and soon she suggested bringing Miss Wilkins to visit Nick's ranch. School was off now, and the poor dear had nothing to do but read and write letters home, whither it cost far too much to return for only a few weeks. Nick said that he would be delighted; and offered to send Miss Wilkins as many books as she liked to her boarding house. Books were great friends of his, he admitted somewhat shyly. She was welcome to borrow any she cared to have.

They saw a good deal of each other during the next fortnight, too much for the school-teacher's peace of mind; for the oftener they met the more was she convinced that Nick was in love, perhaps hopelessly in love, with another woman as different from herself as a lily from a dusty sprig of lavender. Then, one day when Nick had started to carry her some books and they had met on the way, the two sat down and talked by the side of the blue, brackish lake, sheltering from the sun behind a bank of yellow sand that was like the high back of a queerly shaped throne. At a distance passed Green, the landlord of the Eureka, out walking with his little daughter, and in speaking of him and the odd folk who stopped at the green hotel the "Dook" was mentioned. He had disappeared from Lucky Star City some time before, but Miss Wilkins had met and disliked him.

"Horrid little pretentious toad!" she exclaimed sharply. "He was always talking to every one he could get hold of about his family and his swell friends and Oxford. But I don't believe any of his stories. He was just worse than nobody at all; and East I've met real nice Englishmen who had a *lovely* accent, and wouldn't be found dead drawling like he did."

Nick laughed. "You're jolly right," he said; and then being in a humorous as well as confidential mood, he told the story of himself and Montagu Jerrold.

"Wasn't I a Johnny?" he asked at the end. "Served me right for trying to make a silk purse of myself. Can't be done, I guess."

"But you are a silk purse!" Sara protested indignantly. "How can you talk about yourself the way you do?"

"I'm a little down on my luck these days," he answered. "Did you ever read about the moth who loved a star? I guess, when that moth got to thinking of himself and his chances, he saw himself pretty well as he really was, poor old chap. Fusty brown

wings, too many legs, antennae the wrong shape, and a clumsy way of usin' 'em. I've gone and made a moth of myself, Miss Wilkins."

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“Maybe the star doesn’t think you a moth, or anyhow not a common moth,” the little school-teacher tried to comfort him loyally, though her heart ached as a lonely woman’s heart must ache when the man she could have loved, if she had dared, confides in her about the “other.” She had known quite well that there was another, but to have the confession come out in words seemed to make her feel the grayness of life rather more intensely than she had felt it before. Yet she rallied her forces and longed to fight Nick Hilliard’s battles and wave his banner in the face of the enemy—if enemy there were.

“That’s just what the star does think!” laughed Nick. “She thinks I’m common.”

Miss Wilkins stiffened with indignation. “I don’t believe it—if she’s a *real* star. And you wouldn’t mistake an imitation one for real, would you?”

“She’s the brightest star in the heavens; as good as a whole constellation.”

“Then she can’t think you common.”

“Well, put in another way. She thinks me ’impossible’—impossible for her, that is. She told me so. But I might have known it without telling. I guess she thought I would know. I had the cheek to hope, though, that I might polish myself up enough to pass muster in a crowd, even a crowd of *her* sort of people, and that she might change her mind about me.”

“As if that disgusting little Montagu Jerrold could teach you anything!”

“I found he couldn’t. Not anything she’d like me better for knowing.”

“If she doesn’t find you good enough as you are she isn’t worth loving,” insisted the school-teacher. “Oh, I know I’m not the same kind of woman she is! I’m only a little ‘provincial,’ as I expect she’d call me in her own mind, but—but I can tell a *man* when I see him.”

“Thank you a whole lot for sticking up for me,” said Nick, boyishly. “But how do you know what kind of a woman my star is?”

Miss Wilkins blushed and was silent. She did not look pretty when she blushed, like Angela, but Nick thought she had one of the nicest little faces in the world.

“I expect I’ve gone and given myself away,” he said. “Well, I don’t care, for you’re so good and sympathetic. You’ve seen my star, and you can judge just what kind of a blame fool I was to hope she could ever really care for a rough fellow like me—care enough to be yoked up with me for life.”

“Are you sure she didn’t care?” asked the school-teacher.

If he had “given himself away” he did not intend to give away Angela. “I told you she said I was impossible,” he answered discreetly. “Well, thank you again for listenin’ to my whinings. It’s done me a lot of good. Now I’ve talked enough and too much about myself. Let’s talk about you.”

“There’s nothing interesting to say about me,” Miss Wilkins defended herself, with the faintest sigh that only a man who loved her would have heard. “We won’t talk about you any more, though, if you don’t want to. That book of Mr. Muir’s you sent me is beautiful. I’ve been wishing to read it for years.”

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So they fell to discussing *The National Parks of America*; but Sara's heart was not in the discussion, much as she admired the book. She was thinking about Nick and Angela.

"It doesn't seem," she told herself, "that a woman who could be so kind to another woman as she was to me, when she didn't even know me, could be cruel to a man she *did* know and like, even if she didn't love him. And could a woman he loved not love him back again?"

Miss Wilkins had resigned herself long ago, or thought she had, to going through life without any intimate personal interests of her own, and when her heart ached hardest that night in her mean little boarding-house bedroom, it was going out most warmly toward Nick, and yearning for the happiness of making him happy.

"If I could only do something!" she said to her mossy-smelling pillow. "And I owe *her* a good turn too, although maybe she doesn't deserve it. I wonder what I *could* do?"

XXXI

THE BREAKING OF THE SPELL

The spell was broken for Angela. She knew now, if she had not known before, that it was Nick Hilliard who lit the world for her with the light never seen on land or sea, where love is not. Some quality was gone from the sunshine, and the glory of the golden poppies had withered.

Back in San Francisco, living in the rooms which he had helped to make beautiful with daily gifts of flowers, she realized how completely Nick had meant for her the spirit of the West. It was because he had been with her that, from morning till night, she had thrilled with the joy of life and excited anticipation of each new day which had never failed or let her tire.

