CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

THE DANGER MARK

Robert Chambers

The Danger Mark

Chambers R.

The Danger Mark / R. Chambers — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Robert W. Chambers
The Danger Mark

CHAPTER I
THE SEAGRAVES

All day Sunday they had raised the devil from attic to cellar; Mrs. Farren was in tears, Howker desperate. Not one out of the fifteen servants considered necessary to embellish the Seagrave establishment could do anything with them after Kathleen Severn's sudden departure the week before.

When the telegram announcing her mother's sudden illness summoned young Mrs. Severn to Staten Island, every servant in the household understood that serious trouble was impending for them.

Day by day the children became more unruly; Sunday they were demons; and Mrs. Farren shuddered to think what Monday might bring forth.

The day began ominously at breakfast with general target practice, ammunition consisting of projectiles pinched from the interior of hot muffins. Later, when Mrs. Farren ventured into the schoolroom, she found Scott Seagrave drawing injurious pictures of Howker on the black-board, and Geraldine sorting lumps of sugar from the bowl on the breakfast-tray, which had not yet been removed.

"Dearies," she began, "it is after nine o'clock and–"

"No school to-day, Mrs. Farren," interrupted Scott cheerfully; "we haven't anything to do till Kathleen comes back, and you know it perfectly well!"

"Yes, you have, dearie; Mrs. Severn has just sent you this list of lessons." She held out a black-edged envelope.

Geraldine, who had been leisurely occupied in dropping cologne on a lump of sugar, thrust the lump into her pink mouth and turned sharply on Mrs. Farren.

"What list?" she demanded. "Give that letter to me.... Oh, Scott! Did you ever hear of anything half so mean? Kathleen's written out about a thousand questions in geography for us!"

"I can't stand that sort of interference!" shouted Scott, dropping his chalk and aiming a kick at the big papier-maché globe. "I'm sorry Kathleen's mother is probably going to die, but I've had enough geography, too."

"Mrs. Severn's mother died on Friday," said the housekeeper solemnly.

The children paused, serious for a moment in the presence of the incomprehensible.

"We're sorry," said Geraldine slowly.... "When is Kathleen coming back?"

"Perhaps to-night, dearie–"

Scott impatiently detached the schoolroom globe from its brass axis: "I'm sorry, too," he said; "but I'm tired of lessons. Now, Mrs. Farren, watch me! I'm going to kick a goal from the field. Here, you hold it, Geraldine; Mrs. Farren, you had better try to block it and cheer for Yale!"

Geraldine seized the globe, threw herself flat on the floor, and, head on one side, wriggled, carefully considering the angle. Then, tipping the globe, she adjusted it daintily for her brother to kick.

"A little higher, please; look out there, Mrs. Farren!" said Scott calmly; "Harvard is going to score this time. Now, Geraldine!"

Thump! came the kick, but Mrs. Farren had fled, and the big globe struck the nursery door and bounced back minus half of South America.

For ten minutes the upper floors echoed with the racket. Geraldine fiercely disputed her brother's right to kick every time; then, as usual, when she got what she wanted, gave up to Scott and

let him monopolise the kicking until, satiated, he went back to the black-board, having obliterated several continents from the face of the globe.

"You might at least be polite enough to hold it for me to kick," said his sister. "What a pig you are, Scott."

"Don't bother me; I'm drawing Howker. You can't kick straight, anyway–"

"Yes, I can!"

Scott, intent on his drawing, muttered:

"I wish there was another boy in this house; I might have a little fun to-day if there was anybody to play with."

There ensued a silence; then he heard his sister's light little feet flying along the hallway toward their bedrooms, but went on calmly with his drawing, using some effective coloured crayon on Howker's nose. Presently he became conscious that Geraldine had re-entered the room.

"What are you going to do to-day?" he asked, preoccupied.

Geraldine, dressed in her brother's clothes, was kneeling on one knee and hastily strapping on a single roller-skate.

"I'll show you," she said, rising and shaking the dark curls out of her eyes. "Come on, Scott, I'm going to misbehave all day. Look at me! I've brought you the boy you wanted to play with."

Her brother turned, considered her with patronising toleration, then shrugged his shoulders.

"You look like one, but you're no good," he said.

"I can be just as bad as any boy!" she insisted. "I'll do whatever you do; I'll do worse, I tell you. Dare me to do something!"

"You don't dare skate backward into the red drawing-room! There's too much bric-a-brac."

She turned like a flash and was off, hopping and clattering down-stairs on her single skate, and a moment later she whirled into the red drawing-room backward and upset a Sang-de-boeuf jar, reducing the maid to horrified tears and the jar to powder.

Howker strove in vain to defend his dining-room when Scott appeared on one skate; but the breakfast-room and pantry were forcibly turned into rinks; the twins swept through the halls, met and defeated their nurses, Margaret and Betty, tumbled down into the lower regions, from there descended to the basement, and whizzed cheerily through the kitchen, waving two skateless legs.

There Mrs. Bramton attempted to buy them off with tribute in the shape of cup-cakes.

"Sure, darlints, they do be starvin' yez," purred Mrs. Bramton. "Don't I know the likes o' them? Now roon away quietlike an' ladylike–"

"Like a hen," retorted Scott. "I want some preserves."

"That's all very well," said Geraldine with her mouth full, "but we expected to skate about the kitchen and watch you make pastry. Kindly begin, Mrs. Bramton."

"I'd like to see what's inside of that chicken over there," said Scott. "And I want you to give me some raisins, Mrs. Bramton–"

"I'm dying for a glass of milk," added Geraldine. "Get me some dough, somebody; I'm going to bake something."

Scott, who, devoured by curiosity, had been sniffing around the spice cupboard, sneezed violently; a Swedish kitchen-maid threw her apron over her head, weak with laughter.

"If you're laughing at me, I'll fix you, Olga!" shouted Scott in a rage; and the air was suddenly filled with balls of dough. Mrs. Bramton fled before the storm; a well-directed volley drove the maids to cover and stampeded the two cats.

"Take whatever is good to eat, Geraldine. Hurrah! The town surrenders! Loot it! No quarter!" shouted Scott. However, when Howker arrived they retired hastily with pockets full of cinnamon sticks, olives, prunes, and dried currants, climbing triumphantly to the library above, where they curled up on a leather divan, under the portrait of their mother, to divide the spoils.

"Am I bad enough to suit you?" inquired Geraldine with pardonable pride.

"Pooh! That's nothing. If I had another boy here I'd—I'd–"

"Well, what?" demanded Geraldine, flushing. "I tell you I can misbehave as well as any boy. Dare me to do anything and you'll see! I dare you to dare me!"

Scott began: "Oh, it's all very easy for a girl to talk–"

"I *don't* talk; I *do* it! And you know perfectly well I do!"

"You're a girl, after all, even if you have got on my clothes–"

"Didn't I throw as much dough at Olga and Mrs. Bramton as you did?"

"You didn't hit anybody."

"I did! I saw a soft, horrid lump stick to Olga!"

"Pooh! *You* can't throw straight–"

"That's a lie!" said Geraldine excitedly.

Scott bristled:

"If you say that again–"

"All right; go and get the boxing-gloves. You *did* tell a lie, Scott, because I did hit Olga!"

Scott hastily unstrapped his lone skate, cast it clattering from him, and sped up-stairs. When he returned he hurled a pair of boxing-gloves at Geraldine, who put them on, laced them, trembling with wrath, and flew at her brother as soon as his own gloves were fastened.

They went about their business like lightning, swinging, blocking, countering. Twice she gave him inviting openings and then punished him savagely before he could get away; then he attempted in-fighting, but her legs were too nimble. And after a while he lost his head and came at her using sheer weight, which set her beside herself with fury.

Teeth clenched, crimson-cheeked, she side-stepped, feinted, and whipped in an upper-cut. Then, darting in, she drove home her left with all her might; and Scott went down with an unmistakable thud.

"One—two—three—four," she counted, "and you *did* tell a lie, didn't you? Five—six—Oh, Scott! I've made your nose bleed horridly! Does it hurt, dear? Seven—eight–"

The boy, still confused, rose and instinctively assumed the classic attitude of self-defence; but his sister threw down her gloves and offered him her handkerchief, saying: "You've just got to be fair to me now, Scott. Tell me that I throw straight and that I did hit Olga!"

He hesitated; wiped his nose:

"I take it back. You can throw straight. Ginger! What a crack you just gave me!"

She was all compunction and honey now, hovering around him where he stood stanching honourable wounds. After a while he laughed. "Thunder!" he exclaimed ruefully; "my nose seems to be growing for fair. You're all right, Geraldine."

"Here's my last cup-cake, if you like," said his sister, radiant.

Embarrassed a little by defeat, but nursing no bitterness, he sat down on the leather divan again and permitted his sister to feed him and tell him that his disaster was only an accident. He tried to think so, too, but serious doubts persisted in his mind. There had been a clean-cut finish to that swing and jab which disturbed his boy's conceit.

"We'll try it again," he began. "I'm all right now, if you like–"

"Oh, Scott, I don't want to!"

"Well, we ought to know which of us really can lick the other–"

"Why, of course, you can lick me every time. Besides, I wouldn't want to be able to lick you—except when I'm very, very angry. And I ought not to become angry the way I do. Kathleen tries so hard to make me stop and reflect before I do things, but I can't seem to learn.... Does your nose hurt?"

"Not in the least," said her brother, reddening and changing the subject. "I say, it looks as though it were going to stop raining."

He went to the window; the big Seagrave house with its mansard roof, set in the centre of an entire city block, bounded by Madison and Fifth Avenues and by Ninety-fifth and Ninety-sixth

Streets, looked out from its four red brick façades onto strips of lawn and shrubbery, now all green and golden with new grass and early buds.

