

Inside of the Cup, the — Volume 04 eBook

Inside of the Cup, the — Volume 04 by Winston Churchill

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I

Hodder fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, awaking during the night at occasional intervals to recall chimerical dreams in which the events of the day before were reflected, but caricatured and distorted. Alison Parr was talking to the woman in the flat, and both were changed, and yet he identified both: and on another occasion he saw a familiar figure surrounded by romping, ragged children—a figure which turned out to be Eldon Parr's!

Finally he was aroused by what seemed a summons from the unknown—the prolonged morning whistle of the shoe factory. For a while he lay as one benumbed, and the gradual realization that ensued might be likened to the straining of stiffened wounds. Little by little he reconstructed, until the process became unbearable, and then rose from his bed with one object in mind,—to go to Horace Bentley. At first—he seized upon the excuse that Mr. Bentley would wish to hear the verdict of Dr. Jarvis, but immediately abandoned it as dishonest, acknowledging the true reason, that in all the—world the presence of this one man alone might assuage in some degree the terror in his soul. For the first time in his life, since childhood, he knew a sense of utter dependence upon another human being. He felt no shame, would make no explanation for his early visit.

He turned up Tower, deliberately avoiding Dalton Street in its lower part, reached Mr. Bentley's door. The wrinkled, hospitable old darky actually seemed to radiate something of the personality with which he had so long been associated, and Hodder was conscious of a surge of relief, a return of confidence at sight of him. Yes, Mr. Bentley was at home, in the dining room. The rector said he would wait, and not disturb him.

“He done tole me to bring you out, sah, if you come,” said Sam.

“He expects me?” exclaimed Hodder, with a shock of surprise.

“That's what he done tole me, sah, to ax you kindly for to step out when you come.”

The sun was beginning to penetrate into the little back yard, where the flowers were still glistening with the drops of their morning bath; and Mr. Bentley sat by the window reading his newspaper, his spectacles on his nose, and a great grey cat rubbing herself against his legs. He rose with alacrity.

“Good morning, sir,” he said, and his welcome implied that early morning visits were the most common and natural of occurrences. “Sam, a plate for Mr. Hodder. I was just hoping you would come and tell me what Dr. Jarvis had said about the case.”



But Hodder was not deceived. He believed that Mr. Bentley understood perfectly why he had come, and the knowledge of the old gentleman's comprehension curiously added to his sense of refuge. He found himself seated once more at the mahogany table, permitting Sam to fill his cup with coffee.

“Jarvis has given a favourable report, and he is coming this morning himself, in an automobile, to take the boy out to the hospital.”



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“That is like Jarvis,” was Mr. Bentley’s comment. “We will go there, together, after breakfast, if convenient for you,” he added.

“I hoped you would,” replied the rector. “And I was going to ask you a favour. I have a check, given me by a young lady to use at my discretion, and it occurred to me that Garvin might be willing to accept some proposal from you.” He thought of Nan Ferguson, and of the hope he had expressed of finding some one in Dalton Street.

“I have been considering the matter,” Mr. Bentley said. “I have a friend who lives on the trolley line a little beyond the hospital, a widow. It is like the country there, you know, and I think Mrs. Bledsoe could be induced to take the Garvins. And then something can be arranged for him. I will find an opportunity to speak to him this morning.”

Hodder sipped his coffee, and looked out at the morning-glories opening to the sun.

“Mrs. Garvin was alone last night. He had gone out shortly after we left, and had not waited for the doctor. She was greatly worried.”

Hodder found himself discussing these matters on which, an hour before, he had feared to permit his mind to dwell. And presently, not without feeling, but in a manner eliminating all account of his personal emotions, he was relating that climactic episode of the woman at the piano. The old gentleman listened intently, and in silence.

“Yes,” he said, when the rector had finished, “that is my observation. Most of them are driven to the life, and held in it, of course, by a remorseless civilization. Individuals may be culpable, Mr. Hodder—are culpable. But we cannot put the whole responsibility on individuals.”

“No,” Hodder assented, “I can see that now.” He paused a moment, and as his mind dwelt upon the scene and he saw again the woman standing before him in bravado, the whole terrible meaning of her life and end flashed through him as one poignant sensation. Her dauntless determination to accept the consequence of her acts, her willingness to look her future in the face, cried out to him in challenge.

“She refused unconditionally,” he said.

Mr. Bentley seemed to read his thought, divine his appeal.

“We must wait,” he answered.

“Do you think?—” Hodder began, and stopped abruptly.

“I remember another case, somewhat similar,” said Mr. Bentley. “This woman, too, had the spirit you describe—we could do nothing with her. We kept an eye on her—or rather Sally Grover did—she deserves credit—and finally an occasion presented itself.”

“And the woman you speak of was—rehabilitated?” Hodder asked. He avoided the word “saved.”

“Yes, sir. It was one of the fortunate cases. There are others which are not so fortunate.”

Hodder nodded.

“We are beginning to recognize that we are dealing, in, many instances, with a disease,” Mr. Bentley went on. “I am far from saying that it cannot be cured, but sometimes we are forced to admit that the cure is not within our power, Mr. Hodder.”



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Two thoughts struck the rector simultaneously, the: revelation of what might be called a modern enlightenment in one of Mr. Bentley's age, an indication of uninterrupted growth, of the sense of continued youth which had impressed him from the beginning; and, secondly, an intimation from the use of the plural pronoun we, of an association of workers (informal, undoubtedly) behind Mr. Bentley. While he was engaged in these speculations the door opened.

"Heah's Miss Sally, Marse Ho'ace," said Sam.

"Good morning, Sally," said Mr. Bentley, rising from the table with his customary courtesy, "I'm glad you came in. Let me introduce Mr. Hodder, of St. John's."

Miss Grover had capability written all over her. She was a young woman of thirty, slim to spareness, simply dressed in a shirtwaist and a dark blue skirt; alert, so distinctly American in type as to give a suggestion of the Indian. Her quick, deep-set eyes searched Hodder's face as she jerked his hand; but her greeting was cordial, and, matter-of-fact. She stimulated curiosity.

"Well, Sally, what's the news?" Mr. Bentley asked.

"Gratz, the cabinet-maker, was on the rampage again, Mr. Bentley. His wife was here yesterday when I got home from work, and I went over with her. He was in a beastly state, and all the niggers and children in the neighbourhood, including his own, around the shop. Fusel oil, labelled whiskey," she explained, succinctly.

"What did you do?"

"Took the bottle away from him," said Miss Grower. The simplicity of this method, Holder thought, was undeniable. "Stayed there until he came to. Then I reckon I scared him some."

"How?" Mr. Bentley smiled.

"I told him he'd have to see you. He'd rather serve three months than do that—said so. I reckon he would, too," she declared grimly. "He's better than he was last year, I think." She thrust her hand in the pocket of her skirt and produced some bills and silver, which she counted. "Here's three thirty-five from Sue Brady. I told her she hadn't any business bothering you, but she swears she'd spend it."

"That was wrong, Sally."

Miss Grower tossed her head.

"Oh, she knew I'd take it, well enough."



"I imagine she did," Mr. Bentley replied, and his eyes twinkled. He rose and led the way into the library, where he opened his desk, produced a ledger, and wrote down the amount in a fine hand.

"Susan Brady, three dollars and thirty-five cents. I'll put it in the savings bank to-day. That makes twenty-two dollars and forty cents for Sue. She's growing rich."

"Some man'll get it," said Sally.

"Sally," said Mr. Bentley, turning in his chair, "Mr. Holder's been telling me about a rather unusual woman in that apartment house just above Fourteenth Street, on the south side of Dalton."

"I think I know her—by sight," Sally corrected herself. She appealed to Holder. "Red hair, and lots of it—I suppose a man would call it auburn. She must have been something of a beauty, once."



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The rector assented, in some astonishment.

“Couldn’t do anything with her, could you? I reckoned not. I’ve noticed her up and down Dalton Street at night.”

Holder was no longer deceived by her matter-of-fact tone.

“I’ll tell you what, Mr. Holder,” she went on, energetically, “there’s not a particle of use running after those people, and the sooner you find it out the less worry and trouble you give yourself.”

“Mr. Holder didn’t run after her, Sally,” said Mr. Bentley, in gentle reproof.

Holder smiled.

“Well,” said Miss Grower, “I’ve had my eye on her. She has a history—most of ’em have. But this one’s out of the common. When they’re brazen like that, and have had good looks, you can nearly always tell. You’ve got to wait for something to happen, and trust to luck to be on the spot, or near it. It’s a toss-up, of course. One thing is sure, you can’t make friends with that kind if they get a notion you’re up to anything.”

“Sally, you must remember—” Mr. Bentley began.

Her tone became modified. Mr. Bentley was apparently the only human of whom she stood in awe.

“All I meant was,” she said, addressing the rector, “that you’ve got to run across ’em in some natural way.”

“I understood perfectly, and I agree with you,” Holder replied. “I have come, quite recently, to the same conclusion myself.”

She gave him a penetrating glance, and he had to admit, inwardly, that a certain satisfaction followed Miss Grower’s approval.

“Mercy, I have to be going,” she exclaimed, glancing at the black marble clock on the mantel. “We’ve got a lot of invoices to put through to-day. See you again, Mr. Holder.” She jerked his hand once more. “Good morning, Mr. Bentley.”

“Good morning, Sally.”

Mr. Bentley rose, and took his hat and gold-headed stick from the rack in the hall.

“You mustn’t mind Sally,” he said, when they had reached the sidewalk. “Sometimes her brusque manner is not understood. But she is a very extraordinary woman.”



“I can see that,” the rector assented quickly, and with a heartiness that dispelled all doubt of his liking for Miss Grower. Once more many questions rose to his lips, which he suppressed, since Mr. Bentley volunteered no information. Hodder became, in fact, so lost in speculation concerning Mr. Bentley’s establishment as to forget the errand on which—they were bound. And Sally Grower’s words, apropos of the woman in the flat, seemed but an energetic driving home of the severe lessons of his recent experiences. And how blind he had been, he reflected, not to have seen the thing for himself! Not to have realized the essential artificiality of his former method of approach! And then it struck him that Sally Grower herself must have had a history.

Mr. Bentley, too, was preoccupied.

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Presently, in the midst of these thoughts, Hodder's eyes were arrested by a crowd barring the sidewalk on the block ahead; no unusual sight in that neighbourhood, and yet one which aroused in him sensations of weakness and nausea. Thus were the hidden vice and suffering of these sinister places occasionally brought to light, exposed to the curious and morbid stares of those whose own turn might come on the morrow. It was only by degrees he comprehended that the people were gathered in front of the house to which they were bound. An ambulance was seen to drive away: it turned into the aide street in front of them.

"A city ambulance!" the rector exclaimed.

Mr. Bentley did not reply.

The murmuring group which overflowed the uneven brick pavement to the asphalt was characteristic: women in calico, drudges, women in wrappers, with sleepy, awestricken faces; idlers, men and boys who had run out of the saloons, whose comments were more audible and caustic, and a fringe of children ceaselessly moving on the outskirts. The crowd parted at their approach, and they reached the gate, where a burly policeman, his helmet in his hand, was standing in the morning sunlight mopping his face with a red handkerchief. He greeted Mr. Bentley respectfully, by name, and made way for them to pass in.

"What is the trouble, Ryan?" Mr. Bentley asked.

"Suicide, sir," the policeman replied. "Jumped off the bridge this morning. A tug picked him up, but he never came to—the strength wasn't in him. Sure it's all wore out he was. There was a letter on him, with the home number, so they knew where to fetch him. It's a sad case, sir, with the woman in there, and the child gone to the hospital not an hour ago."

"You mean Garvin?" Mr. Bentley demanded.

"It's him I mean, sir."

"We'd like to go in," said Mr. Bentley. "We came to see them."

"You're welcome, air, and the minister too. It's only them I'm holdin' back," and the policeman shook his stick at the people.

Mr. Bentley walked up the steps, and took off his hat as he went through the battered doorway. Hodder followed, with a sense of curious faces staring at them from the thresholds as they passed; they reached the upper passage, and the room, and paused: the shutters were closed, the little couch where the child had been was empty. On the bed lay a form—covered with a sheet, and beside it a woman kneeling, shaken by sobs, ceaselessly calling a name



A stout figure, hitherto unperceived, rose from a corner and came silently toward them—Mrs. Breitmann. She beckoned to them, and they followed her into a room on the same floor, where she told them what she knew, heedless of the tears coursing ceaselessly down her cheeks.