Every moment she missed him and wanted him, and would have given anything to call him back to her; but she had no right to call, for what had she to give worth his pain in coming?

Angela was an anxiety to Kate and a responsibility to Mr. Morehouse. The banker would have liked to send his friends to call upon Mrs. May, but she was in no mood to meet people. Then he suggested that she should go to Del Monte for the summer and watch the beginning of the new home, but she dismissed this idea, saying that as the architect had not yet even finished his plan it would be a long time before the house could reach an interesting stage.

“We all go somewhere in summer,” Mr. Morehouse urged. Whereupon Angela merely shrugged her shoulders. “You who live here may want a change,” she said. “I’ve had plenty of changes. I’m very happy where I am, thanks.”

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But she did not look happy, and Kate, who loved her, realized the alteration far more keenly than Mr. Morehouse, though even he felt vaguely that something had gone wrong with the Princess di Sereno. Kate, who knew well what a difference happiness could make in a woman's health and looks, guessed that the loss of her mistress's colour and spirits was connected with the disappearance of Hilliard. A paragraph she had read in that exciting number of the *Illustrated London News* had, together with some vague hints unconsciously dropped by Angela and a few words of the banker's overheard, set Kate's wits to working, and thus she arrived, through sympathy, at something like the truth. But Mr. Morehouse's diagnosis of the case had in it no such romantic ingredient as hopeless love.

He alone in America (since Theo Dene was gone, and Kate merely suspected) knew that Mrs. May was the Princess di Sereno, who had never been a wife to Paolo di Sereno except in name. He knew that the Princess had grievances, and that she had left her identity in the Old World in the wish to forget the past completely. Knowing this, when a certain piece of news came his way he felt it his disagreeable duty to pass it on to Mrs. May. And it was the very piece of news which had set Theo Dene wondering whether Angela "knew about the Prince."

Most California journals are apt to give local matters of interest precedence over affairs at a distance, and so it was that (though Angela usually glanced through a newspaper every day or two during her travels) she had never come upon Paolo di Sereno's name except in that old copy of the *Illustrated London News*. There she learned how well he was amusing himself while Mrs. May saw California under Nick Hilliard's guidance. But after that came a blank. She knew only that he and a somewhat notorious woman were making ascents together in an aeroplane. But it remained for Mr. Morehouse to tell her of the sensation the pair were creating in Europe.

There was a woman—indeed, there was invariably a woman, though not always the same—whose flaunting friendship with the Prince had fixed Angela's resolve to turn her back on the old life. The woman had begun a career on the very humblest plane, had become an artist's model, then had learned to sing and dance, and at length her reputation as a beauty had made her name famous. A marquis had married her, and when his heart was broken and his money spent, had obligingly killed himself in an inconspicuous and gentlemanly manner. After that his widow had achieved an even greater popular success, and had attracted the attention of Paolo di Sereno.

It was about this time that Angela left Rome, and what Theo Dene wondered if Mrs. May "knew about the Prince," was his hope to break the record for distance in a new aeroplane. Mr. Morehouse, who took one or two French and English illustrated weeklies as well as New York daily papers, saw these things as soon as Theo Dene saw them; and, when Angela returned to San Francisco from Bakersfield, he told her of the Prince's project.

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“I reasoned,” he said, “that it would be better for you to hear what is going on from me rather than be exposed to a surprise and shock from some London or Paris paper lying on a hotel table.”

Angela interrupted him to reply that nothing the Prince di Sereno could do had power to shock her, for they had never been really in each other’s lives, and had now passed out of one another’s orbits forever. In spite of this assurance, however, when Mr. Morehouse saw the Princess looking pale and listless taking little interest in the plans for her new house, he attributed the change to humiliation, or possibly even to fears for the Prince’s safety, for women are strange. Luckily she could not be annoyed in this new country where she would make her home, for nobody knew who she was or could associate her with the Prince’s eccentricities! Nevertheless, Mr. Morehouse thought it natural that her health and spirits should suffer; and because of his old and close friendship with Franklin Merriam he longed to find some wholesome distraction for Angela.

But after all it was Kate, not he, who succeeded in supplying it. Poor Kate, so near to, yet so far from, Oregon, dared in her insignificance to follow her mistress’s example. Though she would have had a hand cut off rather than “give notice” to her beloved lady, as a matter of fact, she was pining; Tim was growing impatient. His affairs were marching well. Something had been saved out of the disaster caused by his dishonest partner. He had got in with a “good man,” and they believed that together they would some day “beat the world” with their apples. Already they had obtained a London market. There wasn’t much ready money to spare yet; but Tim could manage to pay Kate’s way from San Francisco to Portland, and on to his place, if she would come. Besides, there was her nest egg, her dowry, from the sale of the gold bag.

Of course, Kate was dying to go, but would not even tell her sad-eyed, pale-cheeked mistress that Tim was wanting her. It was only when, one day, Angela noticed how miserable poor Kate was looking, that little by little she drew out the whole truth. Then she was roused to interest, and forgetfulness of herself.

“I’ll tell you what I will do, Kate,” she said with more animation than she had shown for weeks. “I’ll take Mr. Morehouse’s very latest advice, and run up north to Lake Tahoe, to stay till my new house is born. Then, instead of your going to your Tim, he must come to you; and I’ll give you a wedding—oh, a beautiful wedding, with a white silk dress and a veil and orange blossoms, and a cake big enough to last you the rest of your life. You’re not to make any objections, because I shouldn’t be happy to have you stay with me now that Tim’s ready, and you know the idea always was for you to go when I’d reached my farthest point north and nearest to Oregon. Besides, it will do me good to plan for a wedding. And I mean to give you your trousseau. You shall get the things here in San Francisco before we start for Tahoe.”

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So that was why one evening Nick read in a San Francisco paper that “Mrs. May, who has been staying at the Fairmont Hotel for several weeks, left last night for Lake Tahoe, where she has engaged rooms at the famous Tahoe Tavern, and may remain for some time.”