It was topsy-turvy, March-hare weather, which perhaps accounted for the early April dementia that possessed the children at recurring intervals, and which nothing ever checked except the ultimate slumber of infantile exhaustion.

If anybody in the house possessed authority to punish them, nobody exercised it. Servants grown gray in the Seagrave service endured much, partly for the children's sakes, partly in memory of the past; but the newer and younger domestics had less interest in the past glories and traditions of an old New York family which, except for two little children, ten years old, had perished utterly from the face of the land.

The entire domestic régime was a makeshift—had been almost from the beginning. Mrs. Farren, the housekeeper, understood it; Howker, the butler, knew it; Lacy knew it—he who had served forty years as coachman in the Seagrave family.

For in all the world there remained not one living soul who through ties of kinship was authorised to properly control these children. Nor could they themselves even remember parental authority; and only a shadowy recollection of their grandfather's lax discipline survived, becoming gradually, as time passed, nothing more personal to them than a pleasant legend kept alive and nourished in the carefully guarded stories told them by Kathleen Severn and by Anthony Seagrave's old servants.

Yet, in the land, and in his own city of Manhattan, their grandfather had been a very grand man, with his large fortune, now doubled and still increasing; he had been a very distinguished man in the world of fashion with his cultivated taste in art and wine and letters and horses; he had been a very important man, too, in the civic, social, and political construction of New York town, in the quaint days when the sexton of Old Trinity furnished fashionable hostesses with data concerning the availability of social aspirants. He had been a courtly and fascinating man, too. He had died a drunkard.

Now his grandchildren were fast forgetting him. The town had long since forgotten him. Only an old friend or two and his old servants remembered what he had been, his virtues, his magnificence, his kindness, and his weakness.

But if the Seagrave twins possessed neither father nor mother to exercise tender temporal and spiritual suzerainty in the nursery, and if no memory of their grandfather's adoring authority remained, the last will and testament of Anthony Seagrave had provided a marvellous, man-created substitute for the dead: a vast, shadowy thing which ruled their lives with passionless precision; which ordered their waking hours even to the minutest particulars; which assumed machine-like charge of their persons, their personal expenses, their bringing-up, their schooling, the items of their daily routine.

This colossal automaton, almost terrifyingly impersonal, loomed always above them, throwing its powerful and gigantic shadow across their lives. As they grew old enough to understand, it became to them the embodiment of occult and unpleasant authority which controlled their coming and going; which chose for them their personal but not their legal guardian, Kathleen Severn; which fixed upon the number of servants necessary for the house that Anthony Seagrave directed should be maintained for his grandchildren; which decided what kind of expenses, what sort of clothing, what recreations, what accomplishments, what studies, what religion they should be provided with.

And the name of this enormous man-contrived machine which took the place of father and mother was the Half Moon Trust Company, acting as trustee, guardian, and executor for two little children, who neither understood why they were sometimes very unruly or that they would one day be very, very rich.

As for their outbreaks, an intense sense of loneliness for which they were unable to account was always followed by a period of restlessness sure to culminate in violent misbehaviour.

Such an outbreak had been long impending. So when a telegram called away their personal guardian, Kathleen Severn, the children broke loose with the delicate fury of the April tempest outside, which all the morning had been blotting the western windows with gusts of fragrant rain.

The storm was passing now; light volleys of rain still arrived at intervals, slackening as the spring sun broke out, gilding naked branches and bare brown earth, touching swelling buds and the frail points of tulips which pricked the soaked loam in close-set thickets.

From the library bay windows where they stood, the children noticed dandelions in the grass and snowdrops under the trees and recognised the green signals of daffodil and narcissus.

Already crocuses, mauve, white, and yellow, glimmered along a dripping privet hedge which crowned the brick and granite wall bounding the domain of Seagrave. East, through the trees, they could see the roofs of electric cars speeding up and down Madison Avenue, and the houses facing that avenue. North and south were quiet streets; westward Fifth Avenue ran, a sheet of wet, golden asphalt glittering under the spring sun, and beyond it, above the high retaining wall, budding trees stood out against the sky, and the waters of the Park reservoirs sparkled behind.

"I am glad it's spring, anyway," said Geraldine listlessly.

"What's the good of it?" asked Scott. "We'll have to take all our exercise with Kathleen just the same, and watch other children having good times. What's the use of spring?"

"Spring *is* tiresome," admitted Geraldine thoughtfully.

"So is winter. I think either would be all right if they'd only let me have a few friends. There are plenty of boys I'd like to have some fun with if they'd let me."

"I wonder," mused Geraldine, "if there is anything the matter with us, Scott?"

"Why?"

"Oh—I don't know. People stare at us so—nurses always watch us and begin to whisper as soon as we come along. Do you know what a boy said to me once when I skated very far ahead of Kathleen?"

"What did he say?" inquired Scott, flattening his nose against the window-pane to see whether it still hurt him.

"He asked me if I were too rich and proud to play with other children. I was so surprised; and I said that we were not rich at all, and that I never had had any money, and that I was not a bit proud, and would love to stay and play with him if Kathleen permitted me."

"Did Kathleen let you? Of course she didn't."

"I told her what the boy said and I showed her the boy, but she wouldn't let me stay and play."

"Kathleen's a pig."

"No, she isn't, poor dear. They make her act that way—Mr. Tappan makes her. Our grandfather didn't want us to have friends."

"I'll tell you what," said Scott impatiently, "when I'm old enough, I'll have other boys to play with whether Kathleen and—and that Thing—likes it or not."

The Thing was the Half Moon Trust Company.

Geraldine glanced back at the portrait over the divan:

"Do you know," she ventured, "that I believe mother would have let us have fun."

"I'll bet father would, too," said Scott. "Sometimes I feel like kicking over everything in the house."

"So do I and I generally do it," observed Geraldine, lifting a slim, graceful leg and sending a sofa-cushion flying.

When they had kicked all the cushions from the sofas and divans, Scott suggested that they go out and help Schmitt, the gardener, who, at that moment, came into view on the lawn, followed by Olsen wheeling a barrowful of seedlings in wooden trays.

So the children descended to the main hall and marched through it, defying Lang, the second man, refusing hats and overshoes; and presently were digging blissfully in a flower-bed under the delighted directions of Schmitt.

"What are these things, anyway?" demanded Scott, ramming down the moist earth around a fragile rootlet from which trailed a green leaf or two.

"Dot vas a verpena, sir," explained the old gardener. "Now you shall vatch him grow."

The boy remained squatting for several minutes, staring hard at the seedling.

"I can't see it grow," he said to his sister, "and I'm not going to sit here all day waiting. Come on!" And he gave her a fraternal slap.

Geraldine wiped her hands on her knickerbockers and started after him; and away they raced around the house, past the fountains, under trees by the coach-house, across paths and lawns and flower-beds, tearing about like a pair of demented kittens. They frisked, climbed trees, chased each other, wrestled, clutched, tumbled, got mad, made up, and finally, removing shoes and stockings, began a game of leapfrog.

Horror-stricken nurses arrived bearing dry towels and footgear, and were received with fury and a volley of last year's horse-chestnuts. And when the enemy had been handsomely repulsed, the children started on a tour of exploration, picking their way with tender, naked feet to the northern hedge.

Here Geraldine mounted on Scott's shoulders and drew herself up to the iron railing which ran along the top of the granite-capped wall between hedge and street; and Scott followed her, both pockets stuffed with chestnuts which he had prudently gathered in the shrubbery.

In the street below there were few passers-by. Each individual wayfarer, however, received careful attention, Scott having divided the chestnuts, and the aim of both children being excellent.

They had been awaiting a new victim for some time, when suddenly Geraldine pinched her brother with eager satisfaction:

"Oh, Scott! there comes that boy I told you about!"

"What boy?"

"The one who asked me if I was too rich and proud to play with him. And that must be his sister; they look alike."

"All right," said Scott; "we'll give them a volley. You take the nurse and I'll fix the boy.... Ready.... Fire!"

The ambuscade was perfectly successful; the nurse halted and looked up, expressing herself definitely upon the manners and customs of the twins; the boy, who appeared to be amazingly agile, seized a swinging wistaria vine, clambered up the wall, and, clinging to the outside of the iron railing, informed Scott that he would punch his head when a pleasing opportunity presented itself.

"All right," retorted Scott; "come in and do it now."

"That's all very well for you to say when you know I can't climb over this railing!"

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Scott, thrilled at the chance of another boy on the grounds even if he had to fight him; "I'll tell you what!" sinking his voice to an eager whisper; "You run away from your nurse as soon as you get into the Park and I'll be at the front door and I'll let you in. Will you?"

"Oh, *please*!" whispered Geraldine; "and bring your sister, too!"

The boy stared at her knickerbockers. "Do *you* want to fight my sister?" he asked.

"I? Oh, no, no, no. You can fight Scott if you like, and your sister and I will have such fun watching you. Will you?"

His nurse was calling him to descend, in tones agitated and peremptory; the boy hesitated, scowled at Scott, looked uncertainly at Geraldine, then shot a hasty and hostile glance at the interior of the mysterious Seagrave estate. Curiosity overcame him; also, perhaps, a natural desire for battle.

"Yes," he said to Scott, "I'll come back and punch your head for you."

And very deftly, clinging like a squirrel to the pendant wistaria, he let himself down into the street again.

The Seagrave twins, intensely excited, watched them as far as Fifth Avenue, then rapidly drawing on their shoes and stockings, scrambled down to the shrubbery and raced for the house. Through it they passed like a double whirlwind; feeble and perfunctory resistance was offered by their nurses.

"Get out of my way!" said Geraldine fiercely; "do you think I'm going to miss the first chance for some fun that I've ever had in all my life?"