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It seemed that Mrs. Garvin had had a premonition which she had not wholly confided to the rector. She had believed her husband never would come back; and early in the morning, in spite of all that Mrs. Breitmann could do, had insisted at intervals upon running downstairs and scanning the street. At half past seven Dr. Jarvis had come and himself carried down the child and put him in the back of his automobile. The doctor had had a nurse with him, and had begged the mother to accompany them to the hospital, saying that he would send her back. But she would not be persuaded to leave the house. The doctor could not wait, and had finally gone off with little Dicky, leaving a powder with Mrs. Breitmann for the mother. Then she had become uncontrollable.

“Ach, it was terrible!” said the kind woman. “She was crazy, yes—she was not in her mind. I make a little coffee, but she will not touch it. All those things about her home she would talk of, and how good he was, and how she loved him more again than the child.

“Und then the wheels in the street, and she makes a cry and runs to see—I cannot hold her”

“It would be well not to disturb her for a while,” said Mr. Bentley, seating himself on one of the dilapidated chairs which formed apart of the German woman’s meagre furniture. “I will remain here if you, Mr. Hodder, will make the necessary arrangements for the funeral. Have you any objections, sir?”

“Not at all,” replied the rector, and left the house, the occupants of which had already returned to the daily round of their lives: the rattle of dishes and the noise of voices were heard in the ‘ci devant’ parlour, and on the steps he met the little waif with the pitcher of beer; in the street the boys who had gathered around the ambulance were playing baseball. Hodder glanced up, involuntarily, at the window of the woman he had visited the night before, but it was empty. He hurried along the littered sidewalks to the drug store, where he telephoned an undertaker; and then, as an afterthought, telephoned the hospital. The boy had arrived, and was seemingly no worse for the journey.

All this Hodder performed mechanically. Not until he was returning—not, indeed, until he entered the house did the whiff of its degrading, heated odours bring home to him the tragedy which it held, and he grasped the banister on the stairs. The thought that shook him now was of the cumulative misery of the city, of the world, of which this history on which he had stumbled was but one insignificant incident. But he went on into Mrs. Breitmann’s room, and saw Mr. Bentley still seated where he had left him. The old gentleman looked up at him.

“Mrs. Breitmann and I are agreed, Mr. Hodder, that Mrs. Garvin ought not to remain in there. What do you think?”

“By all means, no,” said the rector.

The German woman burst into a soliloquy of sympathy that became incoherent.



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“She will not leave him,—nein—she will not come. . . .”

They went, the three of them, to the doorway of the death chamber and stood gazing at the huddled figure of the woman by the bedside. She had ceased to cry out: she was as one grown numb under torture; occasionally a convulsive shudder shook her. But when Mrs. Breitmann touched her, spoke to her, her grief awoke again in all its violence, and it was more by force than persuasion that she was finally removed. Mrs. Breitmann held one arm, Mr. Bentley another, and between them they fairly carried her out, for she was frail indeed.

As for Hodder, something held him back—some dread that he could not at once define. And while he groped for it, he stood staring at the man on the bed, for the hand of love had drawn back the sheet from the face. The battle was over of this poor weakling against the world; the torments of haunting fear and hate, of drink and despair had triumphed. The sight of the little group of toys brought up the image of the home in Alder Street as the wife had pictured it. Was it possible that this man, who had gone alone to the bridge in the night, had once been happy, content with life, grateful for it, possessed of a simple trust in his fellow-men—in Eldon Parr? Once more, unsummoned, came the memory of that evening of rain and thunder in the boy’s room at the top of the great house in Park Street. He had pitied Eldon Parr then. Did he now?

He crossed the room, on tiptoe, as though he feared to wake once more this poor wretch to his misery and hate, Gently he covered again the face with the sheet.

Suddenly he knew the reason of his dread,—he had to face the woman! He was a minister of Christ, it was his duty to speak to her, as he had spoken to others in the hour of sorrow and death, of the justice and goodness of the God to whom she had prayed in the church. What should he say, now? In an agony of spirit, he sat down on the little couch beside the window and buried his face in his hands. The sight of poor Garvin’s white and wasted features, the terrible contrast between this miserable tenement and the palace with its unseen pictures and porcelains and tapestries, brought home to him with indescribable poignancy his own predicament. He was going to ask this woman to be comforted by faith and trust in the God of the man who had driven her husband to death! He beheld Eldon Parr in his pew complacently worshipping that God, who had rewarded him with riches and success—beheld himself as another man in his white surplice acquiescing in that God, preaching vainly

At last he got to his feet, went out of the room, reached the doorway of that other room and looked in. Mr. Bentley sat there; and the woman, whose tears had ceased to flow, was looking up into his face.

II

“The office ensuing,” says the Book of Common Prayer, meaning the Burial of the Dead, “is not to be used for any Unbaptized adult, any who die excommunicate, or who have laid violent hands on themselves.”



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Hodder had bought, with a part of Nan Ferguson's money, a tiny plot in a remote corner of Winterbourne Cemetery. And thither, the next morning, the body of Richard Garvin was taken.

A few mourners had stolen into the house and up the threadbare stairs into the miserable little back room, somehow dignified as it had never been before, and laid their gifts upon the coffin. An odd and pitiful assortment they were—mourners and gifts: men and women whose only bond with the man in life had been the bond of misery; who had seen him as he had fared forth morning after morning in the hopeless search for work, and slunk home night after night bitter and dejected; many of whom had listened, jeeringly perhaps, to his grievance against the world, though it were in some sort their own. Death, for them, had ennobled him. The little girl whom Hodder had met with the pitcher of beer came tiptoeing with a wilted bunch of pansies, picked heaven knows where; stolen, maybe, from one of the gardens of the West End. Carnations, lilies of the valley, geraniums even—such were the offerings scattered loosely on the lid until a woman came with a mass of white roses that filled the room with their fragrance,—a woman with burnished red hair. Hodder started as he recognized her; her gaze was a strange mixture of effrontery and —something else; sorrow did not quite express it. The very lavishness of her gift brought to him irresistibly the reminder of another offering. . . . She was speaking.

“I don't blame him for what he done—I'd have done it, too, if I'd been him. But say, I felt kind of bad when I heard it, knowing about the kid, and all. I had to bring something—”

Instinctively Hodder surmised that she was in doubt as to the acceptance of her flowers. He took them from her hand, and laid them at the foot of the coffin.

“Thank you,” he said, simply.

She stared at him a moment with the perplexity she had shown at times on the night he visited her, and went out. . .

Funerals, if they might be dignified by this name, were not infrequent occurrences in Dalton Street, and why this one should have been looked upon as of sufficient importance to collect a group of onlookers at the gate it is difficult to say. Perhaps it was because of the seeming interest in it of the higher powers—for suicide and consequent widows and orphans were not unknown there. This widow and this orphan were to be miraculously rescued, were to know Dalton Street no more. The rector of a fashionable church, of all beings, was the agent in the miracle. Thus the occasion was tinged with awe. As for Mr. Bentley, his was a familiar figure, and had been remarked in Dalton Street funerals before.



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They started, the three mourners, on the long drive to the cemetery, through unfrequented streets lined with mediocre dwellings, interspersed with groceries and saloons—short cuts known only to hearse drivers: they traversed, for some distance, that very Wilderness road where Mr. Bentley's old-fashioned mansion once had stood on its long green slope, framed by ancient trees; the Wilderness road, now paved with hot blocks of granite over which the carriage rattled; spread with car tracks, bordered by heterogeneous buildings of all characters and descriptions, bakeries and breweries, slaughter houses and markets, tumble-down shanties, weedy corner lots and "refreshment-houses" that announced "Lager Beer, Wines and Liquors." At last they came to a region which was neither country nor city, where the road-houses were still in evidence, where the glass roofs of greenhouses caught the burning rays of the sun, where yards filled with marble blocks and half-finished tombstones appeared, and then they turned into the gates of Winterbourne.

Like the city itself, there was a fashionable district in Winterbourne: unlike the city, this district remained stationary. There was no soot here, and if there had been, the dead would not have minded it. They passed the Prestons and the Parrs; the lots grew smaller, the tombstones less pretentious; and finally they came to an open grave on a slope where the trees were still young, and where three men of the cemetery force lifted the coffin from the hearse—Richard Garvin's pallbearers.

John Hodder might not read the service, but there was none to tell him that the Gospel of John was not written for this man. He stood on the grass beside the grave, and a breeze from across the great river near by stirred the maple leaves above his head. "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." Nor was there any canon to forbid the words of Paul: "It is sown in corruption; it is raised in in corruption; it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."

They laid the flowers on the fresh earth, even the white roses, and then they drove back to the city.

CHAPTER XIV

A SATURDAY AFTERNOON

I

The sight of a certain old gentleman as he walked along the shady side of Twenty-second Street about two o'clock on a broiling Saturday afternoon in midsummer was one not easily to be forgotten. A younger man, tall and vigorous, clad in a thin suit of



blue serge, walked by his side. They were followed by a shouting troop of small boys who overran the pavements, and some of whom were armed with baseball bats. The big trolley car was hailed by a dozen dirty little hands.

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Even the grumpy passengers were disarmed. The conductor took Mr. Bentley's bill deprecatingly, as much as to say that the newly organized Traction Company—just out of the receivers' hands—were the Moloch, not he, and rang off the fares under protest. And Mr. Bentley, as had been his custom for years, sat down and took off his hat, and smiled so benignly at those around him that they immediately began to talk, to him. It was always irresistible, this desire to talk to Mr. Bentley. If you had left your office irritated and out of sorts, your nerves worn to an edge by the uninterrupted heat, you invariably got off at your corner feeling better. It was Phil Goodrich who had said that Horace Bentley had only to get on a Tower Street car to turn it into a church. And if he had chosen to establish that 'dernier cri' of modern civilization where ladies go who have 'welt-schmerz' without knowing why, —a sanitarium, he might have gained back again all the money he had lost in giving his Grantham stock to Eldon Parr.

Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, he could have emptied Dalton Street of its children. In the first place, there was the irresistible inducement to any boy to ride several miles on a trolley without having this right challenged by the irate guardian of the vehicle, without being summarily requested to alight at twenty-five miles an hour: in the second place, there was the soda water and sweet biscuit partaken of after the baseball game in that pavilion, more imposing in one's eyes than the Taj Mahal. Mr. Bentley would willingly have taken all Dalton Street. He had his own 'welt-schmerz', though he did not go to a sanitarium to cure it; he was forced to set an age limit of ten, and then establish a high court of appeal; for there were boys whose biographies, if they are ever written, will be as hazy as those of certain world-wide celebrities who might be mentioned concerning the date and exact spot of the entrance of their heroes into the light. The solemn protestations, the tears, the recrimination even, brought pangs to the old gentleman's heart, for with all the will in the world he had been forced in the nature of things, to set a limit.

This limit had recently been increased by the unlooked-for appearance on these excursions of the tall man in the blue serge suit, whose knowledge of the national game and of other matters of vital import to youth was gratifying if sometimes disconcerting; who towered, an unruffled Gulliver, over their Lilliputian controversies, in which bats were waved and fists brought into play and language used on the meaning of which the Century dictionary is silent. On one former occasion, indeed, Mr. Bentley had found moral suasion, affection, and veneration of no avail, and had had to invoke the friendly aid of a park policeman to quell one of these incipient riots. To Mr. Bentley baseball was as a sealed book. The tall man's justice, not always worthy of the traditions of Solomon, had

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in it an element of force. To be lifted off the ground by strong arms at the moment you are about to dust the home plate with your adversary is humiliating, but effective. It gradually became apparent that a decision was a decision. And one Saturday this inexplicable person carried in his hand a mysterious package which, when opened, revealed two pairs of diminutive boxing gloves. They instantly became popular.

By the time they had made the accidental and somewhat astounding discovery that he was a parson, they were willing to overlook it; in view, perhaps, of his compensating accomplishments. Instead of advising them to turn the other cheek, he taught them uppercuts, feints, and jabs, and on the proof of this unexpected acquaintance with a profession all of them openly admired, the last vestige of reserve disappeared. He was accepted without qualifications.

II

Although the field to which they resorted was not in the most frequented section of the park, pedestrians often passed that way, and sometimes lingered. Thus, towards the close of a certain Saturday in July, a young woman walked out of the wood path and stood awhile gazing intently at the active figure striding among the diminutive, darting forms. Presently, with an amused expression, she turned her head to discover Mr. Bentley, who sat on a green bench under a tree, his hat and stick on the grass beside him. She was unaware that he had been looking at her.