Afterward, when he sent the paper on to Sara Wilkins, as he did send papers now, with parcels of books and magazines, she too noticed the paragraph.

“His star’s gone as far north and as far from him as she can possibly go and be in California,” thought the school-teacher. And because Nick was right, and her good little face hid a heart that was still better, she was not glad, but very, very sorry.

When Kate was married to her good-looking Irishman, and the little excitement of the wedding was over, Angela began to feel rather desolate.

There were a great many pleasant people at the tavern who would have been kind to the stranger if she had let them be kind, but they were all so merry and had so many intimate interests of their own that their goodness to her seemed only to emphasize her loneliness. Kate had insisted on “lending” her Timmy in fact, the bride and bridegroom both insisted, for there was no doubt in their minds that the black cat had brought them good fortune. Now they had all the fortune they wanted, to “go on with,” and as poor, pretty Mrs. May seemed “a bit down on her luck,” they would leave her Timmy to bring it back again. And really the topaz-eyed creature, in its becoming jade collar—a gift from Nick Hilliard—was often a comfort to Angela, curled up in her lap and purring cosily under her book as she read. It seemed curiously fond of her, even fonder than of Kate, and had “taken to” her from the first.

Angela had travelled through a region of snowsheds to reach the lake in the heart of the Sierra Nevada, and the scenery was as different from any she had met in California as was her mood from the mood of the south. At Tahoe she was a mile above sea-level, and ringed in by higher mountains which had not lost their dazzling crowns of snow.

On the shore of the long blue lake that mirrored eternally, a clear, cool sky and immense dark trees—pines and cedars—Angela felt that a line had been drawn between her and her California past, with its flame of golden, poppies and flowers of the forest. Here she had reached a high note of beauty which rang crystalline as a silver rod striking upon ice. The place gave Angela a sense of purity and remoteness which she had felt by no lake-shore of Europe. The charm of other lakes had been their villa-sprinkled shores, their historical associations. The charm of Tahoe was loneliness. She liked to row out on the water alone, and rest on her oars to look down, down, through miles (it seemed) of liquid sapphire and emerald blending together.

Tahoe was not remote, really since luxurious trains had brought it into close touch with San Francisco and with the East; but Angela liked to cultivate the impression of

remoteness as if she were a nun in retreat, and the beauty was of a kind that called to her spirit, making renunciation easier than in the luscious south, scented with lilies and roses. Tahoe had its roses, too; but its chief perfume was of pines and the pure freshness of breezes that blow over water and snow mountains.

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The journey, too, had prepared her for the isolation that she craved; the glimpse of tragic Donner Lake, where the pioneers starved and agonized in 1848; the wild Truckee River sweeping its flood past thickets of pale sagebrush and forests of black pines; the tang of cold and the smell of snow in the air; the lonely farmhouses folded among green hills; and the primitive look of Truckee town with its little frame buildings called by pretentious foreign names; Firenze Saloon; Roma Hotel.

Nobody else, however, seemed to have the half-sad, half-delicious sense of remoteness from the world, at Tahoe, which Angela had. That month was very gay, and the immense verandas of the tavern were flower-gardens of pretty girls—those American "summer girls," of whom Angela had often heard. They swam, and boated and fished, and, above all, flirted, for there were always plenty of men; and in the evenings they danced in the ballroom of the casino, built on the edge of the water.

Angela never tired of going from end to end of the lake in the steamboat that set out from the tavern jetty in the morning and returned in the afternoon. The captain, a great character, let her sit in a room behind the pilot-box, where her luncheon was brought by an eager-eyed youth working his way through college by serving as steward in the holidays. He was in love with a girl at his university, equally poor and equally plucky; but because she was earning dollars as a waitress at the tavern, the boy thought Tahoe a place "where you couldn't help being happy." Angela thought it a place where, more than most others, it might be possible to find peace, though happiness was gone.

She no longer opened her diary. Never again, she told herself, would she keep a record of her days. But, some time—years from now, maybe—when she could read what she had written without a heartache, she would open the unfinished volume where she had broken off a sentence in the great redwood forest. She might be able to think of Nick Hilliard then without longing for him; but that time seemed far, very far away.

* * * * *

One August evening Angela came back from an excursion to the top of Mount Tallac. She was tired, and had made up her mind to dine in her own sitting-room, then to go immediately to bed; but asking for her key she was told that "a lady was waiting to see her; had been waiting nearly all day."

"A lady!" she echoed. Could it be Mrs. Gaylor? Angela hoped not; for, though she had not heard from Nick those things which Carmen had feared and expected her to hear, she guessed something of Carmen's hate. The fact that she had not been allowed to go back; that Kate had arrived in Bakersfield with a story of Mrs. Gaylor's being called suddenly away from home; that Carmen had never answered a short letter she wrote; all these things roused her suspicions. Indeed, she had even gone so far as to associate the box of poison-oak leaves with Mrs. Gaylor; and now the thought that the Spanish woman might have followed her to Tahoe sent a shiver through her veins. Who

could the lady be, if not Carmen Gaylor? Who but Carmen would wait patiently for her coming, through a whole day?

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For an instant Angela was tempted to answer: “I’m too tired to see any one this evening.” But that would be cowardly. Besides, she was curious to see her visitor, whoever it might be.

“The lady’s waiting in the veranda now,” said a hotel clerk. “She’s been here ever since morning, but she went away at lunch time and came back afterward. I don’t know what she means to do to-night, for the train for Truckee will be leaving in a few minutes, and she hasn’t engaged a room.”

Angela went out on the veranda, feeling’ a little tense and excited, but when a small, blue-frocked, gray-hatted figure, dejectedly lost in a big rocking-chair, was pointed out to her, excitement died while bewilderment grew.