At the same moment, through the glass-sheeted grill Scott discovered two small figures dashing up the drive to the porte-cochère. And he turned on Lang like a wild cat.

Lang, the man at the door, was disposed to defend his post; Scott prepared to fly at him, but his sister intervened:

"Oh, Lang," she pleaded, jumping up and down in an agony of apprehension, "please, *please*, let them in! We've never had any friends." She caught his arm piteously; he looked fearfully embarrassed, for the Seagrave livery was still new to him; nor, during his brief service, had he fully digested the significance of the policy which so rigidly guarded these little children lest rumour from without apprise them of their financial future and the contaminating realisation undermine their simplicity.

As he stood, undecided, Geraldine suddenly jerked his hand from the bronze knob and Scott flung open the door.

"Come on! Quick!" he cried; and the next moment four small pairs of feet were flying through the hall, echoing lightly across the terrace, then skimming the lawn to the sheltering shrubbery beyond.

"The thing to do," panted Scott, "is to keep out of sight." He seized his guests by the arms and drew them behind the rhododendrons. "Now," he said, "what's your name? You, I mean!"

"Duane Mallett," replied the boy, breathless. "That's my sister, Naïda. Let's wait a moment before we begin to fight; Naïda and I had to run like fury to get away from our nurse."

Naïda was examining Geraldine with an interest almost respectful.

"I wish they'd let *me* dress like a boy," she said. "It's fun, isn't it?"

"Yes. They don't *let* me do it; I just did it," replied Geraldine. "I'll get you a suit of Scott's clothes, if you like. I can get the boxing-gloves at the same time. Shall I, Scott?"

"Go ahead," said Scott; "we can pretend there are four boys here." And, to Duane, as Geraldine sped cautiously away on her errand: "That's a thing I never did before."

"What thing?"

"Play with three boys all by myself. Kathleen—who is Mrs. Severn, our guardian—is always with us when we are permitted to speak to other boys and girls."

"That's babyish," remarked Duane in frank disgust. "You are a mollycoddle."

The deep red of mortification spread over Scott's face; he looked shyly at Naïda, doubly distressed that a girl should hear the degrading term applied to him. The small girl returned his gaze without a particle of expression in her face.

"Mollycoddles," continued Duane cruelly, "do the sort of things you do. You're one."

"I—don't *want* to be one," stammered Scott. "How can I help it?"

Duane ignored the appeal. "Playing with three boys isn't anything," he said. "I play with forty every day."

"W-where?" asked Scott, overwhelmed.

"In school, of course—at recess—and before nine, and after one. We have fine times. School's all right. Don't you even go to school?"

Scott shook his head, too ashamed to speak. Naïda, with a flirt of her kilted skirts, had abruptly turned her back on him; yet he was miserably certain she was listening to her brother's merciless catechism.

"I suppose you don't even know how to play hockey," commented Duane contemptuously.

There was no answer.

"What do you do? Play with dolls? Oh, what a molly!"

Scott raised his head; he had grown quite white. Naïda, turning, saw the look on the boy's face.

"Duane doesn't mean that," she said; "he's only teasing."

Geraldine came hurrying back with the boxing-gloves and a suit of Scott's very best clothes, halting when she perceived the situation, for Scott had walked up to Duane, and the boys stood glaring at one another, hands doubling up into fists.

"You think I'm a molly?" asked Scott in a curiously still voice.

"Yes, I do."

"Oh, Scott!" cried Geraldine, pushing in between them, "you'll have to hammer him well for that–"

Naïda turned and shoved her brother aside:

"I don't want you to fight him," she said. "I like him."

"Oh, but they must fight, you know," explained Geraldine earnestly. "If we didn't fight, we'd really be what you call us. Put on Scott's clothes, Naïda, and while our brothers are fighting, you and I will wrestle to prove that I'm not a mollycoddle–"

"I don't want to," said Naïda tremulously. "I like you, too–"

"Well, *you're* one if you don't!" retorted Geraldine. "You can like anybody and have fun fighting them, too."

"Put on those clothes, Naïda," said Duane sternly. "Are you going to take a dare?"

So she retired very unwillingly into the hedge to costume herself while the two boys invested their fists with the soft chamois gloves of combat.

"We won't bother to shake hands," observed Scott. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, you will, too," insisted Geraldine; "shake hands before you begin to fight!"

"I won't," retorted Scott sullenly; "shake hands with anybody who calls me—what he did."

"Very well then; if you don't, I'll put on those gloves and fight you myself."

Duane's eyes flew wide open and he gazed upon Geraldine with newly mixed emotions. She walked over to her brother and said:

"Remember what Howker told us that father used to say—that squabbling is disgraceful but a good fight is all right. Duane called you a silly name. Instead of disputing about it and calling each other names, you ought to settle it with a fight and be friends afterward.... Isn't that so, Duane?"

Duane seemed doubtful.

"Isn't it so?" she repeated fiercely, stepping so swiftly in front of him that he jumped back.

"Yes, I guess so," he admitted; and the sudden smile which Geraldine flashed on him completed his subjection.

Naïda, in her boy's clothes, came out, her hands in her pockets, strutting a little and occasionally bending far over to catch a view of herself as best she might.

"All ready!" cried Geraldine; "begin! Look out, Naïda; I'm going to throw you."

Behind her the two boys touched gloves, then Scott rushed his man.

At the same moment Geraldine seized Naïda.

"We are not to pull hair," she said; "remember! Now, dear, look out for yourself!"

Of that classic tournament between the clans of Mallett and Seagrave the chronicles are lacking. Doubtless their ancestors before them joined joyously in battle, confident that all details of their prowess would be carefully recorded by the family minstrel.

But the battle of that Saturday noon hour was witnessed only by the sparrows, who were too busy lugging bits of straw and twine to half-completed nests in the cornices of the House of Seagrave, to pay much attention to the combat of the Seagrave children, who had gone quite mad with the happiness of companionship and were expressing it with all their might.

Naïda's dark curls mingled with the grass several times before Geraldine comprehended that her new companion was absurdly at her mercy; and then she seized her with all the desperation of first possession and kissed her hard.

"It's ended," breathed Geraldine tremulously, "and nobody gained the victory and—you *will* love me, won't you?"

"I don't know—I'm all dirt." She looked at Geraldine, bewildered by the passion of the lonely child's caresses. "Yes—I do love you, Geraldine. Oh, *look* at those boys! How perfectly disgraceful! They *must* stop—make them stop, Geraldine!"

Hair on end, grass-stained, dishevelled, and unspeakably dirty, the boys were now sparring for breath. Grime and perspiration streaked their countenances. Duane Mallett wore a humorously tinted eye and a prehensile upper lip; Scott's nose had again yielded to the coy persuasion of a left-handed jab and the proud blood of the Seagraves once more offended high heaven on that April day.

Geraldine, one arm imprisoning Naïda's waist, walked coolly in between them:

"Don't let's fight any more. The thing to do is to get Mrs. Bramton to give you enough for four to eat and bring it back here. Scott, please shake hands with Duane."

"I wasn't licked," muttered Scott.

"Neither was I," said Duane.

"Nobody was licked by anybody," announced Geraldine. "Do get something to eat, Scott; Naïda and I are starving!"

After some hesitation the boys touched gloves respectfully, and Scott shook off his mitts, and started for the kitchen.

And there, to his horror and surprise, he was confronted by Mrs. Severn, black hat, crape veil, and gloves still on, evidently that instant arrived from those occult and, as the children supposed, distant bournes of Staten Island, where the supreme mystery of all had been at work.

"Oh, Scott!" she exclaimed tremulously, "what on earth has happened? What is all this that Mrs. Farren and Howker have been telling me?"

The boy stood petrified. Then there surged over him the memory of his brief happiness in these new companions—a happiness now to be snatched away ere scarcely tasted. Into the child's dirty, disfigured face came a hunted expression; he looked about for an avenue of escape, and Kathleen Severn caught him at the same instant and drew him to her.

"What is it, Scott? Tell me, darling!"

"Nothing.... Yes, there is something. I opened the front door and let a strange boy and girl in to play with us, and I've just been fighting with him, and we were having such good times—I—" his voice broke—"I can't bear to have them go—so soon–"

Kathleen looked at him for a moment, speechless with consternation. Then:

"Where are they, Scott?"

"In the—the hedge."

"Out *there*?"

"Yes."

"*Who* are they?"

"Their names are Duane Mallett and Naïda Mallett. We got them to run away from their nurse. Duane's such a bully fellow." A sob choked him.

"Come with me at once," said Kathleen.

Behind the rhododendrons smiling peace was extending its pinions; Duane had produced a pocketful of jack-stones, and the three children were now seated on the grass, Naïda manipulating the jacks with soiled but deft fingers.

Duane was saying to Geraldine:

"It's funny that you didn't know you were rich. Everybody says so, and all the nurses in the Park talk about it every time you and Scott walk past."

"If I'm rich," said Geraldine, "why don't I have more money?"

"Don't they let you have as much as you want?"

"No—only twenty-five cents every month.... It's my turn, Naïda! Oh, bother! I missed. Go on, Duane–"

And, glancing up, her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth as Kathleen Severn, in her mourning veil and gown, came straight up to where they sat.

"Geraldine, dear, the grass is too damp to sit on," said Mrs. Severn quietly. She turned to the youthful guests, who had hastily risen.

"You are Naïda Mallett, it seems; and you are Duane? Please come in now and wash and dress properly, because I am going to telephone to your mother and ask her if you may remain to luncheon and play in the nursery afterward."

Dazed, the children silently followed her; one of her arms lay loosely about the shoulders of her own charges; one encircled Naïda's neck. Duane walked cautiously beside his sister.