“Aren’t they having a good time!” she said, and the genuine thrill in her voice betrayed a rare and unmistakable pleasure.

“Ah,” replied Mr. Bentley, smiling back at her, “you like to see them, too. Most persons do. Children are not meant for the city, my dear young lady, their natural home is in the woods and fields, and these little fellows are a proof of it. When they come out here, they run wild. You perceive,” he added with a twinkle, as an expletive of unquestionable vigour was hurled across the diamond, “they are not always so polite as they might be.”

The young woman smiled again, but the look she gave him was a puzzled one. And then, quite naturally, she sank, down on the grass, on the other side of Mr. Bentley’s hat, watching the game for a while in silence.

“What a tyrant!” she exclaimed. Another uproar had been quelled, and two vigorously protesting runners sent back to their former bases.

“Oh, a benevolent tyrant,” Mr. Bentley corrected her. “Mr. Hodder has the gift of managing boys,—he understands them. And they require a strong hand. His



generation has had the training which mine lacked. In my day, at college, we worked off our surplus energy on the unfortunate professors, and we carried away chapel bells and fought with the townspeople.”

It required some effort, she found, to imagine this benevolent looking old gentleman assaulting professors.



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“Nowadays they play baseball and football, and box!” He pointed to the boxing gloves on the grass. “Mr. Hodder has taught them to settle their differences in that way; it is much more sensible.”

She picked off the white clover-tops.

“So that is Mr. Hodder, of St. John’s,” she said.

“Ah, you know him, then?”

“I’ve met him,” she answered quietly. “Are these children connected with his church?”

“They are little waifs from Dalton Street and that vicinity,” said Mr. Bentley. “Very few of them, I should imagine, have ever been inside of a church.”

She seemed surprised.

“But—is it his habit to bring them out here?” The old gentleman beamed on her, perhaps with the hint of a smile at her curiosity.

“He has found time for it, this summer. It is very good of him.”

She refrained from comment on this remark, falling into reflection, leaning back, with one hand outstretched, on the grass. The game went on vociferously, the shrill lithe voices piercing the silence of the summer afternoon. Mr. Bentley’s eyes continued to rest on her.

“Tell me,” he inquired, after a while, “are you not Alison Parr?”

She glanced up at him, startled. “Yes.”

“I thought so, although I have not seen you since you were a little girl. I knew your mother very well indeed, but it is too much to expect you to remember me, after all this time. No doubt you have forgotten my name. I am Mr. Bentley.”

“Mr. Bentley!” she cried, sitting upright and gazing at him. “How stupid of me not to have known you! You couldn’t have been any one else.”

It was the old gentleman’s turn to start. She rose impulsively and sat down on the bench beside him, and his hand trembled as he laid it in hers.

“Yes, my dear, I am still alive. But surely you cannot remember me, Alison?”

The old look of almost stubborn honesty he recalled in the child came into her eyes.



“I do—and I don’t,” she said, perplexed. “It seemed to me as if I ought to have recognized you when I came up, and yet I hadn’t the slightest notion who you were. I knew you were somebody.”

He shook his head, but did not speak.

“But you have always been a fact in my existence—that is what I want to say,” she went on. “It must be possible to remember a person and not recognize him, that is what I feel. I can remember you coming to our house in Ransome Street, and how I looked forward to your visits. And you used to have little candy beans in your pockets,” she cried. “Have you now?”

His eyes were a little dimmed as he reached, smilingly, into the skirts of a somewhat shiny but scrupulously brushed coat and produced a brightly colored handful. She took one, and put it in her mouth:

“Oh,” she said, “how good they were—Isn’t it strange how a taste brings back events? I can remember it all as if it were yesterday, and how I used to sit on your knee, and mother would tell me not to bother you.”



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“And now—you are grown,” he said.

“Something more than grown,” she smiled. “I was thirty-one in May. Tell me,” she asked, choosing another of the beans which he still absently held, “do you get them for these?” And she nodded toward the Dalton Street waifs.

“Yes,” he said, “they are children, too.”

“I can remember,” she said, after a pause, “I can remember my mother speaking of you to me the year she died. I was almost grown, then. It was after we had moved up to Park Street, and her health had already begun to fail. That made an impression on me, but I have forgotten what she said—it was apropos of some recollection. No—it was a photograph—she was going over some old things.” Alison ceased speaking abruptly, for the pain in Mr. Bentley’s remarkable grey eyes had not escaped her. What was it about him? Why could she not recall? Long-forgotten, shadowy episodes of the past tormented her, flitted provokingly through her mind—ungrasped: words dropped in her presence which had made their impression, but the gist of which was gone. Why had Mr. Bentley ceased coming to the house? So strongly did she feel his presence now that the thought occurred to her,—perhaps her mother had not wished her to forget him!

“I did not suspect,” she heard him saying, “that you would go out into the world and create the beautiful gardens of which I have heard. But you had no lack of spirit in those days, too.”

“I was a most disagreeable child, perverse,—cantankerous—I can hear my mother saying it! As for the gardens—they have given me something to do, they have kept me out of mischief. I suppose I ought to be thankful, but I still have the rebellious streak when I see what others have done, what others are doing, and I sometimes wonder what right I ever had to think that I might create something worth while.”

He glanced at her quickly as she sat with bent head.

“Others put a higher value on what you have done.”

“Oh, they don’t know—” she exclaimed.

If something were revealed to him by her tone, he did not betray it, but went on cheerfully.

“You have been away a long time, Alison. It must interest you to come back, and see the changes in our Western civilization. We are moving very rapidly—in certain directions,” he corrected himself.

She appraised his qualification.



“In certain directions,—yes. But they are little better in the East. I have scarcely been back,” she added, “since I went to Paris to study. I have often thought I should like to return and stay awhile, only —I never seemed to get time. Now I am going over a garden for my father which was one of my first efforts, and which has always reproached me.”

“And you do not mind the heat?” he asked. “Those who go East to live return to find our summers oppressive.”

“Oh, I’m a salamander, I think,” Alison laughed.



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Thus they sat chatting, interrupted once or twice by urchins too small to join in the game, who came running to Mr. Bentley and stood staring at Alison as at a being beyond the borders of experience: and she would smile at them quite as shyly,—children being beyond her own. Her imagination was as keen, as unspoiled as a child's, and was stimulated by a sense of adventure, of the mystery which hung about this fine old gentleman who betrayed such sentiment for a mother whom she had loved and admired and still secretly mourned. Here, if there had been no other, was a compelling bond of sympathy

The shadows grew longer, the game broke up. And Hodder, surrounded by an argumentative group keeping pace with him, came toward them from the field; Alison watched him curiously as he turned this way and that to answer the insistent questions with which he was pelted, and once she saw him stride rapidly after a dodging delinquent and seize him by the collar amidst piercing yells of approval, and derision for the rebel.

"It's remarkable how he gets along with them," said Mr. Bentley, smiling at the scene. "Most of them have never known what discipline is."

The chorus approached. And Hodder, recognizing her, dropped the collar he held: A young woman conversing with Mr. Bentley—was no unusual sight, —he had made no speculations as to this one's identity. He left the boys, and drew near.

"You know Miss Parr, I believe," the old gentleman said.

Hodder took her hand. He had often tried to imagine his feelings if he should meet her again: what he should do and say,—what would be their footing. And now he had no time to prepare

"It is so strange," she said, with that note of wonder at life in her voice which he recalled so well, "that I should have come across Mr. Bentley here after so many years. How many years, Mr. Bentley?"

"Ah, my dear," he protested, "my measurements would not be yours."

"It is better for both of us not to say, Alison declared, laughingly.

"You knew Mr. Bentley?" asked Hodder, astonished.

"He was a very dear friend of my mother's, although I used to appropriate him when he came to our house. It was when we lived in Ransome Street, ages ago. But I don't think Mr. Bentley has grown a bit older."

"He is one of the few who have found the secret of youth," said the rector.



But the old gentleman had moved off into the path, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was carried off by the swarm which clustered around him, two smaller ones tugging at his hand, and all intent upon arriving at the soda-water pavilion near the entrance. They had followed him with their eyes, and they saw him turn around and smile at them, helplessly. Alison presented a perplexed face to Hodder.

“Does he bring them here,—or you?” she asked.

“I—” he hesitated. “Mr. Bentley has done this every Saturday afternoon for years,” he said, “I am merely one of them.”



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She looked at him quickly. They had started to follow, in the cool path beneath the forest trees. Restraint fell upon them, brought about by the memory of the intimacy of their former meeting, further complicated on Hodder's part by his new attitude toward her father, and his finding her in the company, of all persons, of Mr. Bentley. Unuttered queries pressed on the minds of both.

"Tell me about Mr. Bentley," she said.

Hodder hesitated.

"I scarcely know where to begin," he replied, yet smiling at the characteristic abruptness of her question. The modulations of her voice revealed again the searching, inquisitive spirit within her, and his responded to the intensity of the interest in Mr. Bentley.

"Begin anywhere."

"Anywhere?" he repeated, seeking to gain time.

"Yes—anywhere," she said impatiently.

"Well, he lives in Dalton Street, if you recall what kind of a place that is" (she nodded), "and he is known from one end of it to the other."

"I see what he is—he is the most extraordinary person I have ever known. Just to talk to him gives one such a queer feeling of—of dissatisfaction with one's self, and seeing him once more seems to have half revived in me a whole series of dead memories. And I have been trying to think, but it is all so tantalizing. There is some mystery about him," she insisted. "He disappeared suddenly, and my mother never mentioned him but once afterward, but other persons have spoken of him since—I forget who. He was so well known, and he used to go to St. John's."

"Yes, he used to go to St. John's."

"What happened to him—do you know? The reason he stopped coming to our house was some misunderstanding with my father, of course. I am positive my mother never changed her feelings toward him."

"I can only tell you what he has told me, which is all I know —authoritatively," Hodder replied. How could he say to her that her father had ruined Mr. Bentley? Indeed, with a woman of her fearlessness and honesty—and above all, her intuition,—he felt the cruelty of his position keenly. Hodder did not relish half truths; and he felt that, however scant his intercourse in the future might be with Alison Parr, he would have liked to have kept it on that basis of frankness in which it had begun. But the exact stage of disillusionment she had reached in regard to Eldon Parr was unknown to him, and he



feared that a further revelation might possibly sever the already precarious tie between father and daughter.

He recounted, therefore, that Mr. Bentley had failed; and how he had before that given much of his estate away in charity, how he had been unable to keep his pew in St. John's, and had retired to the house in Dalton Street.

For some moments after he had finished Alison did not reply.

"What is his number in Dalton Street?" she asked.

Hodder informed her.



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He could not read in her face whether she suspected that he could have told her more. And in spite of an inordinate, human joy in being again in her presence, his desire to hide from her that which had taken place within him, and the inability he felt to read his future, were instinctive: the more so because of the very spontaneity they had achieved at their first meeting. As a man, he shrank from confessing to her, however indirectly, the fact that she herself was so vital an element in his disillusionment. For the conversation in the garden had been the immediate cause of the inner ferment ending in his resolution to go away, and had directed him, by logical steps, to the encounter in the church with Mrs. Garvin.

"You have not yet finished the garden?" he asked. "I imagined you back in the East by this time."

"Oh, I am procrastinating," she replied. "It is a fit of sheer laziness. I ought to be elsewhere, but I was born without a conscience. If I had one I should try to quiet it by reminding it that I am fulfilling a long-delayed promise—I am making a garden for Mrs. Larrabee. You know her, of course, since she is a member of your congregation."

"Yes, I know her," he assented. And his mind was suddenly filled with vivid colour,—cobalt seas, and arsenic-green spruces with purple cones, cardinal-striped awnings that rattled in the salt breeze, and he saw once more the panorama of the life which had passed from him and the woman in the midst of it. And his overwhelming thought was of relief that he had somehow escaped. In spite of his unhappiness now, he would not have gone back. He realized for the first time that he had been nearer annihilation than to-day.

"Grace isn't here to bother me with the ideas she has picked up in Europe and catalogued," Alison continued.

"Catalogued!" Hodder exclaimed, struck by the pertinency of the word.

"Yes. Did you ever know anybody who had succeeded half so well in piecing together and absorbing into a harmonized whole all the divergent, artificial elements that enter into the conventional world to-day? Her character might be called a triumph of synthesis. For she has actually achieved an individuality—that is what always surprises me when I think of her. She has put the puzzle picture together, she has become a person."