Her first thought was that she had never seen this countrified-looking person before, but as her guest turned, raising to hers a pair of singularly intelligent, rather frightened eyes, she knew that she had met the same glance from the same eyes somewhere before.

The little woman’s face was so pale, so tired, her whole personality so pathetic yet indomitable, that Angela’s heart softened.

“How do you do?” she asked kindly. “I hear you have come to see me, so we must know each other, I’m sure——”

The visitor was on her feet, the chair, from which she had sprung with a nervous jerk, rocking frantically as if a nervous ghost were sitting in it.

“We don’t know each other exactly,” Miss Wilkins hastened to explain, as though eager not to begin with false pretences. “The only time you ever saw me was at Santa Barbara last May, but you were very good to me and—and I found out your name——”

“Of course. I remember quite well!” Mrs. May smiled reassuringly, for the poor little thing was certainly terrified and ill at ease as well as tired. Angela sprang to the conclusion that the young woman was in money difficulties, and having remembered the loan of the sitting-room at Santa Barbara had somehow found her way to Tahoe in the hope of getting help. Well, she should have it. Angela was only too glad to be able to do something for any one in trouble. “I’m glad to see you again,” she said, as if it were quite a commonplace thing for a stranger to have dropped apparently from the clouds in search of her. “But I’m so sorry you’ve had to wait. Perhaps you wrote and I haven’t got the letter yet?”

“No, I didn’t write. I couldn’t have explained in a letter,” said the weary-faced visitor; “and maybe you wouldn’t have wanted me to come if you’d known before-hand. I thought if I’d travelled all this way though, just to speak to you, you wouldn’t refuse. I’ve been two nights on the way.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” exclaimed Angela. “You must let me get you a room at once. Some people are leaving to-night. They surely can put you up in the hotel.”

“Thank you very much,” returned the young woman, “but I couldn’t impose on you as your guest. You’ll see that when I’ve told you why I came. I can’t get away to Truckee, I know, for the train goes too soon, but I’ll take a room at some simpler place where it’s cheaper than this.”

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“We’ll talk of that later,” said Angela soothingly. “Now I hope you’ll come to my rooms and rest, and tell me about yourself. When we’re both washed and refreshed we’ll dine together in my sitting-room quietly.”

“But it isn’t about myself I want to talk,” protested the stranger. “I must tell you my name, Mrs. May. Of course, you’ve forgotten it. It’s Miss Wilkins—Sara Wilkins.”

She didn’t want to talk about herself! That was puzzling and didn’t fit in with Angela’s deductions. However, she made no comment, and talking of her day on Mount Tallac, escorted Miss Wilkins to a pretty sitting-room, which in her absence had been supplied with fresh flowers.

“Shall we talk first?” Angela asked. “Or would you like to rest and bathe——”

“If you’re not too tired yourself to listen to me, I’d rather talk now,” Sara answered with a kind of suppressed desperation. “But you do look tired. You’re thinner and paler than at Santa Barbara! Yet I’ve been screwing my courage up to this for so long I can hardly bear to wait.”

“If I was tired I’ve forgotten it now,” said Angela. “And I’m as eager to begin as you can be. But you mustn’t feel that it needs courage to speak out, whatever you have to say. And if there’s any way for me to make it easier for you, I should be so glad if you could give me just the slightest hint. Shall we both sit down on this sofa together?”

“You sit there,” replied Sara. “I don’t *want* to be comfortable. I couldn’t lean back. I’m all on edge.”

“Oh, but you mustn’t be ’on edge’!”

“I don’t tell you that to get sympathy, Mrs. May,” said the school-teacher, “but only because I’d like you to understand before I begin that I haven’t come just to be ‘cheeky’ and bold. I came because I felt I must—on somebody’s account, if not yours. For myself, I didn’t want to force myself on you. I didn’t want it one bit! And now I’m here, if I could do what I feel most like doing, I’d run away as fast as ever I could go, without saying one more word.”

“You almost frighten me,” said Angela, her eyes dark and serious. “Have I done something dreadful that—that I ought to be warned not to do again, and you have come to tell me because you think I was once a little kind to you? Not that I was really kind—-for it was nothing at all that I did.”

Miss Wilkins, sitting stiff and upright on the smallest, straightest, least luxurious chair in the pretty room, was silent for an instant, as if collecting all her forces. “No,” she answered at last. “It wouldn’t be fair to say exactly that. And yet you *have* done something dreadful. Oh, my goodness, this is even harder to get out than—than I

supposed it would be, for, of course, you'll think it's not my business anyhow. And isn't or wouldn't be if—if——"

"If—what?" Angela prompted her gently.

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Sara Wilkins swallowed a lump in her throat and pressed her lips together. They were dry and pale. “Well,” she broke out, “I’ll have to tell you the truth and not care for my own feelings. They don’t matter really. It wouldn’t be my business if I didn’t love him myself, dearly—oh, but not selfishly! And he doesn’t dream of it. He never will. And he never thinks about me except to pity me a little and do kind things because I’m alone in the world. And that’s all I want of him. It is, truly, though I can’t explain very well. I just want him to be happy, and to have made him so. Because *somebody* had to act if anything was to be done. And there was nobody but me.”

“Him!” Angela repeated in a whisper. Yet the name was in her mind now, as always it was in her heart.

“Mr. Hilliard, of course. You see”—desperately—“I’m school-teacher at Lucky Star City, close to his place. All the land there and the big gusher were his. When he came back in June I was at Lucky Star, and we were introduced. He remembered my face dimly, more I guess because he couldn’t forget even the least thing associated with you than for any other reason. Since then we’ve got to be friends.”

Angela did not speak, even when Sara Wilkins made a slight hesitating pause. Her heart was beating too fast and thickly for words to come, and, besides, there seemed to be nothing to say yet, until she had heard more.