In the house the nurses took charge; Geraldine, turning on the stairs, looked back at Kathleen Severn.

"Are you really going to let them stay?"

"Yes, I am, darling."

"And—and may we play together all alone in the nursery?"

"I think so.... I think so, dear."

She ran back down the stairs and impetuously flung herself into Kathleen's arms; then danced away to join the others in the blessed regions above.

Mrs. Severn moved slowly to the telephone, and first called up and reassured Mrs. Mallett, who, however, knew nothing about the affair, as the nurse was still scouring the Park for her charges.

Then Mrs. Severn called up the Half Moon Trust Company and presently was put into communication with Colonel Mallett, the president. To him she told the entire story, and added:

"It was inevitable that the gossip of servants should enlighten the children sooner or later. The irony of it all is that this gossip filtered in here through your son, Duane. That is how the case stands, Colonel Mallett; and I have used my judgment and permitted the children this large liberty which they have long needed, believe me, long, long needed. I hope that your trust officer, Mr. Tappan, will approve."

"Good Lord!" said Colonel Mallett over the wire. "Tappan won't stand for it! You know that he won't, Mrs. Severn. I suppose, if he consults us, we can call a directors' meeting and consider this new phase of the case."

"You ought to; the time is already here when the children should no longer suffer such utter isolation. They *must* make acquaintances, they must have friends, they should go to parties like other children—they ought to be given outside schooling sooner or later. All of which questions must be taken up by your directors as soon as possible, because my children are fast getting out of hand—fast getting away from me; and before I know it I shall have a young man and a young girl to account for—and to account to, colonel–"

"I'll sift out the whole matter with Mr. Tappan; I'll speak to Mr. Grandcourt and Mr. Beekman to-night. Until you hear from us, no more visitors for the children. By the way, is that matter—the one we talked over last month—definitely settled?"

"Yes. I can't help being worried by the inclination she displays. It frightens me in such a child."

"Scott doesn't show it?"

"No. He hates anything like that."

"Do the servants thoroughly understand your orders?"

"I'm a little troubled. I have given orders that no more brandied peaches are to be made or kept in the house. The child was perfectly truthful about it. She admitted filling her cologne bottle with the syrup and sipping it after she was supposed to be asleep."

"Have you found out about the sherry she stole from the kitchen?"

"Yes. She told me that for weeks she had kept it hidden and soaked a lump of sugar in it every night.... She is absolutely truthful, colonel. I've tried to make her understand the danger."

"All right. Good-bye." Kathleen Severn hung up the receiver with a deep indrawn breath.

From the nursery above came a joyous clamour and trampling and shouting.

Suddenly she covered her face with her black-gloved hands.

CHAPTER II
IN TRUST

The enfranchisement of the Seagrave twins proceeded too slowly to satisfy their increasing desire for personal liberty and their fast-growing impatience of restraint.

Occasionally, a few carefully selected and assorted children were permitted to visit them in relays, and play in the nursery for limited periods without the personal supervision of Kathleen or the nurses; but no serious innovation was attempted, no radical step taken without authority from old Remsen Tappan, the trust officer of the great Half Moon Trust Company.

There could be no arguing with Mr. Tappan.

Shortly before Anthony Seagrave died he had written to his old friend Tappan:

> "If I live, I shall see to it that my grandchildren know nothing of the fortune awaiting them until they become of age—which will be after I am ended. Meanwhile, plain food and clothing, wholesome home seclusion from the promiscuity of modern child life, and an exhaustive education in every grace, fashion, and accomplishment of body and intellect is the training I propose for the development in them of the only thing in the world worth cultivating—unterrified individualism.
>
> "The ignorance which characterises the conduct of modern institutes of education reduces us all to one mindless level, reproducing *ad nauseam* what is known as 'average citizens.' This nation is already crawling with them; art, religion, letters, government, business, human ideals remain embryonic because the 'average citizen' can conceive nothing higher, can comprehend nothing loftier even when the few who have escaped the deadly levelling grind of modern methods of education attempt to teach the masses to think for themselves.
>
> "That is bad enough in itself—but add to cut-and-dried pedagogy the outrageous liberty which modern pupils are permitted in school and college, and add to that the unheard-of luxury in which they live—and the result is stupidity and utter ruin.
>
> "My babies must have discipline, system, frugality, and leisure for individual development drilled into them. I do not wish them to be ignorant of one single modern grace and accomplishment; mind and body must be trained together like a pair of Morgan colts.
>
> "But I will not have them victims of pedagogy; I will not have them masters of their time and money until they are of age; I will not permit them to choose companions or pursuits for their leisure until they are fitted to do so.
>
> "If there is in them, latent, any propensity toward viciousness—any unawakened desire for that which has been my failing—hard work from dawn till dark is the antidote. An exhausted child is beyond temptation.
>
> "If I pass forward, Tappan, before you—and it is likely because I am twenty years older and I have lived unwisely—I shall arrange matters in such shape that you can carry out something of what I have tried to begin, far better than I, old friend; for I am strong in theory and very weak in practice; they are such dear little things! And when they cry to be taken up—and a modern trained nurse says 'No! let them cry!' good God! Remsen, I sometimes sneak into their thoroughly modern and scientifically arranged nursery, which resembles an operating room in a brand-

new hospital, and I take up my babies and rock them in my arms, terrified lest that modern and highly trained nurse discover my infraction of sanitary rule and precept.

"I don't know; babies were born, and survived cradles and mothers' arms and kisses long before sterilised milk and bacilli were invented.

"You see I *am* weak in more ways than one. But I do mean to give them every chance. It isn't that these old arms ache for them, that this rather tired heart weakens when they cry for God knows what, and modern science says let them *cry*!—it is that, deep in me, Tappan, a heathenish idea persists that what they need more than hygienics and scientific discipline is some of that old-fashioned love—love which rocks them when it is not good for them—love which overfeeds them sometimes so that they yell with old-fashioned colic—love which ventures a bacilli-laden kiss. Friend, friend—I am very unfit! It will be well for them when I move on. Only try to love them, Tappan. And if you ever doubt, kill them with indulgence, rather than with hygiene!"

He died of pneumonia a few weeks later. He had no chance. Remsen Tappan picked up the torch from the fallen hand and, blowing it into a brisk blaze, shuffled forward to light a path through life for the highly sterilised twins.

So the Half Moon Trust became father and mother to the Seagrave children; and Mr. Tappan as dry nurse prescribed the brand of intellectual pap for them and decided in what manner it should be administered.

Now home tuition and the "culture of the indiwidool" was a personal hobby of Mr. Tappan, and promiscuous schools his abomination. Had not his own son, Peter Stuyvesant Tappan, been reared upon unsteady legs to magnificent physical and intellectual manhood under this theory?

So there was to be no outside education for the youthful Seagraves; from the nursery schoolroom no chance of escape remained. As they grew older they became wild to go to school; stories of schoolrooms and playgrounds and studies and teachers and jolly fellowship and vacations, brought to them from outside by happier children, almost crazed them with the longing for it.

It was hard for them when their little friends the Malletts were sent abroad to school; Naïda, now aged twelve, to a convent, and Duane, who was now fifteen, three years older than the Seagrave twins, accompanied his mother and a tutor, later to enter some school of art in Paris and develop whatever was in him. For like all parents, Duane's had been terribly excited over his infantile efforts at picture-making—one of the commonest and earliest developed of talents, but which never fails to amaze and delight less gifted parents and which continues to overstock the world with mediocre artists.

So it was arranged that Colonel Mallett should spend every summer abroad with his wife to watch the incubation of Duane's Titianesque genius and Naïda's unbelievable talent for music; and when the children came to bid good-bye to the Seagrave twins, they seized each other with frantic embraces, vowing lifelong fidelity. Alas! it is those who depart who forget first; and at the end of a year, Geraldine's and Scott's letters remained unanswered.

At the age of thirteen, after an extraordinary meeting of the directors of the Half Moon Trust Company, it was formally decided that a series of special tutors should now be engaged to carry on to the bitter end the Tappan-Seagrave system of home culture; and the road to college was definitely closed.

"I want my views understood," said Mr. Tappan, addressing the board of solemn-visaged directors assembled in session to determine upon the fate of two motherless little children. "Indiwidoolism is nurtured in excloosion; the elimination of the extraneous is necessary for the dewelopment of indiwidoolism. I regard the human indiwidool as sacred. Like a pearl"—he pronounced it "poil"—"it can grow in beauty and symmetry and purity and polish only when nourished in seclusion. Indiwidoolism is a poil without price; and the natal mansion, gentlemen—if I may be permitted the simulcritude—is its oyster.

"My old friend, Anthony Seagrave, shared with me this unalterable conwiction. I remember in the autumn of 1859–"

The directors settled themselves in their wadded arm-chairs; several yawned; some folded their hands over their ample stomachs. The June atmosphere was pleasantly conducive to the sort of after-luncheon introspection which is easily soothed by monotones of the human voice.

And while Mr. Tappan droned on and on, some of the directors watched him with one eye half open, thinking of other things, and some listened, both eyes half closed, thinking of nothing at all.

Many considered Mr. Tappan a very terrible old man, though why terrible, unless the most rigid honesty and bigoted devotion to duty terrifies, nobody seemed to know.

Long Island Dutch—with all that it implies—was the dull stock he rooted in. Born a poor farmer's son, with a savage passion for learning, he almost destroyed his eyesight in lonely study under the flicker of tallow dips. All that had ever come to him of knowledge came in these solitary vigils. Miry and sweating from the plough he mastered the classics, law, chemistry, engineering; and finally emerging heavily from the reek of Long Island fertiliser, struck with a heavy surety at Fortune and brought her to her knees amidst a shower of gold. And all alone he gathered it in.