He remembered, with a start, that this was the exact word Mrs. Larrabee had used about Alison Parr. If he had searched the world, he could not have found a greater contrast than that between these two women. And when she spoke again, he was to be further struck by her power of logical insight.



“Grace wants me because she thinks I have become the fashion—for the same reason that Charlotte Plimpton wants me. Only there is this difference—Grace will know the exact value of what I shall have done. Not that she thinks me a Le Notre”—Alison laughed—“What I mean is, she sees behind, she sees why it is fashionable to have a garden, since she has worked out the values of that existence. But there!” Alison added, with a provocative touch that did not escape him, “I am picking your parishioners to pieces again.”

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“You have more right than I,” he replied, “they have been your friends since childhood.”

“I thought you had gone away,” she said.

“Why?” he demanded. Had she been to church again?

“My father told me before he left that you were to take a cruise with him on the yacht he has chartered.”

“He wrote me from New York—I was unable to go,” Hodder said slowly.

He felt her gaze upon him, but resolutely refused to meet it. . . . They walked on in silence until they came to the more open spaces near the edge of the Park, thronged that Saturday evening by crowds which had sought the, city’s breathing space. Perfect trees cast long, fantastic shadows across the lawns, fountains flung up rainbows from the midst of lakes; children of the tenements darted hither and thither, rolled and romped on the grass; family parties picnicked everywhere, and a very babel of tongues greeted the ear—the languages of Europe from Sweden to Italy.

Suddenly an exclamation from her aroused and thrilled him.

“Isn’t it wonderful how happy they are, and with what simple pleasures they are satisfied! I often come over here on Saturdays and Sundays, just to talk to them.”

“Talk to them!” he echoed stupidly. “In their own languages?”

“Oh, I know a little German and Italian, though I can’t lay claim to Czech,” she answered gayly. “Why are you so surprised that I should possess such modest accomplishments?”

“It’s not the accomplishments.” He hesitated.

“No. You are surprised that I should be interested in humanity.” She stood facing him. “Well, I am,” she said, half humorously, half defiantly. “I believe I am more interested in human beings than in anything else in the world—when they are natural, as these people are and when they will tell one their joys and their troubles and their opinions.”

“Enthusiasm, self-assertion, had as usual, transformed her, and he saw the colour glowing under her olive skin. Was she accusing him of a lack of frankness?”

“And why,” he asked, collecting himself, “did you think—” he got no further.

“It’s because you have an idea that I’m a selfish Epicurean, if that isn’t tautology—because I’m interested in a form of art, the rest of the world can go hang. You have a prejudice against artists. I wish I really were one, but I’m not.”



This speech contained so many surprises for him that he scarcely knew how to answer it.

“Give me a little time,” he begged, “and perhaps I’ll get over my prejudices. The worst of them, at any rate. You are helping me to do so.” He tried to speak lightly, but his tone was more serious in the next sentence. “It seems to me personally that you have proved your concern for your fellow-creatures.”

Her colour grew deeper, her manner changed.

“That gives me the opportunity to say something I have hoped to say, ever since I saw you. I hoped I should see you again.”



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“You are not going away soon?” he exclaimed.

The words were spoken before he grasped their significance.

“Not at once. I don’t know how long I shall stay,” she answered hurriedly, intent upon what was in her mind. “I have thought a great deal about what I said to you that afternoon, and I find it more than ever difficult to excuse myself. I shan’t attempt to. I merely mean to ask you to forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” he assured her, under the influence of the feeling she had aroused.

“It’s nice of you to say so, and to take it as you did—nicer than I can express. I am afraid I shall never learn to appreciate that there may be other points of view toward life than my own. And I should have realized and sympathized with the difficulties of your position, and that you were doing the best under the circumstances.”

“No,” he exclaimed, “don’t say that! Your other instinct was the truer one, if indeed you have really changed it—I don’t believe you have.” He smiled at her again. “You didn’t hurt my feelings, you did me a service. I told you so at the time, and I meant it. And, more than that, I understood.”

“You understood—?”

“You were not criticizing me, you were—what shall I say?—merely trying to iron out some of the inconsistencies of life. Well, you helped me to iron out some of the inconsistencies of my own. I am profoundly grateful.”

She gazed at him, puzzled. But he did not, he could not enlighten her. Some day she would discover what he meant.

“If so, I am glad,” she said, in a low voice.

They were standing in the midst of the crowd that thronged around the pavilion. An urchin caught hold of the rector’s coat.

“Here he is! Say, Mr. Hodder, ain’t you going to have any sody?”

“Certainly we are,” he replied, returning Alison’s faint smile In the confusion that followed he caught a glimpse of her talking to Mr. Bentley; and later, after he had taken her hand, his eyes followed her figure wending its way in the evening light through the groups toward Park Street, and he saw above the tree-tops the red tiled roof of the great house in which she was living, alone.



CHAPTER XV

THE CRUCIBLE

I

For better or worse John Hodder had flung his treasured beliefs into the crucible, and one by one he watched them crumble and consume away. None but his own soul knew what it cost him to make the test; and some times, in the early stages of it, he would cast down his book under the lamp and walk for hours in the night. Curiosity, and the despair of one who is lost impelled him to persist.

It had been said of him that he had a talent for the law, and he now discovered that his mind, once freed, weighed the evidence with a pitiless logic, paid its own tribute—- despite the anguish of the heart—to the pioneers of truth whose trail it followed into the Unknown, who had held no Mystery more sacred than Truth itself, who had dared to venture into the nothingness between the whirling worlds.



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He considered them, those whirling worlds, at night. Once they had been the candles of Jehovah, to light the path of his chosen nation, to herald the birth of his Son. And now? How many billions of blind, struggling creatures clung to them? Where now was this pin-point of humanity, in the midst of an appalling spectacle of a grinding, remorseless nature?

And that obscure Event on which he had staked his hopes? Was He, as John had written, the First Born of the Universe, the Word Incarnate of a system that defied time and space, the Logos of an outworn philosophy? Was that Universe conscious, as Berkeley had declared, or the blind monster of substance alone, or energy, as some modern scientists brutally and triumphantly maintained? Where was the Spirit that breathed in it of hope?

Such were some of the questions that thronged for solution. What was mind, what spirit? an attenuated vapour of the all-pervading substance?

He could not permit himself to dwell on these thoughts—madness lay that way. Madness, and a watching demon that whispered of substance, and sought to guide his wanderings in the night. Hodder clung to the shell of reality, to the tiny panorama of the visible and the finite, to the infinitesimal gropings that lay recorded before him on the printed page. Let him examine these first, let him discover—despite the price—what warrant the mind of man (the only light now vouchsafed to him in his darkness) gave him to speculate and to hope concerning the existence of a higher, truer Reality than that which now tossed and wounded him. It were better to know.

Scarcely had the body been lifted from the tree than the disputes commenced, the adulterations crept in. The spontaneity, the fire and zeal of the self-sacrificing itinerant preachers gave place to the paralyzing logic then pervading the Roman Empire, and which had sent its curse down the ages to the modern sermon; the geometrical rules of Euclid were made to solve the secrets of the universe. The simple faith of the cross which had inspired the martyr along the bloody way from Ephesus to the Circus at Rome was formalized by degrees into philosophy: the faith of future ages was settled by compromises, by manipulation, by bribery in Councils of the Church which resembled modern political conventions, and in which pagan Emperors did not hesitate to exert their influence over the metaphysical bishops of the factions. Recriminations, executions, murders—so the chronicles ran.

The prophet, the idealist disappeared, the priest with his rites and ceremonies and sacrifices, his power to save and damn, was once more in possession of the world.

The Son of Man was degraded into an infant in his mother's arms. An unhealthy, degenerating asceticism, drawn from pagan sources, began with the monks and anchorites of Egypt and culminated in the spectacle of Simeon's pillar. The mysteries of Eleusis, of Attis, Mithras, Magna Mater and Isis developed into Christian sacraments—

the symbol became the thing itself. Baptism the confession of the new life, following the customs of these cults, became initiation; and from the same superstitious origins, the repellent materialistic belief that to eat of the flesh and drink of the blood of a god was to gain immortality: immortality of the body, of course.



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Ah, when the superstitions of remote peoples, the fables and myths, were taken away; when the manufactured history and determinism of the Israelites from the fall of man to the coming of that Messiah, whom the Jews crucified because he failed to bring them their material Kingdom, were discredited; when the polemic and literal interpretations of evangelists had been rejected, and the pious frauds of tampering monks; when the ascetic Buddhism was removed; the cults and mysteries, the dogmas of an ancient naive philosophy discarded; the crude science of a Ptolemy who conceived the earth as a flat terrestrial expanse and hell as a smoking pit beneath proved false; the revelation of a Holy City of jasper and gold and crystal, the hierarchy with its divine franchise to save and rule and conquer,—when all these and more were eliminated from Christianity, what was left?

Hodder surveyed the ruins. And his mind recalled, that Sunday of rain in New York which had been the turning-point in his life, when he had listened to the preacher, when he had walked the streets unmindful of the wet, led on by visions, racked by fears. And the same terror returned to him now after all the years of respite, tenfold increased, of falling in the sight of man from the topmost tower.

What was to become of him, now that the very driving power of life was gone? Where would he go? to what might he turn his hand, since all were vanity and illusion? Careers meant nothing, had any indeed been possible to a man forty, left staring at stark reality after the rainbow had vanished. Nineveh had mocked and conquered him who had thought himself a conqueror. Self flew back and swung on its central pivot and took command. His future, his fate, what was to become of him. Who else now was to be considered? And what was to restrain him from reaching out his hand to pluck the fruit which he desired? . . .

II

What control from the Unknown is this which now depresses and now releases the sensitive thing called the soul of man, and sends it upward again until the green light of hope shines through the surface water? He might have grown accustomed, Holder thought, to the obscurity of the deeps; in which, after a while, the sharp agony of existence became dulled, the pressure benumbing. He was conscious himself, at such times, of no inner recuperation. Something drew him up, and he would find himself living again, at length to recognize the hand if not to comprehend the power.

The hand was Horace Bentley's.

What was the source of that serenity which shone on the face of his friend? Was it the light of faith? Faith in—what? Humanity, Mr. Bentley had told him on that first evening when they had met: faith in a world filled with cruelties, disillusionments, lies, and cheats! On what Authority was it based? Holder never asked, and no word of theology

ever crossed Mr. Bentley's lips; not by so much as a sign did he betray any knowledge he may have had of the drama taking place in Holder's soul; no comment escaped him on the amazing anomalies of the life the rector was leading, in the Church but not of it.



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It was only by degrees Holder came to understand that no question would be asked, and the frequency of his visits to Dalton Street increased. He directed his steps thither sometimes hurriedly, as though pursued, as to a haven from a storm. And a haven it was indeed! At all hours of the day he came, and oftener in the night, in those first weeks, and if Mr. Bentley were not at home the very sight of the hospitable old darky brought surging up within him a sense of security, of, relief; the library itself was filled with the peace of its owner. How many others had brought their troubles here, had been lightened on the very threshold of this sanctuary!

Gradually Hodder began to realize something of their numbers. Gradually, as he was drawn more and more into the network of the relationships of this extraordinary man,—nay, as he inevitably became a part of that network,—a period of bewilderment ensued. He found himself involved, and quite naturally, in unpremeditated activities, running errands, forming human ties on a human basis. No question was asked, no credentials demanded or rejected. Who he was made no difference—he was a friend of Horace Bentley's. He had less time to read, less time to think, to scan the veil of his future.

He had run through a score of volumes, critical, philosophical, scientific, absorbing their contents, eagerly anticipating their conclusions; filled, once he had begun, with a mania to destroy, a savage determination to leave nothing,—to level all

And now, save for the less frequent relapsing moods, he had grown strangely unconcerned about his future, content to live in the presence of this man; to ignore completely the aspects of a life incomprehensible to the few, besides Mr. Bentley, who observed it.

What he now mostly felt was relief, if not a faint self-congratulation that he had had the courage to go through with it, to know the worst. And he was conscious even, at times, of a faint reviving sense of freedom he had not known since the days at Bremerton. If the old dogmas were false, why should he regret them? He began to see that, once he had suspected their falsity, not to have investigated were to invite decay; and he pictured himself growing more unctuous, apologetic, plausible. He had, at any rate, escaped the more despicable fate, and if he went to pieces now it would be as a man, looking the facts in the face,—not as a coward and a hypocrite.