“Don’t think,” Sara went on, gathering courage, “that he confided in me in any ordinary way. I just couldn’t bear you should do him that injustice. If you did I should have done harm instead of good by coming all this way to see you. But the very first day I met him at Lucky Star I asked about you, and I—*saw*; though he only said he believed you were in San Francisco—that he was heart-broken about you. Even at Santa Barbara I couldn’t help making up a romance round you both—you so beautiful and somehow like a great lady, though you didn’t put on any airs at all; he so handsome and splendid, like a hero in some book of the West. It was weeks before we mentioned you again—he and I—though I saw a lot of him at Lucky Star. He was kind, and it was holidays, so I hadn’t much to do except read books he lent me.”

Still Angela said nothing, though it was evident that Miss Wilkins would have been thankful at this stage for some leading question which might help her over a difficult place. Angela could not now give the help she had once offered. Rather was she in need of it herself. She sat waiting, her eyes disconcertingly fixed upon the other woman’s flushed face. But that was because she could not bring herself to look away from it.

“Before we spoke of you again, what do you think he’d been doing?” the school-teacher went on, almost fiercely.

"Oh, I can hardly tell you, it's so sad! If you're the sweet woman that in spite of everything I think you *are*, you'll be sorry all the way through to your heart. He—he hired a wretched humbug of a man who pretended to be an English swell to teach him *manners*, so that he could be a little worthier of you. He, *Nick Hilliard*, the noblest gentleman that ever drew breath, to stoop to learning from a little thing who called itself Montagu Jerrold. He did it because of what *you* said to him."

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“Oh!” cried Angela, her cheeks scarlet. “I said nothing—nothing which could make him feel that I didn’t think him a gentleman. I——”

“That’s what I told him,” Sara broke in. “I knew his reason for employing Jerrold, because he made up a sort of allegory about a moth loving a star and trying to fly up to heaven and be near her, or something like that. I said that a *real* star couldn’t be stupid enough to think him a moth, or, anyway, not a common one. And he said, ’That’s just what she does think me, *common*.’ I knew he meant you, though he didn’t speak your name then. And I thought to myself, ’She didn’t look like a silly doll stuffed with sawdust,’ I did you the justice to believe that a great lady, experienced in the world, would know and appreciate a *man*. I’m just nobody at all, Mrs. May; but even I’m clever enough for that. I’m sure as fate, if I were acquainted with all the best kings and princes there are in the world, I couldn’t find a better gentleman than Nick Hilliard. Yet according to him you didn’t have the eyes to see what he was worth. You not only turned him down, but turned him down saying he was too common for you.”

Angela could stand no more. It was as if the fierce little woman in dusty blue serge had struck her in the face. She sprang up, very white, her eyes blazing. “It is not true,” she said in a low voice. “He couldn’t have told you I said that.”

“He told me you said just the same thing: that he was ‘impossible.’ That was the word—a cruel, cruel word.”

She was up too, the fiery little school-teacher, and they faced each other—the tall girl, white as lily grown in a king’s garden, and the little snub-nosed, freckled country schoolma’am.

“Do you mean when I used the word ‘impossible,’” asked Angela, “that he thought I meant it in *such* a way—meant to tell him that he was an impossible person?”

“Yes, I do mean just that.”

“You’re *sure* of what you say?”

“Dreadfully sure. When I’d got that much out of him—somehow. I hardly know how—I felt wounded and sore, as I knew he was feeling, and, would feel all the rest of his life. Oh, I’d have given mine for him! I would then, and I would now, to make him happy. That’s why I came up here—to find out whether, after all, there could be any misunderstanding between you that could be righted. He doesn’t know I’ve come. He thinks I’m staying with a friend in San Francisco. I don’t want him to know, ever. I should die of shame. I wish I could talk in some wise, clever way to you, and get you to see what a mistake you’ve made. He loves you so, Mrs. May!”

Then a thing happened which was the last that Sara Wilkins had expected. With a stifled cry Angela turned away, and, covering her face with both hands, sobbed as if her heart would break.

The little school-teacher trembled all over. She had come here—giving her time and money—far more than she could afford—and her nerve-tissue, in Nick Hilliard's cause; and all in the hope of making his "star" see the error of her ways. But when the cruel star broke down and cried uncontrollably, in anguish of soul, the hardness and anger which Nick's champion had cherished melted into pity.

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“I do hope you’ll forgive me,” she stammered. “I—I didn’t mean to make you suffer like this. I’m so afraid I’ve done everything all wrong! But I let my feelings carry me away. I thought if you loved him a little after all, maybe——”

“Loved him! I love him so much that it’s killing me!” Angela broke out through her tears. “I can’t sleep at night, for thinking of him, longing for him, and telling myself it’s all over—all the joy of waking up to a new day and knowing I shall see him. Ah, night is terrible! I pray for peace, and just as I begin to hope—to be a little calmer, at least by day, out in the sunshine looking at the white mountains, you, a stranger, come and tell me that I *don’t love him!*”

“I wouldn’t have dared if I didn’t love him myself,” Sara retorted, choking on the words. “You see—I *know*. But if you care for him like this, if you’re so unhappy without him, why did you send him away broken-hearted?”

Angela flung her hands up, then dropped them hopelessly. With no attempt to hide her tear-blurred face she answered: “I sent him away because I am married. I said ‘It is impossible’; not—what he seems to think I said.”

“Oh, how sad!” The little school-teacher was confronting real tragedy for the first time in her gray, conscientious existence. “How sorry I am. Forgive me! But—you know, it isn’t I who matter.”

“No,” Angela echoed. “It isn’t you.”

“You didn’t tell him? You gave him no idea?”

“I hadn’t a chance. There’d been an evening, a little while before, when I’d meant to tell if—if anything happened. But—we were interrupted.”

“He thinks you’re a young widow.”

“Yes. It’s only in the sight of the world that I have a husband—that I *ever* had one. When I came to America I left the man for good, and took another name.”

“‘Mrs. May’ isn’t your real name?”