On Coenties Slip his warehouse still bore the legend: "R. Tappan: Iron." All that he had ever done he had done alone. He knew of no other way; believed in no other way.

Plain living, plainer clothing, tireless thinking undisturbed—that had been his childhood; and it had suited him.

Never but once had he made any concession to custom and nature, and that was only when, desiring an heir, he was obliged to enter into human partnership to realise the wish.

His son was what his father had made him under the iron cult of solitary development; and now, the father, loyal in his own way to the memory of his old friend Anthony Seagrave, meant to do his full duty toward the orphaned grandchildren.

So it came to pass that tutors and specialists replaced Kathleen in the schoolroom; and these ministered to the twin "poils," who were now fretting through their thirteenth year, mad with desire for boarding-school.

Four languages besides their own were adroitly stuffed into them; nor were letters, arts, and sciences neglected, nor the mundane and social patter, accomplishments, and refinements, including poise, pose, and deportment.

Specialists continued to guide them indoors and out; they rode every morning at eight with a specialist; they drove in the Park between four and five with the most noted of four-in-hand specialists; fencing, sparring, wrestling, swimming, gymnastics, were all supervised by specialists in those several very important and scientific arts; and specialists also taught them hygiene: how to walk, sit, breathe; how to masticate; how to relax after the manner of the domestic cat.

They had memory lessons; lessons in personal physiology, and in first aid to themselves.

Specialists cared for their teeth, their eyes, their hair, their skin, their hands and feet.

Everything that was taught them, done for them, indirectly educated them in the science of self-consideration and deepened an unavoidably natural belief in their own overwhelming importance. They had not been born so.

But in the house of Seagrave everything revolved around and centred in them; everything began for them and ended for them alone. They had no chance.

True, they were also instructed in theology and religion; they became well grounded in the elements of both,—laws, by-laws, theory, legends, proverbs, truisms, and even a few abstract truths. But there was no meaning in either to these little prisoners of self. Seclusion is an enemy to youth; solitude its destruction.

When the twins were fifteen they went to their first party. A week of superficial self-restraint and inward delirium was their preparation, a brief hour of passive bewilderment the realisation. Dazed by the sight and touch and clamor of the throng, they moved and spoke as in a vision. The presence

of their own kind in such numbers confused them; overwhelmed, they found no voices to answer the call of happiness. Their capacity to respond was too limited.

As in a dream they were removed earlier than anybody else—taken away by a footman and a maid with decorous pomp and circumstance, carefully muffled in motor robes, and embedded in a limousine.

The daily papers, with that lofty purpose which always characterises them, recorded next morning the important fact that the famous Seagrave twins had appeared at their first party.

Between the ages of fifteen and sixteen the twins might have entered Harvard, for the entrance examinations were tried on both children, and both passed brilliantly.

For a year or two they found a substitute for happiness in pretending that they were really at college; they simulated, day by day, the life that they supposed was led there; they became devoted to their new game. Excited through tales told by tutor and friend, they developed a passionate loyalty for their college and class; they were solemnly elected to coveted societies, they witnessed Harvard victories, they strove fiercely for honours; their ideals were lofty, their courage clean and high.

So completely absorbed in the pretence did they become that their own tutors ventured to suggest to Mr. Tappan that such fiercely realistic mimicry deserved to be rewarded. Unfortunately, the children heard of this; but the Trust Officer's short answer killed their interest in playing at happiness, and their junior year began listlessly and continued without ambition. There was no heart in the pretence. Their interest had died. They studied mechanically because they were obliged to; they no longer cared.

That winter they went to a few more parties—not many. However, they were gingerly permitted to witness their first play, and later, the same year, were taken to "Lohengrin" at the opera.

During the play, which was a highly moral one, they sat watching, listening, wide-eyed as children.

At the opera Geraldine's impetuous soul soared straight up to paradise with the first heavenly strains, and remained there far above the rigid, breathless little body, bolt upright in its golden sarcophagus of the grand tier.

Her physical consciousness really seemed to have fled. Until the end she sat unaware of the throngs, of Scott and Kathleen whispering behind her, of several tall, broad-shouldered, shy young fellows who came into their box between the acts and tried to discuss anything at all with her, only to find her blind, deaf, and dumb.

These were the only memories of her first opera—confused, chaotic brilliancy, paradise revealed: and long, long afterward, the carriage flying up Fifth Avenue through darkness all gray with whirling snow.

Their eighteenth year dragged, beginning in physical and intellectual indifference, but promised stormily as they became more accustomed to glimpses of an outside world—a world teeming with restless young people in unbelievable quantities.

Scott had begun to develop two traits: laziness and a tendency to sullen, unspoken wrath. He took more liberty than was officially granted him—more than Geraldine dared take—and came into collision with Kathleen more often now. He boldly overstayed his leave in visiting his few boy friends for an afternoon; he returned home alone on foot after dusk, telling the chauffeur to go to the devil. Again and again he remained out to dinner without permission, and, finally, one afternoon quietly and stealthily cut his studies, slipped out of the house, and reappeared about dinner-time, excited, inclined to be boisterously defiant, admitting that he had borrowed enough money from a friend to go to a matinée with some other boys, and that he would do it again if he chose.

Also, to Kathleen's horror, he swore deliberately at table when Mr. Tappan's name was mentioned; and Geraldine looked up with startled brown eyes, divining in her brother something new —something that unconsciously they both had long, long waited for—the revolt of youth ere youth had been crushed for ever from the body which encased it.

"Damn him," repeated Scott, a little frightened at his own words and attitude; "I've had enough of this baby business; I'm eighteen and I want two things: some friends to go about with freely, and some money to do what other boys do. And you can tell Mr. Tappan, for all I care."

"What would you buy with money that is not already provided for, Scott?" asked Kathleen, gently ignoring his excited profanity.

"I don't know; there is no pleasure in using things which that fool of a Trust Company votes to let you have. Anyway, what I want is liberty and money."

"What would you do with what you call liberty, dear?"

"Do? I'd—I'd—well, I'd go shooting if I wanted to. I'd buy a gun and go off somewhere after ducks."

"But your father's old club on the Chesapeake is open to you. Shall I ask Mr. Tappan?"

"Oh, yes: I know," he sneered, "and Mr. Tappan would send some chump of a tutor there to teach me. I don't want to be taught how to hit ducks. I want to find out for myself. I don't care for that sort of thing," he repeated savagely; "I just ache to go off somewhere with a boy of my own age where there's no club and no preserve and no tutor; and where I can knock about and get whatever there is to get without anybody's help."

Geraldine said: "You have more liberty now than I have, Scott. What are you howling for?"

"The only real liberty I have I take! Anyway, you have enough for a girl of your age. And you'd better shut up."

"I won't shut up," she retorted irritably. "I want liberty as much as you do. If I had any, I'd go to every play and opera in New York. And I'd go about with my friends and I'd have gowns fitted, and I'd have tea at Sherry's, and I'd shop and go to matinees and to the Exchange, and I'd be elected a member of the Commonwealth Club and play basket-ball there, and swim, and lunch and—and then have another fitting–"

"Is that what you'd do with your liberty?" he sneered. "Well, I don't wonder old Tappan doesn't give you any money."

"I do need money and decent gowns. I'm sick of the frumpy prunes-and-prisms frocks that Kathleen makes me wear–"

Kathleen's troubled laugh interrupted her:

"Dearest, I do the best I can on the allowance made you by Mr. Tappan. His ideas on modern feminine apparel are perhaps not yours or mine."

"I should say not!" returned Geraldine angrily. "There isn't a girl of my age who dresses as horridly as I do. I tell you, Mr. Tappan has got to let me have money enough to dress decently. If he doesn't, I—I'll begin to give him as much trouble as Scott does—more, too!"

She set her teeth and stared at her glass of water.

"What about my coming-out gown?" she asked.

"I have written him about your début," said Kathleen soothingly.

"Oh! What did the old beast say?"

"He writes," began Kathleen pleasantly, "that he considers eighteen an unsuitable age for a young girl to make her bow to New York society."

"Did he say that?" exclaimed Geraldine, furious. "Very well; I shall write to Colonel Mallett and tell him I simply will not endure it any longer. I've had enough education; I'm suffocated with it! Besides, I dislike it. I want a dinner-gown and a ball-gown and my hair waved and dressed on top of my head instead of bunched half way! I want to have an engagement pad—I want to have places to go to—people expecting me; I want silk stockings and pretty underclothes! Doesn't that old fool understand what a girl wants and needs?"

She half rose from her seat at the table, pushing away the fruit which a servant offered; and, laying her hands flat on the cloth, leaned forward, eyes flashing ominously.

"I'm getting tired of this," she said. "If it goes on, I'll probably run away."

"So will I," said Scott, "but I've good reasons. They haven't done anything to you. You're making a terrible row about nothing."

"Yes, they have! They've suppressed me, stifled me, bottled me up, tinkered at me, overgroomed me, dressed me ridiculously, and stuffed my mind. And I'm starved all the time! O Kathleen, I'm hungry! hungry! Can't you understand?

"They've made me into something I was not. I've never yet had a chance to be myself. Why couldn't they let me be it? I know—I *know* that when at last they set me free because they have to —I—I'll act like a fool; I'll not know what to do with my liberty—I'll not know how to use it—how to understand or be understood.... Tell Mr. Tappan that! Tell him that it is all silly and wrong! Tell him that a young girl never forgets when other girls laugh at her because she never had any money, and dresses like a frump, and wears her hair like a baby!… And if he doesn't listen to us, some day Scott and I will show him and the others how we feel about it! I can make as much trouble as Scott can; I'll do it, too–"

"Geraldine!"