Late one afternoon, when he dropped in at Mr. Bentley's house, he was informed by Sam that a lady was awaiting Mr. Bentley in the library. As Hodder opened the door he saw a tall, slim figure of a woman with her back toward him. She was looking at the photographs on the mantel.

It was Alison Parr!

He remembered now that she had asked for Mr. Bentley's number, but it had never occurred to him that he might one day find her here. And as she turned he surprised in

her eyes a shyness he had never seen in them before. Thus they stood gazing at each other a moment before either spoke.



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“Oh, I thought you were Mr. Bentley,” she said.

“Have you been waiting long?” he asked.

“Three quarters of an hour, but I haven’t minded it. This is such an interesting room, with its pictures and relics and books. It has a soothing effect, hasn’t it? To come here is like stepping out of the turmoil of the modern world into a peaceful past.”

He was struck by the felicity of her description.

“You have been here before?” he asked.

“Yes.” She settled herself in the armchair; and Hodder, accepting the situation, took the seat beside her. “Of course I came, after I had found out who Mr. Bentley was. The opportunity to know him again—was not to be missed.”

“I can understand that,” he assented.

“That is, if a child can even be said to know such a person as Mr. Bentley. Naturally, I didn’t appreciate him in those days—children merely accept, without analyzing. And I have not yet been able to analyze,—I can only speculate and consider.”

Her enthusiasm never failed to stir and excite Hodder. Nor would he have thought it possible that a new value could be added to Mr. Bentley in his eyes. Yet so it was.

He felt within him, as she spoke, the quickening of a stimulus.

“When I came in a little while ago,” Alison continued, “I found a woman in black, with such a sweet, sad face. We began a conversation. She had been through a frightful experience. Her husband had committed suicide, her child had been on the point of death, and she says that she lies awake nights now thinking in terror of what might have happened to her if you and Mr. Bentley hadn’t helped her. She’s learning to be a stenographer. Do you remember her?—her name is Garvin.”

“Did she say—anything more?” Hodder anxiously demanded.

“No,” said Alison, surprised by his manner, “except that Mr. Bentley had found her a place to live, near the hospital, with a widow who was a friend of his. And that the child was well, and she could look life in the face again. Oh, it is terrible to think that people all around us are getting into such straits, and that we are so indifferent to it!”

Hodder did not speak at once. He was wondering, now that she had renewed her friendship with Mr. Bentley, whether certain revelations on her part were not inevitable . . .



She was regarding him, and he was aware that her curiosity was aflame. Again he wondered whether it were curiosity or—interest.

“You did not tell me, when we met in the Park, that you were no longer at St. John’s.”

Did Mr. Bentley tell you?”

“No. He merely said he saw a great deal of you. Martha Preston told me. She is still here, and goes to church occasionally. She was much surprised to learn that you were in the city.

“I am still living in the parish house,” he said. “I am—taking my vacation.”

“With Mr. Bentley?” Her eyes were still on his face.



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“With Mr. Bentley,” he replied.

He had spoken without bitterness. Although there had indeed been bitterness in his soul, it passed away in the atmosphere of Mr. Bentley’s house. The process now taking place in him was the same complication of negative and positive currents he had felt in her presence before. He was surprised to find that his old antipathy to agnosticism held over, in her case; to discover, now, that he was by no means, as yet, in view of the existence of Horace Bentley, to go the full length of unbelief! On the other hand, he saw that she had divined much of what had happened to him, and he felt radiating from her a sympathetic understanding which seemed almost a claim. She had a claim, although he could not have said of what it was constituted. Their personal relationship bore responsibilities. It suddenly came over him, in fact, that the two persons who in all the world were nearest him were herself and Mr. Bentley! He responded, scarce knowing why he did so, to the positive current.

“With Mr. Bentley,” he repeated, smiling, and meeting her eyes, “I have been learning something about the actual conditions of life in a modern city.”

She bent a little toward him in one of those spontaneous movements that characterized her.

“Tell me—what is his life?” she asked. “I have seen so little of it, and he has told me nothing himself. At first, in the Park, I saw only a kindly old gentleman, with a wonderful, restful personality, who had been a dear friend of my mother’s. I didn’t connect those boys with him. But since then—since I have been here twice, I have seen other things which make me wonder how far his influence extends.” She paused.

“I, too, have wondered,” said the rector, thoughtfully. “When I met him, I supposed he were merely living in simple relationships with his neighbours here in Dalton Street, but by degrees I have discovered that his relationships are as wide as the city itself. And they have grown naturally—by radiation, as it were. One incident has led to another, one act of kindness to another, until now there seems literally no end to the men and women with whom he is in personal touch, who are ready to do anything in their power for him at any time. It is an institution, in fact, wholly unorganized, which in the final analysis is one man. And there is in it absolutely nothing of that element which has come to be known as charity.”

Alison listened with parted lips.

“To give you an example,” he went on, gradually becoming fired by his subject, by her absorption, “since you have mentioned Mrs. Garvin, I will tell you what happened in that case. It is typical of many. It was a question of taking care of this woman, who was worn out and crushed, until she should recover sufficiently to take care of herself. Mr. Bentley did not need any assistance from me to get the boy into the hospital—Dr. Jarvis



worships him. But the mother. I might possibly have got her into an institutional home—Mr. Bentley did better than that, far better. On the day of the funeral we went directly from the cemetery to the house of a widow who owns a little fruit farm beyond the Park. Her name is Bledsoe, and it is not an exaggeration to say that her house, small as it is, contains an endowed room always at Mr. Bentley's disposal.



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“Mrs. Garvin is there now. She was received as a friend, as a guest—not as an inmate, a recipient of charity. I shall never forget how that woman ran out in the sun when she saw us coming, how proud she was to be able to do this thing, how she ushered us into the little parlour, that was all swept and polished, and how naturally and warmly she welcomed the other woman, dazed and exhausted, and took her hat and veil and almost carried her up the stairs. And later on I found out from Miss Grower, who lives here, Mrs. Bledsoe’s history. Eight or nine years ago her husband was sent to prison for forgery, and she was left with four small children, on the verge of a fate too terrible to mention. She was brought to Mr. Bentley’s attention, and he started her in life.

“And now Mrs. Garvin forms another link to that chain, which goes on growing. In a month she will be earning her own living as stenographer for a grain merchant whom Mr. Bentley set on his feet several years ago. One thing has led to the next. And—I doubt if any neighbourhood could be mentioned, north or south or west, or even in the business portion of the city itself, where men and women are not to be found ready and eager to do anything in their power for him. Of course there have been exceptions, what might be called failures in the ordinary terminology of charity, but there are not many.”

When he had finished she sat quite still, musing over what he had told her, her eyes alight.

“Yes, it is wonderful,” she said at length, in a low voice. “Oh, I can believe in that, making the world a better place to live in, making people happier. Of course every one cannot be like Mr. Bentley, but all may do their share in their own way. If only we could get rid of this senseless system of government that puts a premium on the acquisition of property! As it is, we have to depend on individual initiative. Even the good Mr. Bentley does is a drop in the ocean compared to what might be done if all this machinery— which has been invented, if all these discoveries of science, by which the forces of an indifferent nature have been harnessed, could be turned to the service of all mankind. Think of how many Mrs. Garvins, of how many Dalton Streets there are in the world, how many stunted children working in factories or growing up into criminals in the slums! I was reading a book just the other day on the effect of the lack of nutrition on character. We are breeding a million degenerate citizens by starving them, to say nothing of the effect of disease and bad air, of the constant fear of poverty that haunts the great majority of homes. There is no reason why that fear should not be removed, why the latest discoveries in medicine and science should not be at the disposal of all.”

The genuineness of her passion was unmistakable. His whole being responded to it.

“Have you always felt like this?” he asked. Like what?”



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“Indignant—that so many people were suffering.”

His question threw her into reflection.

“Why, no,” she answered, at length, “I never thought—I see what you mean. Four or five years ago, when I was going to socialist lectures, my sense of all this—inequality, injustice was intellectual. I didn’t get indignant over it, as I do now when I think of it.”

“And why do you get indignant now?”

“You mean,” she asked, “that I have no right to be indignant, since I do nothing to attempt to better conditions?—”

“Not at all,” Hodder disavowed. “Perhaps my question is too personal, but I didn’t intend it to be. I was merely wondering whether any event or series of events had transformed a mere knowledge of these conditions into feeling.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, but not in offence. Once more she relapsed into thought. And as he watched her, in silence, the colour that flowed and ebbed in her cheeks registered the coming and going of memories; of incidents in her life hidden from him, arousing in the man the torture of jealousy. But his faculties, keenly alert, grasped the entire field; marked once more the empirical trait in her that he loved her unflinching willingness to submit herself to an experiment.

“I suppose so,” she replied at length, her thoughts naturally assuming speech. “Yes, I can see that it is so. Yet my experience has not been with these conditions with which Mr. Bentley, with which you have been brought in contact, but with the other side—with luxury. Oh, I am sick of luxury! I love it, I am not at all sure that I could do without it, but I hate it, too, I rebel against it. You can’t understand that.”

“I think I can,” he answered her.

“When I see the creatures it makes,” she cried, “I hate it. My profession has brought me in such close contact with it that I rebelled at last, and came out here very suddenly, just to get away from it in the mass. To renew my youth, if I could. The gardens were only an excuse. I had come to a point where I wanted to be quiet, to be alone, to think, and I knew my father would be going away. So much of my girlhood was spent in that Park that I know every corner of it, and I—obeyed the impulse. I wanted to test it.”

“Yes,” he said, absorbed.

“I might have gone to the mountains or the sea, but some one would have come and found me, and I should have been bound again—on the wheel. I shouldn’t have had the strength to resist. But here—have you ever felt,” she demanded, “that you craved a particular locality at a certain time?”



He followed her still.

“That is how I felt. These associations, that Park, the thought of my girlhood, of my mother, who understood me as no one else has since, assumed a certain value. New York became unbearable. It is just there, in the very centre of our modern civilization, that one sees the crudest passions. Oh, I have often wondered whether a man, however disillusioned, could see New York as a woman sees it when the glamour is gone. We are the natural prey of the conqueror still. We dream of independence—”



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She broke off abruptly.

This confession, with the sudden glimpse it gave him of the fires within her that would not die down, but burned now more fiercely than ever, sent the blood to his head. His face, his temples, were hot with the fierceness of his joy in his conviction that she had revealed herself to him. Why she had done so, he could not say. . . This was the woman whom the world thought composed; who had triumphed over its opposition, compelled it to bow before her; who presented to it that self-possessed, unified personality by which he had been struck at their first meeting. Yet, paradoxically, the personality remained,—was more elusive than before. A thousand revelations, he felt, would not disclose it.

He was no nearer to solving it now. . Yet the fires burned! She, too, like himself, was aflame and unsatisfied! She, too, had tasted success, and had revolted!

“But I don’t get anywhere,” she said wearily. “At times I feel this ferment, this anger that things are as they are, only to realize what helpless anger it is. Why not take the world as it appears and live and feel, instead of beating against the currents?”

“But isn’t that inconsistent with what you said awhile ago as to a new civilization?” Hodder asked.

“Oh, that Utopia has no reality for me. I think it has, at moments, but it fades. And I don’t pretend to be consistent. Mr. Bentley lives in a world of his own; I envy him with all my heart, I love and admire him, he cheers and soothes me when I am with him. But I can’t see—whatever he sees. I am only aware of a remorseless universe grinding out its destinies. We Anglo-Saxons are fond of deceiving ourselves about life, of dressing it up in beautiful colours, of making believe that it actually contains happiness. All our fiction reflects this—that is why I never cared to read English or American novels. The Continental school, the Russians, the Frenchmen, refuse to be deluded. They are honest.”

“Realism, naturalism,” he mused, recalling a course in philosophy, “one would expect the Russian, in the conditions under which he lives, possessing an artistic temperament combined with a paralysis of the initiative and a sense of fate, to write in that way. And the Frenchmen, Renan, Zola, and the others who have followed, are equally deterministic, but viewing the human body as a highly organized machine with which we may amuse ourselves by registering its sensations. These literatures are true in so far as they reflect the characteristics of the nations from which they spring. That is not to say that the philosophies of which they are the expressions are true. Nor is it to admit that such a literature is characteristic of the spirit of America, and can be applied without change to our life and atmosphere. We have yet, I believe, to develop our own literature; which will come gradually as we find ourselves.”

“Find ourselves?” she repeated.