“No. I’ll tell you if you like——”

“You needn’t. But you ought to tell *him*. That, and everything. I don’t mean *confess*, or anything like that. Probably you thought, till you fell in love with him, that there was no reason why you should give him your secrets. What I mean is—oh, the difference it would make to Mr. Hilliard, knowing that you sent him away, not because you looked down on him as common and impossible, but because you had no *right* to care!”

Angela stared at the earnest little face as if she were dazed, bewildered in a dark place, and groping for light.

“I had no idea he misunderstood me so,” she said slowly. “If I’d guessed at the time, I couldn’t have resisted telling him how much I loved him. I couldn’t have let him go, so wounded. But now, since no happiness can ever come for us together, and perhaps by this time he is getting over his first suffering, wouldn’t it be better just to leave the veil of silence down between us? I don’t want to hurt him all his life long. It must make it easier for him to forget, if he believes me a ’doll stuffed with sawdust,’ or a snob. He can’t go on for long loving a poor thing like that. And so he will be cured. Oh, though I long to send him a message—I mustn’t. I mustn’t be tempted! Let him think badly of me. It’s the best and kindest thing.”

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“No,” said Sara Wilkins, “that is not the right way; not for *him*. It might be with a vain man. But he doesn’t get over it. He doesn’t stop loving you. Only the pain is worse because he thinks you scorned him. Mrs. May, I implore you to write him a letter. I can’t take a message, because he mustn’t know I came to see you. It would spoil it all for him, I think. Write as if it were of your own accord. Don’t *explain* in the letter. Letters are such hard, unsatisfactory things. The best one you could write wouldn’t make up to him a bit for what he’s suffered and what he must go on suffering, for you couldn’t help studying your words, and they’d be stiff and disappointing, no matter how hard you tried to say the things just right. Ask him to come here and let you explain in your own words why you seemed so harsh. Only, warn him that it isn’t to change your mind about—about saying *yes*. It would be awful to rush up here happy and hopeful, only to find out—what he’ll have to find out.”

“You don’t understand,” said Angela. “I care too much to dare see him again. I couldn’t trust myself. I——”

“Ah, but you could trust *him*. He’s strong and high in his nature—like the great redwoods.”

“Yes, like the great redwoods,” Angela echoed, in a whisper.

“He’d be a rock, too—a rock to rely upon,” Sara went on. “Do this, Mrs. May. Do it for my sake. I know it’s the right thing. It will give him back his self-respect. That’s even more important than happiness, especially to him. I’ve done all I could for you—not much, but my best. Do this for me, will you?”

“Yes, I will!” Angela answered suddenly and impulsively. She put out her hands to the little school-teacher and drew her close. They kissed each other, the two women who loved Nick Hilliard.

XXXII

AN END—AND A BEGINNING

“Come to me if you can. I can give you no hope of happiness, but there is something I should like to explain,” Angela said in her letter.

She expected an answer, though she asked for none; but no word came on the morning when she had thought that she might hear. Other people had their letters and were reading them on the veranda, but there was nothing for her. She sat there for a while, cold with disappointment, listening to the tearing open of envelopes and the pleasant crackle of thick letter-paper. Then, when Timmy, the black cat, suddenly leapt off her lap, as if in a mad rush after something he fondly hoped was a mouse, Angela was glad of an excuse to follow. But Timmy, who was of an independent character, evidently

believed that he was in for a good thing. He darted across the grass, and with a whisk of eager tail disappeared behind a clump of trees.

“A dragon-fly!” Angela said to herself. For Timmy could not resist the fascination of dragon-flies—a bright and beautiful kind that spent the summer at Lake Tahoe. She followed round the clump of trees, and there was Nick Hilliard coming toward her with Timmy in his arms.

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“Oh!” she cried, “I—I thought——”

“I was afraid you’d think it was too early,” said Nick as quietly as possible, though his voice shook. “I got in on the train; and after my bath I was taking a walk around, till a decent time to call. Then Timmy came running to welcome me——”

“I believe he must really have seen you!” cried Angela, grateful to Timmy, who was saving them both the first awkwardness of the situation. “He is the most extraordinary cat—quite a super-cat. And you remember, he used always to know what time you were coming to call when we were in San Francisco.”

Owing to Timmy, they were spared a meeting on the veranda, and Angela did not offer to take her visitor into the house yet.

There were some quiet places in the garden in the deep shadow of trees, where she could say what she had to say better than between four walls. They strolled on, Nick holding Timmy, who purred loudly, as if glad to welcome the giver of his jade collar.

“I got your letter just in time to catch the train for San Francisco, and then to get on here,” Hilliard explained. “Of course, you knew I’d come at once.”

“No—I wasn’t sure. I thought—I might hear from you this morning—a telegram or letter,” Angela stammered. “But—I’m glad, very glad. It was good of you to come, and so soon.”

“Good!”

“I wanted so much to talk to you. I’ve been wanting it for a long time. Ever since—we parted. But it was only the other night I made up my mind that I had any right to send for you.”

“What did I say to you that last day about coming from the end of the world? It’s only a step from Lucky Star here.”

“I know what you said. There isn’t one word I’ve forgotten. Shall we sit under that arbour? It’s my favourite seat, and no one ever disturbs me.”

They sat down on a rustic bench curtained with trails of Virginia creeper, red as the blood of the dying summer. Nick kept Timmy on his knee, stroking the glossy back. His hand looked very strong and brown, and Angela longed to snatch it up and lay it against her cheek. How she loved him! How much more even than she had known when she couldn’t see his face, his eyes and the light there was in his eyes for her! It had not changed, that wonderful light, though his face was sadder, and, she thought, thinner.

“Are you glad to see me again—Nick?” she could not resist asking.

He smiled at her wistfully. “Just about as glad as a man would be to see God’s sunlight if he’d been in prison, or starving in a mine that had fallen in on him. Only perhaps a little gladder than that.”

She answered him with a look; and then, as involuntarily she put out her hand to stroke Timmy, their fingers met. He caught hers, held them for an instant, and let them go.