"Very well. I'm boiling inside when I think of—some things. The injustice of a lot of hateful, snuffy old men deciding on what sort of underclothes a young girl shall wear!… And I *will* make my début! I will! I will!"

"Dearest–"

"Yes, I will! I'll write to them and complain of Mr. Tappan's stingy, unjust treatment of us both–"

"Let me do the writing, dear," said Kathleen quietly. And she rose from the table and left the dining-room, both arms around the necks of the Seagrave twins, drawing them close to her sides—closer when her sidelong glance caught the sullen bitterness on the darkening features of the boy, and when on the girl's fair face she saw the flushed, wide-eyed, questioning stare.

When the young, seeking reasons, gaze questioningly at nothing, it is well to divine and find the truthful answer, lest their *other* selves, evoked, stir in darkness, counselling folly.

The answer to such questions Kathleen knew; who should know better than she? But it was not for her to reply. All she could do was to summon out of the vasty deep the powers that ruled her wards and herself; and these, convoked in solemn assembly because of conflict with their Trust Officer, might decide in becoming gravity such questions as what shall be the proper quality and cost of a young girl's corsets; and whether or not real lace and silk are necessary for attire more intimate still.

During the next two years the steadily increasing friction between Remsen Tappan and his wards began seriously to disturb the directors of the Half Moon Trust. That worthy old line company viewed with uneasiness the revolutionary tendencies of the Seagrave twins as expressed in periodical and passionate letters to Colonel Mallett. The increasing frequency of these appeals for justice and for intervention fore-shadowed the desirability of a conference. Besides, there was a graver matter to consider, which implicated Scott.

When Kathleen wrote, suggesting a down-town conference to decide delicate questions concerning Geraldine's undergarments and Scott's new gun, Colonel Mallett found it more convenient to appoint the Seagrave house as rendezvous.

And so it came to pass one pleasant Saturday afternoon in late October that, in twos and threes, a number of solemn old gentlemen, faultlessly attired, entered the red drawing-room of the Seagrave house and seated themselves in an impressive semicircle upon the damask chairs.

They were Colonel Stuart Mallett, president of the institution, just returned from Paris with his entire family; Calvin McDermott, Joshua Hogg, Carl Gumble, Friedrich Gumble; the two vice-presidents, James Cray and Daniel Montross; Myndert Beekman, treasurer; Augustus Varick, secretary; the Hon. John D. Ellis; Magnelius Grandcourt 2d, and Remsen Tappan, Trust Officer.

If the pillars of the house of Seagrave had been founded upon millions, the damask and rosewood chairs in the red drawing-room now groaned under the weight of millions. Power, authority,

respectability, and legitimate affluence sat there majestically enthroned in the mansion of the late Anthony Seagrave, awaiting in serious tribunal the appearance of the last of that old New York family.

Mrs. Severn came in first; the directors rose as one man, urbane, sprightly, and gallant. She was exceedingly pretty; they recognised it. They could afford to.

Compositely they were a smooth, soft-stepping, soft-voiced, company. An exception or two, like Mr. Tappan, merely accented the composite impression of rosy-cheeked, neatly shaven, carefully dressed prosperity. They all were cautious of voice, moderate of speech, chary of gesture. There was always an impressive pause before a director of the Half Moon Trust answered even the most harmless question addressed to him. Some among them made it a conservative rule to swallow nothing several times before speaking at all. It was a safe habit to acquire. *Aut prudens aut nullus.*

Geraldine's starched skirts rustled on the stairway. When she came into the room the directors of the Half Moon Trust were slightly astonished. During the youth of the twins, the wives of several gentlemen present had called at intervals to inspect the growth of Anthony Seagrave's grandchildren, particularly those worthy and acquisitive ladies who had children themselves. The far-sighted reap rewards. Some day these baby twins would be old enough to marry. It was prudent to remember such details. A position as an old family friend might one day prove of thrifty advantage in this miserably mercenary world where dog eats dog, and dividends are sometimes passed. God knows and pities the sorrows of the rich.

Geraldine, her slim hand in Colonel Mallett's, courtesied with old-time quaintness, then her lifted eyes swept the rosy, rotund countenances before her. To each she courtesied and spoke, offering the questioning hand of amity.

The thing that seemed to surprise them was that she had grown since they had seen her. Time flies when hunting safe investments. The manners she retained, like her fashion of wearing her hair, and the cut and length of her apparel were clearly too childish to suit the tall, slender, prettily rounded figure—the mature oval of the face, the delicately firm modelling of the features.

This was no child before them; here stood adorable adolescence, a hint of the awakening in the velvet-brown eyes which were long and slightly slanting at the corners; hints, too, in the vivid lips, in the finer outline of the profile, in faint bluish shadows under the eyes, edging the curved cheeks' bloom.

They had not seen her in two years or more, and she had grown up. They had merely stepped down-town for a hasty two years' glance at the market, and, behind their backs, the child had turned into a woman.

Hitherto they had addressed her as "Geraldine" and "child," when a rare interview had been considered necessary. Now, two years later, unconsciously, it was "Miss Seagrave," and considerable embarrassment when the subject of intimate attire could no longer be avoided.

But Geraldine, unconscious of such things, broached the question with all the directness characteristic of her.

"I am sorry I was rude in my last letter," she said gravely, turning to Mr. Tappan. "Will you please forgive me?… I am glad you came. I do not think you understand that I am no longer a little girl, and that things necessary for a woman are necessary for me. I want a quarterly allowance. I need what a young woman needs. Will you give these things to me, Mr. Tappan?"

Mr. Tappan's dry lips cracked apart; he swallowed grimly several times, then his long bony fingers sought the meagre ends of his black string tie:

"In the cultiwation of the indiwidool," he began harshly, and checked himself, when Geraldine flushed to her ear tips and stamped her foot. Self-control had gone at last.

"I won't listen to that!" she said, breathless; "I've listened to it for ten years—as long as I can remember. Answer me honestly, Mr. Tappan! Can I have what other women have—silk underwear and stockings—real lace on my night dresses—and plenty of it? Can I have suitable gowns and furs, and have my hair dressed properly? I want you to answer; can I make my début this winter and have

the gowns I require—and the liberty that girls of my age have?" She turned on Colonel Mallett: "The liberty that Naïda has had is all I want; the sort of things you let her have all I ask for." And appealing to Magnelius Grandcourt, who stood pursing his thick lips, puffed out like a surprised pouter pigeon: "Your daughter Catherine has more than I ask; why do you let her have what you consider bad for me? *Why*?"

Mr. Grandcourt swallowed several times, and spoke in an undertone to Joshua Hogg. But he did not reply to Geraldine.

Remsen Tappan turned his iron visage toward Colonel Mallett—ignoring Geraldine's questions.

"In the cultiwation of the indiwidool," he began again dauntlessly–

"Isn't there anybody to answer me?" asked Geraldine, turning from one to another.

"Concerning the cultiwation–"

"Answer me!" she flashed back. There were tears in her voice, but her eyes blazed.

"Miss Seagrave," interposed old Mr. Montross gravely, "I beg of you to remember–"

"Let him answer me first! I asked him a perfectly plain question. It—it is silly to ignore me as though I were a foolish child—as though I didn't know my mind."

"I think, Mr. Tappan, perhaps if you could give Miss Seagrave a qualified answer to her questions—make some preliminary statement—" began Mr. Cray cautiously.

"Concerning what?" snapped Tappan with a grim stare.

"Concerning my stockings and my underwear," said Geraldine fiercely. "I'm tired of dressing like a servant!"

Mr. Tappan's rugged jaw opened and shut with another snap.

"I'm opposed to any such innowation," he said.

"And—my coming out this winter? And my quarterly allowance? Answer me!"

"Time enough when you turn twenty-one, Miss Seagrave. Cultiwation of mind concerns you now, not cultiwation of raiment."

"That—that—" stammered Geraldine, "is s-su-premely s-silly." The tears reached her eyes; she brushed them away angrily.

Mallett coughed and glanced at Myndert Beekman, then past the secretary, Mr. Varick, directly at Mr. Tappan.

"If you could see your way to—ah—accede to some—a number—perhaps, in a measure, to all of Miss Seagrave's not unreasonable requests, Mr. Tappan–"

He hesitated, looked dubiously at Mr. Montross, who nodded. Mr. Cray, also, made an almost imperceptible sign of concurrence. Magnelius Grandcourt, the sixty-year *enfant terrible* of the company, dreaded for his impulsive outbursts—though the effect of these outbursts was always very carefully considered before-hand—stepped jauntily across the floor, and lifting Geraldine's hand to his rather purplish lips, saluted it with a flourish.

"Oh, I say, Tappan, let Miss Seagrave have what she wants!" he exclaimed with a hearty disregard of caution, which outwardly disturbed but inwardly deceived nobody except Geraldine and Mrs. Severn.

Colonel Mallett thought: "The acquisitive beast is striking attitudes on his fool of a son's account."

Mr. Tappan's small iron-gray eyes bored two holes through the inward motives of Mr. Grandcourt, and his mouth tightened till the seamed lips were merely a line.

"I think, Magnelius," said Colonel Mallett coldly, "that it is, perhaps, the sense of our committee that the time has practically arrived for some change—perhaps radical change—in the—in the—ah—the hitherto exceedingly wise regulations–"

"*May* I have real lace?" cried Geraldine—"Oh, I *beg* your pardon, Colonel Mallett, for interrupting, but I was perfectly crazy to know what you were going to say."

Other people have been crazier and endured more to learn what hope the verdict of ponderous authority might hold for them.

Colonel Mallett, a trifle ruffled at the interruption, swallowed several times and then continued without haste to rid himself of a weighty opinion concerning the début and the petticoats of the Half Moon's ward. He might have made the child happy in one word. It took him twenty minutes.