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“Yes. Isn’t that what we are trying to do? We are not determinists or fatalists, and to condemn us to such a philosophy would be to destroy us. We live on hope. In spite of our apparent materialism, we are idealists. And is it not possible to regard nature as governed by laws—remorseless, if you like the word—and yet believe, with Kant and Goethe, that there is an inner realm? You yourself struggle—you cling to ideals.”

“Ideals!” she echoed. “Ideals are useless unless one is able to see, to feel something beyond this ruthless mechanism by which we are surrounded and hemmed in, to have some perception of another scheme. Why struggle, unless we struggle for something definite? Oh, I don’t mean heavenly rewards. Nothing could be more insipid and senseless than the orthodox view of the hereafter. I am talking about a scheme of life here and now.”

“So am I,” answered Hodder. “But may there not be a meaning in this very desire we have to struggle against the order of things as it appears to us?”

“A meaning?”

“A little while ago you spoke of your indignation at the inequalities and injustices of the world, and when I asked you if you had always felt this, you replied that this feeling had grown upon you. My question is this: whether that indignation would be present at all if it were not meant to be turned into action.”

“You believe that an influence is at work, an influence that impels us against our reason?”

“I should like to think so,” he said. “Why should so many persons be experiencing such a feeling to-day, persons who, like yourself, are the beneficiaries of our present system of privilege? Why should you, who have every reason to be satisfied, materially, with things as they are, be troubling yourself with thoughts of others who are less-fortunate? And why should we have the spectacle, today, of men and women all over this country in social work, in science and medicine and politics, striving to better conditions while most of them might be much more comfortable and luxurious letting well enough alone?”

“But it’s human to care,” she objected.

“Ah—human!” he said, and was silent. “What do we mean by human, unless it is the distinguishing mark of something within us that the natural world doesn’t possess? Unless it is the desire and willingness to strive for a larger interest than the individual interest, work and suffer for others? And you spoke of making people happier. What do you mean by happiness? Not merely the possession of material comforts, surely. I grant you that those who are overworked and underfed, who are burning with the consciousness of wrongs, who have no outlook ahead, are essentially hopeless and

miserable. But by 'happiness' you, mean something more than the complacency and contentment which clothing and food might bring, and the removal of the economic fear, —and even the restoration of self-respect.”



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“That their lives should be fuller!” she exclaimed.

“That drudgery and despair should be replaced by interest and hope,” he went on, “slavery by freedom. In other words, that the whole attitude toward life should be changed, that life should appear a bright thing rather than a dark thing, that labour should be willing vicarious instead of forced and personal. Otherwise, any happiness worth having is out of the question.”

She was listening now with parted lips, apparently unconscious of the fixity of her gaze.

“You mean it is a choice between that or nothing,” she said, in a low voice. “That there is no use in lifting people out of the treadmill —and removing the terror of poverty unless you can give them something more—than I have got.”

“And something more—than I have got,”—he was suddenly moved to reply...

Presently, while the silence still held between them, the door opened and startled them into reality. Mr. Bentley came in.

The old gentleman gave no sign, as they rose to meet him, of a sense of tension in the atmosphere he had entered—yet each felt—somehow, that he knew. The tension was released. The same thought occurred to both as they beheld the peaceful welcome shining in his face, “Here is what we are seeking. Why try to define it?”

“To think that I have been gossiping with Mrs. Meyer, while you were waiting for me!” he said. “She keeps the little florist’s shop at the corner of Tower Street, and she gave me these. I little guessed what good use I should have for them, my dear.”

He held out to her three fragrant, crimson roses that matched the responsive colour in her cheeks as she thanked him and pinned them on her gown. He regarded her an instant.

“But I’m sure Mr. Hodder has entertained you,” Mr. Bentley turned, and laid his hand on the rector’s shoulder.

“Most successfully,” said Alison, cutting short his protest. And she smiled at Hodder, faintly.

CHAPTER XVI

AMID THE ENCIRCLING GLOOM



I

Hodder, in spite of a pressing invitation to remain for supper, had left them together. He turned his face westward, in the opposite direction from the parish house, still under the spell of that moment of communion which had lasted—he knew not how long, a moment of silent revelation to them both. She, too, was storm-tossed! She, too, who had fared forth so gallantly into life, had conquered only to be beaten down—to lose her way.

This discovery strained the very fibres of his being. So close he had been to her—so close that each had felt, simultaneously, complete comprehension of the other, comprehension that defied words, overbore disagreements. He knew that she had felt it. He walked on at first in a bewildered ecstasy, careless of aught else save that in a moment they two had reached out in the darkness and touched hands. Never had his experience known such communion, never had a woman meant what this woman meant, and yet he could not define that meaning. What need of religion, of faith in an unseen order when this existed? To have this woman in the midst of chaos would be enough!



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Faith in an unseen order! As he walked, his mind returned to the argument by which he had sought to combat her doubts—and his own. Whence had the argument come? It was new to him—he had never formulated it before—that pity and longing and striving were a justification and a proof. Had she herself inspired, by some unknown psychological law, this first attempt of his to reform the universe, this theory which he had rather spoken than thought? Or had it been the knowledge of her own longing, and his desire to assuage it? As twilight fell, as his spirits ebbed, he could not apply it now—it meant nothing to him, evaded him, there was in it no solace. To regain his footing once more, to climb again without this woman whom he needed, and might not have! Better to fall, to be engulfed. . . The vision of her, tall and straight, with the roses on her breast, tortured him.

Thus ecstasy ebbed to despondency. He looked around him in the fading day, to find himself opposite the closed gates of the Botanical Gardens, in the southwestern portion of the city An hour later he had made his way back to Dalton Street with its sputtering blue lights and gliding figures, and paused for a moment on the far sidewalk to gaze at Mr. Bentley's gleaming windows. Should he go in? Had that personality suddenly lost its power over him? How strange that now he could see nothing glowing, nothing inspiring within that house,—only a kindly old man reading a newspaper!

He walked on, slowly, to feel stealing on him that desperate longing for adventure which he had known so well in his younger days. And he did not resist. The terror with which it had once inspired him was gone, or lingered only in the form of a delicious sense of uncertainty and anticipation. Anything might happen to him—anything would be grateful; the thought of his study in the parish house was unbearable; the Dalton Street which had mocked and repelled him suddenly became alluring with its champaigns of light and inviting stretches of darkness. In the block ahead, rising out of the night like a tower blazing with a hundred beacons, Hodder saw a hotel, heard the faint yet eager throbbing of music, beheld silhouetted figures flitting from automobiles and carriages across the white glare of the pavement,—figures of men and women.

He hastened his steps, the music grew louder and louder in his ears, he gained the ornamental posts crowned by their incandescent globes, made his way through the loiterers, descended the stone steps of the restaurant, and stood staring into it as at a blurred picture. The band crashed a popular two-step above the mingled voices and laughter. He sat down at a vacant table near the door, and presently became aware that a waiter had been for some time at his elbow.

“What will you have, sir?”



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Then he remembered that he had not eaten, discovered that he was hungry, and ordered some sandwiches and beer. Still staring, the figures began to differentiate themselves, although they all appeared, somehow, in perpetual motion; hurrying, though seated. It was like gazing at a quivering cinematograph. Here and there ribbons of smoke curled upward, adding volume to the blue cloud that hung over the tables, which in turn was dissipated in spots by the industrious electric fans. Everywhere he looked he met the glances of women; even at the table next him, they were not so absorbed in their escorts as to be able to resist flinging him covert stares between the shrieks of laughter in which they intermittently indulged. The cumulative effect of all these faces was intoxicating, and for a long time he was unable to examine closely any one group. What he saw was a composite woman with flushed cheeks and soliciting eyes, becomingly gowned and hatted—to the masculine judgment. On the walls, heavily frescoed in the German style, he read, in Gothic letters:

“Wer liebt nicht Wein, Weib, and Gesang,
Er bleibt ein Narr sein Leben lang.”

The waiter brought the sandwiches and beer, yet he did not eat. In the middle distance certain figures began insistently to stand out,—figures of women sitting alone wherever he looked he met a provoking gaze. One woman, a little farther away than the rest, seemed determinedly bent on getting a nod of recognition, and it was gradually borne in upon Hodder’s consciousness that her features were familiar. In avoiding her eyes he studied the men at the next table,—or rather one of them, who loudly ordered the waiters about, who told brief anecdotes that were uproariously applauded; whose pudgy, bejewelled fingers were continually feeling for the bottle in the ice beside his chair, or nudging his companions with easy familiarity; whose little eyes, set in a heavy face, lighted now and again with a certain expression

Suddenly Hodder pushed back his chair and got to his feet, overcome by a choking sensation like that of being, asphyxiated by foul gases. He must get out at once, or faint. What he had seen in the man’s eyes had aroused in him sheer terror, for it was the image of something in his own soul which had summarily gained supremacy and led him hither, unresisting, to its own abiding-place. In vain he groped to reconstruct the process by which that other spirit—which he would fain have believed his true spirit—had been drugged and deadened in its very flight.

He was aware, as he still stood uncertainly beside the table, of the white-aproned waiter looking at him, and of some one else!—the woman whose eyes had been fastened on him so persistently. She was close beside him, speaking to him.

“Seems to me we’ve met before.”



He looked at her, at first uncomprehendingly, then with a dawning realization of her identity. Even her name came to him, unexpectedly, —Kate Marcy,—the woman in the flat!



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"Ain't you going to invite me to have some supper?" she whispered eagerly, furtively, as one accustomed to be rebuffed, yet bold in spite of it. "They'll throw me out if they think I'm accosting you."

How was it that, a moment ago, she had appeared to him mysterious, inviting? At this range he could only see the paint on her cheeks, the shadows under her burning eyes, the shabby finery of her gown. Her wonderful bronze hair only made the contrast more pitiful. He acted automatically, drawing out for her the chair opposite his own, and sat down again.

"Say, but I'm hungry!" she exclaimed, pulling off her gloves. She smiled at him, wanly, yet with a brazen coquettishness become habit.

"Hungry!" he repeated idly.

"I guess you'd be, if you'd only had a fried egg and a cup of coffee to-day, and nothing last night."

He pushed over to her, hastily, with a kind of horror, the plate of sandwiches. She began eating them ravenously; but presently paused, and thrust them back toward him. He shook his head.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded.

"Nothing," he replied.

"You ordered them, didn't you? Ain't you eating anything?"

"I'm not hungry," he said.

She continued eating awhile without comment. And he watched her as one fascinated, oblivious to his surroundings, in a turmoil of thought and emotion.

"I'm dry," she announced meaningly.

He hesitated a moment, and then gave her the bottle of beer. She made a wry face as she poured it out.

"Have they run out of champagne?" she inquired.

This time he did not hesitate. The women of his acquaintance, at the dinner parties he attended, drank champagne. Why should he refuse it to this woman? A long-nosed, mediaeval-looking waiter was hovering about, one of those bizarre, battered creatures who have long exhausted the surprises of life, presiding over this amazing situation with all the sang froid of a family butler. Hodder told him to bring champagne.



“What kind, sir?” he asked, holding out a card.

“The best you have.”

The woman stared at him in wonder.

“You’re what an English Johnny I know would call a little bit of all right!” she declared with enthusiastic approval.

“Since you are hungry,” he went on, “suppose you have something more substantial than sandwiches. What would you like?”

She did not answer at once. Amazement grew in her eyes, amazement and a kind of fear.

“Quit joshing!” she implored him, and he found it difficult to cope with her style of conversation. For a while she gazed helplessly at the bill of fare.

“I guess you’ll think it’s funny,” she said hesitatingly, “but I feel just like a good beefsteak and potatoes. Bring a thick one, Walter.”

The waiter sauntered off.

“Why should I think it strange?” Hodder asked.



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“Well, if you knew how many evenings I’ve sat up there in my room and thought what I’d order if I ever again got hold of some rich guy who’d loosen up. There ain’t any use trying to put up a bluff with you. Nothing was too good for me once, caviar, pate de foie gras” (her pronunciation is not to be imitated), “chicken casserole, peach Melba, filet of beef with mushrooms,—I’ve had ’em all, and I used to sit up and say I’d hand out an order like that. You never do what you think you’re going to do in this life.”

The truth of this remark struck him with a force she did not suspect; stung him, as it were, into a sense of reality.

“And now,” she added pathetically, “all t want is a beefsteak! Don’t that beat you?”

She appeared so genuinely surprised at this somewhat contemptible trick fate had played her that Hodder smiled in spite of himself.