“Nick, that day when you saved my life and told me you loved me, did I make you realize that I loved you, too?” she asked.

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“No. I couldn’t think you meant that. I thought you tried to save my feelings by saying you cared; that you were sorry for me, and——”

“I was sorry for myself, because, you see, you’d begun to be the one person in the whole world who mattered. Oh, wait; don’t speak yet! I had to make you understand that we couldn’t be anything to each other, and it was so hard for me, that often I’ve wondered if, inadvertently, I said things to hurt you more than you need have been hurt. Tell me, truly and frankly, what did you believe I meant by that word I used—-’*impossible*’?”

He hesitated, then answered slowly: “I felt that I ought to have known, without your telling me, I wasn’t the sort of man for you.”

“You did think that! Oh, Nick, then I’m glad I sent for you—I can’t help being glad. If you loved me, and I were free, nothing in the world could come between us, and I should be the happiest creature on earth.”

“If you were free?” His hand lay heavily on Timmy’s back, and the cat resented it by jumping down. But both had forgotten Timmy’s existence and their late gratitude to him.

“If I were free. You thought I was—you saw me in mourning. I never meant to make you, or any one, believe a lie. All I thought of at first was getting away from the old life. But, oh, Nick, though I’m not a widow, I was never any man’s wife except in name. I’m Franklin Merriam’s daughter—you must have heard of him. And when I was seventeen I married Prince Paolo di Sereno. That very day I found out there was—some one who had more right to him that I had. She came, and threatened to kill herself. You see, it was not me, it was money he cared for. But he hated me for saying I would be his wife only in the eyes of the world. That made him so angry, that he has spent his life since in taking revenge. When my mother died, nearly a year ago, I made up my mind to leave him altogether, and I did as soon as I could. I gave him more than half the money, so he didn’t care, for he’d grown quite indifferent; and I took the name of ‘May.’ It is one of my names really. I was so glad to be some one else and come to a new country to begin a new life! It never entered my head that I could fall in love with any one—that there might be complications in my plan. It seemed so simple. All I wanted was peace and a quiet life, with a few kind people round me. Then—*you* came. At first I didn’t realize what was happening to me—for it had never happened before. But soon I might have seen if I hadn’t closed my eyes and drifted. I was happy. I didn’t want you to go out of my life. Then came the Yosemite, with you, and—I couldn’t close my eyes any more. I saw my own heart. I thought—I saw yours. Now you understand, Nick, why I told you it was impossible for you and me to be anything more to each other than friends. It was you who said we couldn’t be friends. And you know—I *want* you to know—that it’s as hard for me as it can be for you, because I love you.”

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She had hurried on to get it all over, not daring to look at him until just at the end. When he did not speak she had to look at last, and see his bowed head—the dear black head that she loved.

"Oh!" she murmured. "I ought never to have gone with you to the Yosemite. If I hadn't, you would have forgotten me by this time—perhaps."

"No," said Nick. "I'd not have forgotten you. Not if I'd never seen you again after that first day in New York. You see, you were my ideal. Every man has one, I guess. And I just recognized you, the first minute, in the hall of the hotel. I didn't expect to know you—and yet, somehow, it was as if I couldn't let you go—even then. *Have* I got to let you go, now, after what you've told me? You're not the wife of that man—that prince, except in law. You don't love him, and you do love me—you say you do. Why, that makes you already more mine than his."

"Heart and spirit, I'm all yours," Angela said. "Oh, Nick, I don't love you, I worship you, you—*man!* I never thought there were men like you. I don't believe there are any more. Paolo di Sereno is—a mere husk."

"Divorce him," Nick implored. "You've got cause."

"He's Italian," she answered. "So am I, as his wife, in the eyes of the law. He and his people don't recognize divorce, even if I——"

"But here——" Nick began, then stopped, and shut his lips together. No, he would not propose that. Angela guessed what he had wanted to say, and loved him better for not saying it.

"I used to think," she went on hastily, "that I knew the worst of being married to a man without love. But now I see I didn't know half. A woman can't know till she loves another man. Oh, Nick, I can't get on without you—not *quite* without you. I've been trying—and every day it grows harder instead of easier. Nothing *matters*—but you. I'm not Paolo di Sereno's real wife, and he hates me. So it's not wrong to love you, Nick, or for you to love me. Only, we—we——"

"You don't have to get on without me," said Nick. "My angel one, you needn't be frightened. Wait till I tell you. I'll go away—this minute if you tell me to. I'll do whatever you say, because what you say will be right for *you*, and that's the important thing. What I mean is—I'm always there. My love can't change, except to grow bigger and brighter—and make me more of a man—so you won't have to worry about hurting *me*. Once I told you we couldn't be friends, but now I know you better, and what you've got in your heart for me—and what stands between us—I take that back. A friend can worship his friend. I worship you. I *will* be your friend, angel, in the biggest sense of the word."

“Oh, thank you, Nick,” she cried. “Thank you a thousand times. Now I can live again—-just thinking—as you say—that you’re *there*. The world can’t be blank. But you must go. I—I don’t think I could bear this long, and keep true—to myself—and——”

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It was the same with Nick. He had felt that he could not bear this long and be true either to himself or to her. Yet he would have stayed if she had bidden him stay, and fought for his manhood against odds. “Am I to go—now?” he asked.

“Yes—oh, please, yes!” she begged him, holding out her hands. “I am keyed up to bear it now. It might be different later. But—let us write to each other, Nick. I’ll write little things every day—that I think and feel. Then, if they’re worthy, I’ll send them to you—-once a month or so. Will you do the same?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll take care of yourself—for me—won’t you?”

He could not answer in words. He crushed her hands against his lips, and then, turning from her abruptly, walked away, without looking back.

* * * * *

It grew cold at Lake Tahoe. When weeks had passed, there was no excuse to stay: the plans of the architect were finished, and the new house begun. Angela went to Del Monte, and motored nearly every day to the forest on the peninsula to see how her home grew. She had not the old interest in thinking of it, but she was no longer unhappy, for she had not lost Nick Hilliard out of her life. She could almost feel the thrill of his thoughts. And at Del Monte she was much nearer Lucky Star City than she had been at Tahoe.