Concurring opinions were then solemnly delivered by every director in turn except Mr. Tappan, who spoke for half an hour, doggedly dissenting on every point.

But the days of the old régime were evidently numbered. He understood it. He looked across at the crackled portrait of his old friend Anthony Seagrave; the faded, painted features were obliterated in a bar of slanting sunlight.

So, concluding his dissenting opinion, and having done his duty, he sat down, drawing the skirts of his frock-coat close around his bony thighs. He had done his best; his reward was this child's hatred —which she already forgot in the confused delight of her sudden liberation.

Dazed with happiness, to one after another Geraldine courtesied and extended the narrow childlike hand of amity—even to him. Then, as though treading on invisible pink clouds, she floated out and away up-stairs, scarcely conscious of passing her brother on the stairway, who was now descending for his turn before the altar of authority.

When Scott returned he appeared to be unusually red in the face. Geraldine seized him ecstatically:

"Oh, Scott! I *am* to come out, after all—and I'm to have my quarterly, and gowns, and everything. I could have hugged Mr. Grandcourt—the dear! I was so frightened—frightened into rudeness—and then that beast of a Tappan scared me terribly. But it is all right now—and *what* did they promise you, poor dear?"

Scott's face still remained flushed as he stood, hands in his pockets, head slightly bent, tracing with the toe of his shoe the carpet pattern.

"You want to know what they promised me?" he asked, looking up at his sister with an unpleasant laugh. She poured a few drops of cologne onto a lump of sugar, placed it between her lips, and nodded:

"They *did* promise you something—didn't they?"

"Oh, certainly. They promised to make it hot for me if I ever again borrowed money on notes."

"Scott! did you do that?"

"Give my note? Certainly. I needed money—I've told old tabby Tappan so again and again. In a year I'll have all the money I need—so what's the harm if I borrow a little and promise to pay when I'm of age?"

Geraldine considered a moment: "It's curious," she reflected, "but do you know, Scott, I never thought of doing that. It never occurred to me to do it! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because," said her brother with an embarrassed laugh, "it's not exactly a proper thing to do, I believe. Anyway, they raised a terrible row about it. Probably that's why they have at last given me a decent quarterly allowance; they think it's safer, I suppose—and they're right. The stingy old fossils."

The boyish boast, the veiled hint of revolt and reprisal vaguely disturbed Geraldine's sense of justice.

"After all," she said, "they have meant to be kind. They didn't know how, that's all. And, Scott, do let us try to be better now. I'm ashamed of my rudeness to them. And I'm going to be very, very good to Kathleen and not do one single thing to make her unhappy or even to bother Mr. Tappan.... And, oh, Scott! my silks and laces! my darling clothes! All is coming true! Do you hear? And, Scott! Naïda and Duane are back and I'm dying to see them. Duane is twenty-three, think of it!"

She seized him and spun him around.

"If you don't hug me and tell me you're fond of me, I shall go mad. Tell me you're fond of me, Scott! You do love me, don't you?"

He kissed his sister with preoccupied toleration: "Whew!" he said, "your breath reeks of cologne!

"As for me," he added, half sullenly, "I'm going to have a few things I want, now.... And do a few things, too."

But what these things were he did not specify. Nor did Geraldine have time to speculate, so occupied was she now with preparations for the wonderful winter which was to come true at last—which was already beginning to come true with exciting visits to that magic country of brilliant show-windows which, like an enchanted city by itself, sparkles from Madison Square to the Plaza between Fourth Avenue and Broadway.

Into this sparkling metropolitan zone she hastened with Kathleen; all day long, week after week, she flitted from shop to shop, never satisfied, always eager to see, to explore. Yet two things Kathleen noticed: Geraldine seemed perfectly happy and contented to view the glitter of vanity fair without thought of acquiring its treasures for herself; and, when reminded that she was there to buy, she appeared to be utterly ignorant of the value of money, though a childhood without it was supposed to have taught her its rarity and preciousness.

The girl's personal tastes were expensive; she could linger in ecstasy all the morning over piles of wonderful furs without envy, without even thinking of them for herself; but when Kathleen mentioned the reason of their shopping, Geraldine always indicated sables as her choice, any single piece of which would have required half her yearly allowance to pay for.

And she was for ever wishing to present things to Kathleen; silks that were chosen, model gowns that they examined together, laces, velvets, jewels, always her first thought seemed to be that Kathleen should have what they both enjoyed looking at so ardently; and many a laughing contest they had as to whether her first quarterly allowance should be spent upon herself or her friends.

On the surface it would appear that unselfishness was the key to her character. That was impossible; she had lived too long alone. Yet Geraldine was clearly not acquisitive; though, when she did buy, her careless extravagance worried Kathleen. Spendthrift—in that she cared nothing for the money value of anything—her bright, piquant, eager face was a welcome sight to the thrifty metropolitan shopkeeper at Christmas-tide. A delicate madness for giving obsessed her; she bought a pair of guns for Scott, laces and silks for Kathleen, and for the servants everything she could think of. Nobody was forgotten, not even Mr. Tappan, who awoke Christmas morning to gaze grimly upon an antique jewelled fob all dangling with pencils and seals. In the first flush of independence it gave her more pleasure to give than to acquire.

Also, for the first time in her life, she superintended the distribution of her own charities, flying in the motor with Kathleen from church to mission, eager, curious, pitiful, appalled, by turns. Sentiment overwhelmed her; it was a new kind of pleasure.

One night she arose shivering from her warm bed, and with ink and paper sat figuring till nearly dawn how best to distribute what fortune she might one day possess, and live an exalted life on ten dollars a week.

Kathleen found her there asleep, head buried in the scattered papers, limbs icy to the knees; and there ensued an interim of bronchitis which threatened at one time to postpone her début.

But the medical profession of Manhattan came to the rescue in battalions, and Geraldine was soon afoot, once more drifting ecstatically among the splendours of the shops, thrilling with the nearness of the day that should set her free among unnumbered hosts of unknown friends.

Who would these unknown people turn out to be? What hearts were at that very moment destined to respond in friendship to her own?

Often lying awake, nibbling her scented lump of sugar, the darkness reddening, at intervals, as embers of her bedroom fire dropped glowing to the hearth, she pictured to herself this vast, brilliant throng awaiting to welcome her as one of them. And her imagination catching fire, through closed lids she seemed to see heavenly vistas of youthful faces—a thousand arms outstretched in welcome;

and she, advancing, eyes dim with happiness, giving herself to this world of youth and friendship—crossing the threshold—leaving for ever behind her the past with its loneliness and isolation.

It was of friendships she dreamed, and the blessed nearness of others, and the liberty to seek them. She promised herself she would never, never again permit herself to be alone. She had no definite plans, except that. Life henceforth must be filled with the bright shapes of comrades. Life must be only pleasure. Never again must sadness come near her. A miraculous capacity for happiness seemed to fill her breast, expanding with the fierce desire for it, until under the closed lids tears stole out, and there, in the darkness, she held out her bare arms to the world—the kind, good, generous, warm-hearted world, which was waiting, just beyond her threshold, to welcome her and love her and companion her for ever.

CHAPTER III
THE THRESHOLD

She awoke tired; she had scarcely closed her eyes that night. The fresh odour of roses filled her room when her maid arrived with morning gifts from Kathleen and Scott.

She lay abed until noon. They started dressing her about three. After that the day became unreal to her.

Manhattan was conventionally affable to Geraldine Seagrave, also somewhat curious to see what she looked like. Fifth Avenue and the neighbouring side streets were jammed with motors and carriages on the bright January afternoon that Geraldine made her bow, and the red and silver drawing-rooms, so famous a generation ago, were packed continually.

What people saw was a big, clumsy house expensively overdecorated in the appalling taste of forty years ago, now screened by forests of palms and vast banks of flowers; and they saw a number of people popularly identified with the sort of society which newspapers delight to revere; and a few people of real distinction; and a young girl, noticeably pale, standing beside Kathleen Severn and receiving the patronage of dowagers and beaux, and the impulsive clasp of fellowship from fresh-faced young girls and nice-looking, well-mannered young fellows.

The general opinion seemed to be that Geraldine Seagrave possessed all the beauty which rumour had attributed to her as her right by inheritance, but the animation of her clever mother was lacking. Also, some said that her manners still smacked of the nursery; and that, unless it had been temporarily frightened out of her, she had little personality and less charm.

Nothing, as a matter of fact, had been frightened out of her; for weeks she had lived in imagination so vividly through that day that when the day really arrived it found her physically and mentally unresponsive; the endless reiteration of names sounded meaninglessly in her ears, the crowding faces blurred. She was passively satisfied to be there, and content with the touch of hands and the pleasant-voiced formalities of people pressing toward her from every side.

Afterward few impressions remained; she remembered the roses' perfume, and a very fat woman with a confusing similarity of contour fore and aft who blocked the lines and rattled on like a machine-gun saying dreadfully frank things about herself, her family, and everybody she mentioned.

Naïda Mallett, whom she had not seen in many years, she had known immediately, and now remembered. And Naïda had taken her white-gloved hand shyly, whispering constrained formalities, then had disappeared into the unreality of it all.

Duane, her old playmate, may have been there, but she could not remember having seen him. There were so many, many youths of the New York sort, all dressed alike, all resembling one another —many, many people flowing past her where she stood submerged in the silken ebb eddying around her.

These were the few hazy impressions remaining—she was recalling them now while dressing for her first dinner dance. Later, when her maid released her with a grunt of Gallic disapproval, she, distraite, glanced at her gown in the mirror, still striving to recall something definite of the day before.

"*Was* Duane there?" she asked Kathleen, who had just entered.