“I didn’t recognize you at first in that get-up,” she observed, looking at his blue serge suit. “So you’ve dropped the preacher business, have you? You’re wise, all right.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“Didn’t I tell you when you came ’round that time that you weren’t like the rest of ’em? You’re too human.”

Once more the word, and on her lips, startled him.

“Some of the best men I have ever known, the broadest and most understanding men, have been clergymen,” he found himself protesting.

“Well, they haven’t dropped in on me. The only one I ever saw that measured up to something like that was you, and now you’ve chucked it.”

Had he, as she expressed the matter, “chucked it”? Her remark brought him reluctantly, fearfully, remorselessly—agitated and unprepared as he was—face to face with his future.

“You were too good for the job,” she declared. “What is there in it? There ain’t nobody converted these days that I can see, and what’s the use of gettin’ up and preach into a lot of sapheads that don’t know what religion is? Sure they don’t.”

“Do you?” he asked.

“You’ve called my bluff.” She laughed. “Say, do *you*?” If there was anything in it you’d have kept on preachin’ to that bunch and made some of ’em believe they was headed for hell; you’d have made one of ’em that owns the flat house I live in, who gets fancy



rents out of us poor girls, give it up. That's a nice kind of business for a church member, ain't it?"

"Owns the house in which you live!"

"Sure." She smiled at him compassionately, pitying his innocence and ignorance. "Now I come to think of it, I guess he don't go to your church,—it's the big Baptist church on the boulevard. But what's the difference?"

"None," said Hodder, despondently.

She regarded him curiously.

"You remember when you dropped in that night, when the kid was sick?"

He nodded.

"Well, now you ain't in the business any more, I may as well tell you you kind of got in on me. I was sorry for you—honest, I was. I couldn't believe at first you was on the level, but it didn't take me long to see that they had gold-bricked you, too. I saw you weren't wise to what they were."



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“You thought—” he began and paused dumfounded.

“Why not?” she retorted. “It looked easy to me,—your line. How was I to know at first that they had you fooled? How was I to know you wasn’t in the game?”

“The game?”

“Say, what else is it but a game? You must be on now, ain’t you? Why do they put up to keep the churches going? There ain’t any coupons coming out of ’em.

“Maybe some of these millionaires think they can play all the horses and win,—get into heaven and sell gold bricks on the side. But I guess most of ’em don’t think about heaven. They just use the church for a front, and take in strangers in the back alley,—downtown.”

Hodder was silent, overwhelmed by the brutal aptness of her figures. Nor did he take the trouble of a defence, of pointing out that hers was not the whole truth. What really mattered—he saw—was what she and those like her thought. Such minds were not to be disabused by argument; and indeed he had little inclination for it then.

“There’s nothing in it.”

By this expression he gathered she meant life. And some hidden impulse bade him smile at her.

“There is this,” he answered.

She opened her mouth, closed it and stared at him, struck by his expression, striving uneasily to fathom hidden depths in his remark.

“I don’t get on to you,” she said lamely. “I didn’t that other time. I never ran across anybody like you.”

He tried to smile again.

“You mustn’t mind me,” he answered.

They fell into an oasis of silence, surrounded by mad music and laughter. Then came the long-nosed waiter carrying the beefsteak aloft, followed by a lad with a bucket of ice, from which protruded the green and gold neck of a bottle. The plates were put down, the beefsteak carved, the champagne opened and poured out with a flourish. The woman raised her glass.

“Here’s how!” she said, with an attempt at gayety. And she drank to him. “It’s funny how I ran across you again, ain’t it?” She threw back her head and laughed.



He raised his glass, tasted the wine, and put it down again. A sheet of fire swept through him.

“What’s the matter with it? Is it corked?” she demanded. “It goes to the right spot with me.”

“It seems very good,” he said, trying to smile, and turning to the food on his plate. The very idea of eating revolted him—and yet he made the attempt: he had a feeling, ill defined, that consequences of vital importance depended upon this attempt, on his natural acceptance of the situation. And, while he strove to reduce the contents of his plate, he racked his brain for some subject of conversation. The flamboyant walls of the room pressed in on every side; comment of that which lay within their limits was impossible,—but he could not, somehow, get beyond them. Was there in the whole range of life one easy topic which they might share in common? Yet a bond existed between this woman and himself—a bond of which he now became aware, and which seemed strangely to grow stronger as the minutes passed and no words were spoken. Why was it that she, too, to whom speech came so easily, had fallen dumb? He began to long for some remark, however disconcerting. The tension increased.



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She put down her knife and fork. Tears sprang into her eyes,—tears of anger, he thought.

“Say, it’s no use trying to put up a bluff with me,” she cried.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“You know what I mean, all right. What did you come in here for, anyway?”

“I don’t know—I couldn’t tell you,” he answered.

The very honesty of his words seemed, for an instant, to disconcert her; and she produced a torn lace handkerchief, which she thrust in her eyes.

“Why can’t you leave me alone?” she demanded. “I’m all right.”

If he did not at once reply, it was because of some inner change which had taken place in himself; and he seemed to see things, suddenly, in their true proportions. He no longer feared a scene and its consequences. By virtue of something he had cast off or taken on, he was aware of a newly acquired mastery of the situation, and by a hidden and unconscious process he had managed to get at the real woman behind the paint: had beaten down, as it were without a siege, her defences. And he was incomparably awed by the sight of her quivering, frightened self.

Her weeping grew more violent. He saw the people at the next table turn and stare, heard the men laughing harshly. For the spectacle was evidently not an uncommon one here. She pushed away her unfinished glass, gathered up her velvet bag and rose abruptly.

“I guess I ain’t hungry after all,” she said, and started toward the door. He turned to the waiter, who regarded him unmoved, and asked for a check.

“I’ll get it,” he said.

Hodder drew out a ten dollar bill, and told him to keep the change. The waiter looked at him. Some impulse moved him to remark, as he picked up the rector’s hat:

“Don’t let her put it over you, sir.”

Hodder scarcely heard him. He hurried up the steps and gained the pavement, and somewhere in the black shadows beyond the arc-lights he saw her disappearing down the street. Careless of all comment he hastened on, overtook her, and they walked rapidly side by side. Now and again he heard a sob, but she said nothing. Thus they came to the house where the Garvins had lived, and passed it, and stopped in front of the dimly lighted vestibule of the flats next door. In drawing the key from her bag she



dropped it: he picked it up and put it in the lock himself. She led the way without comment up the darkened stairs, and on the landing produced another key, opened the door of her rooms, fumbled for the electric button, and suddenly the place was flooded with light. He glanced in, and recoiled.

II

Oddly enough, the first thing he noticed in the confusion that reigned was the absence of the piano. Two chairs were overturned, and one of them was broken; a siphon of vichy lay on the floor beside a crushed glass and two or three of the cheap ornaments that had been swept off the mantel and broken on the gaudy tiles of the hearth. He glanced at the woman, who had ceased crying, and stood surveying the wreckage with the calmness, the philosophic nonchalance of a class that comes to look upon misfortune as inevitable.



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“They didn’t do a thing to this place, did they?” was her comment. “There was two guys in here to-night who got a notion they were funny.”

Hodder had thought to have fathomed all the horrors of her existence, but it was not until he looked into this room that the bottomless depths of it were brought home to him. Could it be possible that the civilization in which he lived left any human being so defenceless as to be at the mercy of the ghouls who had been here? The very stale odours of the spilled whiskey seemed the material expression of the essence of degraded souls; for a moment it overpowered him. Then came the imperative need of action, and he began to right one of the chairs. She darted forward.

“Cut it out!” she cried. “What business have you got coming in here and straightening up? I was a fool to bring you, anyway.”

It was in her eyes that he read her meaning, and yet could not credit it. He was abashed—ashamed; nay, he could not define the feeling in his breast. He knew that what he read was the true interpretation of her speech, for in some manner—he guessed not how—she had begun to idealize him, to feel that the touch of these things defiled him.

“I believe I invited myself,” he answered, with attempted cheerfulness. Then it struck him, in his predicament, that this was precisely what others had done!

“When you asked me a little while ago whether I had left the Church, I let you think I had. I am still connected with St. John’s, but I do not know how long I shall continue to be.”

She was on her knees with dustpan and whiskbroom, cleaning up the fragments of glass on the stained carpet. And she glanced up at him swiftly, diviningly.

“Say—you’re in trouble yourself, ain’t you?”

She got up impulsively, spilling some of the contents of the pan. A subtle change had come in her, and under the gallantly drooping feathers of her hat he caught her eye—the human eye that so marvellously reflects the phases of the human soul: the eye which so short a time before hardily and brazenly had flashed forth its invitation, now actually shone with fellowship and sympathy. And for a moment this look was more startling, more appalling than the other; he shrank from it, resented it even more. Was it true that they had something in common? And if so, was it sin or sorrow, or both?

“I might have known,” she said, staring at him. In spite of his gesture of dissent, he saw that she was going over the events of the evening from her new point of view.



“I might have known, when we were sitting there in Harrods, that you were up against it, too, but I couldn’t think of anything but the way I was fixed. The agent’s been here twice this week for the rent, and I was kind of desperate for a square meal.”

Hodder took the dustpan from her hand, and flung its contents into the fireplace.

“Then we are both fortunate,” he said, “to have met each other.”

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"I don't see where you come in," she told him.

He turned and smiled at her.

"Do you remember when I was here that evening about two months ago I said I should like to be your friend? Well, I meant it. And I have often hoped, since then, that some circumstance might bring us together again. You seemed to think that no friendship was possible between us, but I have tried to make myself believe that you said so because you didn't know me."

"Honest to God?" she asked. "Is that on the level?"

"I only ask for an opportunity to prove it," he replied, striving to speak naturally. He stooped and laid the dustpan on the hearth. "There! Now let's sit down."

She sank on the sofa, her breast rising and falling, her gaze dumbly fixed on him, as one under hypnosis. He took the rocker.

"I have wanted to tell you how grateful Mrs. Garvin, the boy's mother —was for the roses you brought. She doesn't know who sent them, but I intend to tell her, and she will thank you herself. She is living out in the country. And the boy—you would scarcely recognize him."

"I couldn't play the piano for a week after—that thing happened." She glanced at the space where the instrument had stood.

"You taught yourself to play?" he asked.

"I had music lessons."

"Music lessons?"

"Not here—before I left home—up the State, in a little country town, —Madison. It seems like a long time ago, but it's only seven years in September. Mother and father wanted all of us children to know a little more than they did, and I guess they pinched a good deal to give us a chance. I went a year to the high school, and then I was all for coming to the city—I couldn't stand Madison, there wasn't anything going on. Mother was against it,—said I was too good-looking to leave home. I wish I never had. You wouldn't believe I was good-looking once, would you?"

She spoke dispassionately, not seeming to expect assent, but Hodder glanced involuntarily at her wonderful crown of hair. She had taken off her hat. He was thinking of the typical crime of American parents,—and suddenly it struck him that her speech had changed, that she had dropped the suggestive slang of the surroundings in which she now lived.



“I was a fool to come, but I couldn’t see it then. All I could think of was to get away to a place where something was happening. I wanted to get into Ferguson’s—everybody in Madison knew about Ferguson’s, what a grand store it was,—but I couldn’t. And after a while I got a place at the embroidery counter at Pratt’s. That’s a department store, too, you know. It looked fine, but it wasn’t long before I fell wise to a few things.” (She relapsed into slang occasionally.) “Have you ever tried to stand on your feet for nine hours, where you couldn’t sit down for a minute? Say, when Florry Kinsley and me—she was the girl I roomed with—would get home at night, often we’d just lie down and laugh and cry, we were so tired, and our feet hurt so. We were too used up sometimes to get up and cook supper on the little stove we had. And sitting around a back bedroom all evening was worse than Madison. We’d go out, tired as we were, and walk the streets.”



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He nodded, impressed by the fact that she did not seem to be appealing to his sympathy. Nor, indeed, did she appear—in thus picking up the threads of her past—to be consciously accounting for her present. She recognized no causation there.

“Say, did you ever get to a place where you just had to have something happen? When you couldn’t stand bein’ lonely night after night, when you went out on the streets and saw everybody on the way to a good time but you? We used to look in the newspapers for notices of the big balls, and we’d take the cars to the West End and stand outside the awnings watching the carriages driving up and the people coming in. And the same with the weddings. We got to know a good many of the swells by sight. There was Mrs. Larrabee,”—a certain awe crept into her voice—“and Miss Ferguson—she’s sweet—and a lot more. Some of the girls used to copy their clothes and hats, but Florry and me tried to live honest. It was funny,” she added irrelevantly, “but the more worn out we were at night, the more we’d want a little excitement, and we used to go to the dance-halls and keep going until we were ready to drop.”