Sometimes she wondered if it would be very wrong and unwise to have him come to look at the house when it was finished. If, afterward, she could have the memory of him in the rooms, walking through them with her—just that, no more; and then going away—it would make all the difference between a live home and a dead house, or a house that never had really “come alive.” But generally, when she had dreamed this dream, she said to herself, “Better not,” or “It would never do.”

One morning in October, just six months to the day after her coming to California, she read in a San Francisco paper—a mere tucked-away paragraph to fill up a corner—that the Italian amateur aeronaut, Prince di Sereno, had arranged a sensational flight from Naples to Algiers in his new aeroplane, an improvement on a celebrated older make. The machine had just been named the *Vittoria* in honour of the brave and beautiful lady whom he called his “mascot,” and who had made so many daring journeys through the air with him. The projected dash would be the most ambitious so far attempted, and it was exciting considerable interest. It was said that Prince di Sereno, in gratitude to his “mascot” had lately made a will in her favour, leaving all his personal property to her. In event of death, his great estates would go to a nephew, as he was without a direct heir.

Angela wondered how much of her money was left for him to bequeath to the celebrated Vittoria di Cancellini. She did not grudge it either to the Prince or his mascot. She took no interest in the great flight from Naples to Algiers, but she felt certain that Paolo would succeed in accomplishing it. He had always succeeded in everything he had ever wanted to do, except perhaps in winning her love. But then he had not really wanted that.

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The day came for the flight, but she had forgotten it. She went in the morning to the new house, picnicked there, and returned to Del Monte only at dusk. She was thinking on the way back of several things she would put in the diary she kept for Nick, sending it off to him in a fat envelope the first of each month. One bit of news she wanted to tell him was that his favourite flowers—pansies—were to be planted in a great bed under the windows of her own room. "Then, whenever I look out, I shall think of you. Not that I shouldn't do that anyway." She wondered if she had better add that last sentence, or if it would be better to leave it out.

"There's a telegram for you, Mrs. May; just this minute come," said the hotel clerk.

Angela took it, her heart beating fast, for whenever a telegram arrived—which happened seldom—she always wondered if it would tell her that, for some good reason or other, Nick was coming. But he never had come, and had never telegraphed.

She opened the envelope, and glanced first at the signature: "James Morehouse." Why should he have wired? Then she read:

> "In flight to-day aeroplane fell into Sea off Sardinia. Aeronaut killed. Companion injured. Forgive abruptness. Wished get ahead of newspapers."

For a moment she felt absolutely unconcerned, as if reading of the death of some stranger aeronaut, of Japan or South America. Then:

"I hope you've not got bad news, Mrs. May?" a concerned voice was saying. She was vaguely conscious that the hotel clerk who had given her the telegram was hovering distressfully before her. She had been standing up when she began to read the message. Now she was sitting down. But her voice sounded quite calm and natural in her own ears as she answered, "No, thank you very much. A surprise—that is all. A great surprise."

"You are all right?"

"Oh, quite—quite!"

"Nothing I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thanks. I will go up to my room."

* * * * *

Her first thought, when she could think connectedly, was to send her unfinished letter to Nick, with a few hastily scribbled words at the end—not about the pansies. And perhaps to enclose the telegram.

But she did neither. Two days passed before she sent the long diary letter, and when she did send it, nothing more had been written. She waited. She did not know what would happen. She did not even read the newspapers, though she knew there must be paragraphs, not tucked into corners, for this was, in a way, world's news. There had been "considerable interest."

On the third day she was given another telegram. This time the name at the bottom was the only name that could make her heart beat:

"I have seen what has happened. When will you let me come?"

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He did not say “Will you let me come?” but “When.” She thought if she did not answer soon he would come all the same. It seemed wonderful, unbelievable, that now there was no wrong, no cruelty, no terrible unwisdom in having him near her. But there was none. Even she could see none. So she telegraphed, not the immediate summons he hoped for and she was tempted to send him, but the message of her second thought. “Come; not yet, but on the day I have a home of my own to welcome you in. Till then, let me be alone with my thoughts of you.”

* * * * *

The architect thought Mrs. May’s impatience to get into her new house, and to have even the garden finished, a charming whim. As she seemed not to care how much money was spent, relays of men, many men, were put on to work night as well as day. Angela chose furniture in San Francisco, all made of beautiful California woods. “We shall have two homes,” she thought. It was heavenly to say “we” again.

“You can have Christmas dinner at your own place,” said the architect.

“Oh, but I want Christmas *Eve* there!” Angela exclaimed. “Of all things, I want Christmas Eve!”

“Very well, I promise you Christmas Eve,” the architect answered, almost as if she were a child.

But she was not a child. She was a woman loving and longing. Always she had wanted to have a happy Christmas Eve, and she had never had one since Franklin Merriam died.

At last she wrote: “I am going to have a house-warming at Christmas-time: only five guests, and you, Nick, are the principal one. The others, are Mrs. Harland, Mr. Falconer and his bride, and little Miss Wilkins, your school-teacher at Lucky Star. Some day I’ll tell you how we renewed our acquaintance.”

Nick did not care to know. He wanted to be the only guest: yet somehow he felt that she did not mean to disappoint him. She meant him to be happy that day—the day of Christmas Eve, when she asked him to come to her—at last. But how could she contrive, with other guests, not to let it be a disappointment?

She contrived it by letting him arrive first at the beautiful new house, which was as like as possible, in miniature, to the Mission Inn where they had once “made-believe.” They did not speak when they met. Their hearts were too full. There was no question, “Will you marry me?” No answer, “Yes, I am free to love you now.” But when the others came, Angela said:

“Congratulate me. I am engaged to the best and dearest man on earth, and I—am the happiest woman.”

THE END