She laughed at the recollection.

“There was a floorwalker who never let me alone the whole time I was at Pratt’s—he put me in mind of a pallbearer. His name was Selkirk, and he had a family in Westerly, out on the Grade Suburban Some of the girls never came back at all, except to swagger in and buy expensive things, and tell us we were fools to work. And after a while I noticed Florry was getting discouraged. We never had so much as a nickel left over on Saturdays and they made us sign a paper, when they hired us, that we lived at home. It was their excuse for paying us six dollars a week. They do it at Ferguson’s, too. They say they can get plenty of girls who do live at home. I made up my mind I’d go back to Madison, but I kept putting it off, and then father died, and I couldn’t!

“And then, one day, Florry left. She took her things from the room when I was at the store, and I never saw her again. I got another roommate. I couldn’t afford to pay for the room alone. You wouldn’t believe I kept straight, would you?” she demanded, with a touch of her former defiance. “I had plenty of chances better than that floorwalker. But I knew I was good looking, and I thought if I could only hold out I might get married to some fellow who was well fixed. What’s the matter?”

Hodder’s exclamation had been involuntary, for in these last words she had unconsciously brought home to him the relentless predicament in the lives of these women. She had been saving herself—for what? A more advantageous, sale!

“It’s always been my luck,” she went on reflectingly, “that when what I wanted to happen did happen, I never could take advantage of it. It was just like that to-night, when you handed me out the bill of fare, and I ordered beefsteak. And it was like that when—when he came along—I didn’t do what I thought I was going to do. It’s terrible to fall in

love, isn't it? I mean the real thing. I've read in books that it only comes once, and I guess it's so."



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Fortunately she seemed to expect no answer to this query. She was staring at the wall with unseeing eyes.

"I never thought of marrying him, from the first. He could have done anything with me—he was so good and generous—and it was him I was thinking about. That's love, isn't it? Maybe you don't believe a woman like me knows what love is. You've got a notion that goin' downhill, as I've been doing, kills it, haven't you? I Wish to God it did—but it don't: the ache's there, and sometimes it comes in the daytime, and sometimes at night, and I think I'll go crazy. When a woman like me is in love there isn't anything more terrible on earth, I tell you. If a girl's respectable and good it's bad enough, God knows, if she can't have the man she wants; but when she's like me—it's hell. That's the only way I can describe it. She feels there is nothing about her that's clean, that he wouldn't despise. There's many a night I wished I could have done what Garvin did, but I didn't have the nerve."

"Don't say that!" he commanded sharply.

"Why not? It's the best way out."

"I can see how one might believe it to be," he answered. Indeed, it seemed that his vision had been infinitely extended, that he had suddenly come into possession of the solution of all the bewildered, despairing gropings of the human soul. Only awhile ago, for instance, the mood of self-destruction had been beyond his imagination: tonight he understood it, though he still looked upon it with horror. And he saw that his understanding of her—or of any human being—could never be of the intellect. He had entered into one of those astounding yet simple relationships wherein truth, and truth alone, is possible. He knew that such women lied, deceived themselves; he could well conceive that the image of this first lover might have become idealized in her vicissitudes; that the memories of the creature-comforts, of first passion, might have enhanced as the victim sank. It was not only because she did not attempt to palliate that he believed her.

"I remember the time I met him,—it was only four years ago last spring, but it seems like a lifetime. It was Decoration Day, and it was so beautiful I went out with another girl to the Park, and we sat on the grass and looked at the sky and wished we lived in the country. He was in an automobile; I never did know exactly how it happened,—we looked at each other, and he slowed up and came back and asked us to take a ride. I had never been in one of those things—but that wasn't why I went, I guess. Well, the rest was easy. He lost his head, and I was just as bad. You wouldn't believe me if I told you how rich he was: it scared me when I found out about him, and he was so handsome and full of fun and spirits, and generous! I never knew anybody like him. Honest, I never expected he'd want to marry me. He didn't at first,—it was only after a while. I never asked him to, and



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when he began to talk about it I told him it would cut him off from his swell friends, and I knew his father might turn him loose. Oh, it wasn't the money! Well, he'd get mad all through, and say he never got along with the old man, and that his friends would have to take me, and he couldn't live without me. He said he would have me educated, and bought me books, and I tried to read them. I'd have done anything for him. He'd knocked around a good deal since he'd been to Harvard College,—he wasn't what you'd call a saint, but his heart was all right. And he changed, too, I could see it. He said he was going to make something out of himself.

"I didn't think it was possible to be so happy, but I had a feeling all along, inside of me, that it couldn't come off. I had a little flat in Rutger Street, over on the south side, and everything in the world I wanted. Well, one day, sure enough, the bell rang and I opened the door, and there stood a man with side whiskers staring at me, and staring until I was frightened to death. I never saw such eyes as he had. And all of a sudden I knew it was his father.

"Is this Miss Marcy?" he said.

"I couldn't say anything at all, but he handed me his card and smiled, I'll never forget how he smiled—and came right in and sat down. I'd heard of that man all my life, and how much money he'd made, and all that. Why, up in Madison folks used to talk about him—" she checked herself suddenly and stared at Hodder in consternation. "Maybe you know him!" she exclaimed. "I never thought!"

"Maybe I do," he assented wearily. In the past few moments suspicion had become conviction.

"Well—what difference does it make—now? It's all over, and I'm not going to bother him. I made up my mind I wouldn't, on account of him, you understand. I never fell that low—thank God!"

Hodder nodded. He could not speak The woman seemed to be living over again that scene, in her imagination.

"I just couldn't realize who it was sitting there beside me, but if I hadn't known it wouldn't have made any difference. He could have done anything with me, anyway, and he knew how to get at me. He said, now that he'd seen me, that he was sure I was a good girl at the bottom and loved his son, and that I wouldn't want to ruin the boy when he had such a big future ahead of him. I wouldn't have thought, to look at the man, that he could have been so gentle. I made a fool of myself and cried, and told him I'd go away and never see his son any more—that I'd always been against marrying him. Well, he almost had tears in his eyes when he thanked me and said I'd never regret it, and he



pulled an envelope out of his pocket. I said I wouldn't take any money, and gave it back to him. I've always been sorry since that I didn't make him take it back—it never did anything but harm to me. But he had his way. He laid it on the table and said he wouldn't feel right, and took my hand—and I just didn't care.



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“Well, what do you think I did after he’d gone? I went and played a piece on the piano, —and I never can bear to hear that ragtime to this day. I couldn’t seem to feel anything. And after a while I got up and opened the envelope—it was full of crackly new hundred dollar bills —thirty of ’em, and as I sat there staring at ’em the pain came on, like a toothache, in throbs, getting worse all the time until I just couldn’t stand it. I had a notion of sending the money back even then, but I didn’t. I didn’t know how to do it,—and as I told you, I wasn’t able to care much. Then I remembered I’d promised to go away, and I had to have some money for that, and if I didn’t leave right off I wouldn’t have the strength to do it. I hadn’t even thought where to go: I couldn’t think, so I got dressed and went down to the depot anyway. It was one of those bright, bitter cold winter days after a thaw when the icicles are hanging everywhere. I went inside and walked up and down that long platform under the glass roof. My, it was cold in there! I looked over all the signs, and made up my mind I’d go to Chicago.

“I meant to work, I never meant to spend the money, but to send it back. I’d put it aside —and then I’d go and take a little. Say, it was easy not to work—and I didn’t care what happened to me as long as I wasn’t going to see him again. Well, I’m not trying to smooth it over, I suppose there was something crooked about me from the start, but I just went clean to hell with that money, and when I heard he’d gone away, I came back here.”

“Something crooked!” The words rang in Hodder’s ears, in his very soul. How was he or any man to estimate, to unravel the justice from the injustice, to pass upon the merit of this woman’s punishment? Here again, in this vitiated life, was only to be seen the remorseless working of law—cause and effect. Crooked! Had not the tree been crooked from the beginning—incapable of being straightened? She had herself naively confessed it. Was not the twist ingrained? And if so, where was the salvation he had preached? There was good in her still,—but what was “good”? . . . He took no account of his profound compassion.

What comfort could he give her, what hope could he hold out that the twist, now gnarled and knotted, might be removed, that she might gain peace of soul and body and the “happiness” of which he had talked with Alison Parr? . . . He raised his eyes, to discover that the woman’s were fixed upon him, questioningly.

“I suppose I was a fool to tell you,” she said, with a shade of her old bitterness; “it can’t do any good.” Her next remark was startlingly astute. “You’ve found out for yourself, I guess, that all this talk about heaven and hell and repentance don’t amount to anything. Hell couldn’t be any worse than I’ve been through, no matter how hot it is. And heaven!” She laughed, burst into tears, and quickly dried them. “You know the man I’ve been talking about, that bought me off. I didn’t intend to tell you, but I see you can’t help knowing—Eldon Parr. I don’t say he didn’t do right from his way of looking at things,—but say, it wasn’t exactly Christian, was it?”



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“No,” he said, “it wasn’t.” He bowed his head, and presently, when he raised it again, he caught something in her look that puzzled and disturbed him—an element of adoration.

“You’re white through and through,” she said, slowly and distinctly.

And he knew not how to protest.

“I’ll tell you something,” she went on, as one who has made a discovery. “I liked you the first time you came in here—that night—when you wanted me to be friends; well, there was something that seemed to make it impossible then. I felt it, if you didn’t.” She groped for words. “I can’t explain what it was, but now it’s gone. You’re different. I think a lot more of you. Maybe it’s because of what you did at Harrod’s, sitting down with me and giving me supper when I was so hungry, and the champagne. You weren’t ashamed of me.”

“Good God, why should I have been!” he exclaimed.

“You! Why shouldn’t you?” she cried fiercely.

“There’s hardly a man in that place that wouldn’t have been. They all know me by sight—and some of ’em better. You didn’t see ’em grinning when I came up to you, but I did. My God—it’s awful—it’s awful I...” She burst into violent weeping, long deferred.

He took her hand in his, and did not speak, waiting for the fit to spend itself And after a while the convulsive shudders that shook her gradually ceased.

“You must trust me,” he said. “The first thing tomorrow I’m going to make arrangements for you to get out of these rooms. You can’t stay here any longer.”

“That’s sure,” she answered, trying to smile. “I’m broke. I even owe the co—the policeman.”

“The policeman!”

“He has to turn it in to Tom Beatty and the politicians”

Beatty! Where had he heard the name? Suddenly it came to him that Beatty was the city boss, who had been eulogized by Mr. Plimpton!

“I have some good friends who will be glad to help you to get work—and until you do get work. You will have to fight—but we all have to fight. Will you try?”

“Sure, I’ll try,” she answered, in a low voice.



Her very tone of submission troubled him. And he had a feeling that, if he had demanded, she would have acquiesced in anything.

“We’ll talk it over to-morrow,” he went on, clinging to his note of optimism. “We’ll find out what you can do easiest, to begin with.”

“I might give music lessons,” she suggested.

The remark increased his uneasiness, for he recognized in it a sure symptom of disease—a relapse into what might almost have been called levity, blindness to the supreme tragedy of her life which but a moment before had shaken and appalled her. He shook his head bravely.

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t do—at first.”

She rose and went into the other room, returning in a few moments with a work basket, from which she drew a soiled and unfinished piece of embroidery.



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“There’s a bureau cover I started when I was at Pratt’s,” she said, as she straightened it over her knees. “It’s a copy of an expensive one. I never had the patience to finish it, but one of the sales-ladies there, who was an expert, told me it was pretty good: She taught me the stitch, and I had a notion at that time I might make a little money for dresses and the theatre. I was always clever with my hands.”

“The very thing!” he said, with hopeful emphasis. “I’m sure I can get you plenty of it to do. And I’ll come back in the morning.”

He gave it back to her, and as she was folding it his glance fell on a photograph in the basket.

“I kept it, I don’t know why,” he heard her say; “I didn’t have the heart to burn it.”

He started recovered himself, and rose.

“I’ll go to see the agent the first thing to-morrow,” he said. “And then—you’ll be ready for me? You trust me?”

“I’d do anything for you,” was her tremulous reply.

Her disquieting, submissive smile haunted him as he roped his way down the stairs to the street, and then the face in the photograph replaced it—the laughing eyes, the wilful, pleasure—loving mouth he had seen in the school and college pictures of Preston Parr.