"No, dear.... Why did you happen to think of Duane Mallett?"

"Naïda came.... Duane was such a splendid little boy.... I had hoped–"

Mrs. Severn said coolly:

"Duane isn't a very splendid man. I might as well tell you now as later."

"What in the world do you mean, Kathleen?"

"I mean that people say he was rather horrid abroad. Some women don't mind that sort of thing, but I do."

"Horrid? How?"

"He went about Europe with unpleasant people. He had too much money—and that is ruinous for a boy. I hate to disillusion you, but for several years people have been gossipping about Duane Mallett's exploits abroad; and they are not savoury."

"What were they? I am old enough to know."

"I don't propose to tell you. He was notoriously wild. There were scandals. Hush! here comes Scott."

"For Heaven's sake, pinch some colour into your cheeks!" exclaimed her brother; "we're not going to a wake!"

And Kathleen said anxiously: "Your gown is perfection, dear; are you a trifle tired? You do look pale."

"Tired?" repeated Geraldine—"not in the least, dearest.... If I seem not to be excited, I really am, internally; but perhaps I haven't learned how to show it.... Don't I look well? I was so preoccupied with my gown in the mirror that I forgot to examine my face."

Mrs. Severn kissed her. "You and your gown are charming. Come, we are late, and that isn't permitted to débutantes."

It was Mrs. Magnelius Grandcourt who was giving the first dinner and dance for Geraldine Seagrave. In the cloak-room she encountered some very animated women of the younger married set, who spoke to her amiably, particularly a Mrs. Dysart, who said she knew Duane Mallett, and who was so friendly that a bit of colour warmed Geraldine's pallid cheeks and still remained there when, a few minutes later, she saluted her heavily jewelled hostess and recognised in her the fat fore-and-aft lady of the day before.

Mrs. Magnelius Grandcourt, glittering like a South American scarab, detained her with the smallest and chubbiest hands she had ever seen inside of gloves.

"My dear, you look ghastly," said her hostess. "You're probably scared to death. This is my son, Delancy, who is going to take you in, and I'm wondering about you, because Delancy doesn't get on with débutantes, but that can't be helped. If he's pig enough not to talk to you, it wouldn't surprise me—and it's just as well, too, for if he likes anybody he compromises them, but it's no use your ever liking a Grandcourt, for all the men make rotten husbands—I'm glad Rosalie Dysart threw him over for poor Jack Dysart; it saved her a divorce! I'd get one if I could; so would Magnelius. My husband was a judge once, but he resigned because he couldn't send people up for the things he was doing himself."

Mrs. Grandcourt, still gabbling away, turned to greet new arrivals, merely switching to another subject without interrupting her steady stream of outrageous talk. She was celebrated for it—and for nothing else.

Geraldine, bewildered and a little horrified, looked at her billowy, bediamonded hostess, then at young Delancy Grandcourt, who, not perceptibly abashed by his mother's left-handed compliments, lounged beside her, apparently on the verge of a yawn.

"My mother says things," he explained patiently; "nobody minds 'em.... Shall we exchange nonsense—or would you rather save yourself until dinner?"

"Save myself what?" she asked nervously.

"The nuisance of talking to me about nothing. I'm not clever."

Geraldine reddened.

"I don't usually talk about nothing."

"I do," he said. "I never have much to say."

"Is that because you don't like débutantes?" she asked coldly.

"It's because they don't care about me.... If you would talk to me, I'd really be grateful."

He flushed and stepped back awkwardly to allow room for a slim, handsome man to pass between them. The very ornamental man did not pass, however, but calmly turned toward Geraldine, and began to talk to her.

She presently discovered his name to be Dysart; and she also discovered that Mr. Dysart didn't know her name; and, for a moment after she had told him, surprise and a confused sense of resentment silenced her, because she was quite certain now that they had never been properly presented.

That negligence of conventions was not unusual in this new world she was entering, she had already noticed; and this incident was evidently another example of custom smilingly ignored. She looked up questioningly, and Dysart, instantly divining the trouble, laughed in his easy, attractive fashion—the fashion he usually affected with women.

"You seemed so fresh and cool and sweet all alone in this hot corner that I simply couldn't help coming over to hear whether your voice matched the ensemble. And it surpasses it. Are you going to be resentful?"

"I'm too ignorant to be—or to laugh about it as you do.... Is it because I look a simpleton that you come to see if I really am?"

"Are you planning to punish me, Miss Seagrave?"

"I'm afraid I don't know how."

"Fate will, anyway, unless I am placed next you at dinner," he said with his most reassuring smile, and rose gracefully.

"I'm going to fix it," he added, and, pushing his way toward his hostess, disappeared in the crush.

Later young Grandcourt reappeared from the crush to take her in. Every table seated eight, and, sure enough, as she turned involuntarily to glance at her neighbour on the right, it was Dysart's pale face, cleanly cut as a cameo, that met her gaze. He nodded back to her with unfeigned satisfaction at his own success.

"That's the way to manage," he said, "when you want a thing very much. Isn't it, Miss Seagrave?"

"You did not ask me whether I wanted it," she said.

"Don't you want me here? If you don't—" His features fell and he made a pretence of rising. His pale, beautifully sculptured face had become so fearfully serious that she coloured up quickly.

"Oh, you *wouldn't* do such a thing—now! to embarrass me."

"Yes, I would—I'd do anything desperate."

But she had already caught the flash of mischief, and realising that he had been taking more or less for granted in tormenting her, looked down at her plate and presently tasted what was on it.

"I know you are not offended," he murmured. "Are you?"

She knew she was not, too; but she merely shrugged. "Then why do you ask me, Mr. Dysart?"

"Because you have such pretty shoulders," he replied seriously.

"What an idiotic reply to make!"

"Why? Don't you think you have?"

"What?"

"Pretty shoulders."

"I don't think anything about my shoulders!"

"You would if there was anything the matter with them," he insisted.

Once or twice he turned his handsome dark gaze on her while she was dissecting her terrapin.

"They tip up a little—at the corners, don't they?" he inquired anxiously. "Does it hurt?"

"Tip up? What tips up?" she demanded.

"Your eyes."

She swung around toward him, confused and exasperated; but no seriousness was proof against the delighted malice in Dysart's face; and she laughed a little, and laughed again when he did. And she thought that he was, perhaps, the handsomest man she had ever seen. All débutantes did.

Young Grandcourt turned from the pretty, over-painted woman who, until that moment, had apparently held him interested when his food failed to monopolise his attention, and glanced heavily around at Geraldine.

All he saw was the back of her head and shoulders. Evidently she was not missing him. Evidently, too, she was having a very good time with Dysart.

"What are you laughing about?" he asked wistfully, leaning forward to see her face.

Geraldine glanced back across her shoulder.

"Mr. Dysart is trying to be impertinent," she replied carelessly; and returned again to the impertinent one, quite ready for more torment now that she began to understand how agreeable it was.

But Dysart's expression had changed; there was something vaguely caressing in voice and manner as he murmured:

"Do you know there is something almost divine in your face."

"What did you say?" asked Geraldine, looking up from her ice in its nest of spun sugar.

"You so strenuously reject the truthful compliments I pay you, that perhaps I'd better not repeat this one."

"Was it really more absurd flattery?"

"No, never mind...." He leaned back in his chair, absently turning the curious, heavily chiselled ring on his little finger, but every few moments his expressive eyes reverted to her. She was eating her ice with all the frank enjoyment of a schoolgirl.

"Do you know, Miss Seagrave, that you and I are really equipped for better things than talking nonsense."

"I know that I am," she observed.... "Isn't this spun sugar delicious!"

"Yes; and so are you."

But she pretended not to hear.

He laughed, then fell silent; his dreamy gaze shifted from vacancy to her—and, casually, across the room, where it settled lightly as a butterfly on his wife, and there it poised for a moment's inexpressive examination. Scott Seagrave was talking to Rosalie; she did not notice her husband.

After that, with easy nonchalance approaching impudence, he turned to his own neglected dinner partner, Sylvia Quest, who received his tardy attentions with childish irritation. She didn't know any better. And there was now no time to patch up matters, for the signal to rise had been given and Dysart took Sylvia to the door with genuine relief. She bored him dreadfully since she had become sentimental over him. They always did.

Lounging back through the rising haze of tobacco-smoke he encountered Peter Tappan and stopped to exchange a word.

"Dancing?" he inquired, lighting his cigarette.

Tappan nodded. "You, too, of course." For Dysart was one of those types known in society as a "dancing man." He also led cotillions, and a morally blameless life as far as the more virile Commandments were concerned.

He said: "That little Seagrave girl is rather fetching."

Tappan answered indifferently:

"She resembles the general run of this year's output. She's weedy. They all ought to marry before they go about to dinners, anyway."

"Marry whom?"

"Anybody—Delancy, here, for instance. You know as well as I do that no woman is possible unless she's married," yawned Tappan. "Isn't that so, Delancy?" clapping Grandcourt on the shoulder.

Grandcourt said "yes," to be rid of him; but Dysart turned around with his usual smile of amused contempt.

"You think so, too, Delancy," he said, "because what is obvious and ready-made appeals to you. You think as you eat—heavily—and you miss a few things. That little Seagrave girl is charming. But you'd never discover it."

Grandcourt slowly removed the fat cigar from his lips, rolled it meditatively between thick forefinger and thumb:

"Do you know, Jack, that you've been saying that sort of thing to me for a number of years?"

"Yes; and it's just as true now as it ever was, old fellow."

"That may be; but did it ever occur to you that I might get tired hearing it.... And might, possibly, resent it some day?"

For a long time Dysart had been uncomfortably conscious that Grandcourt had had nearly enough of his half-sneering, half-humourous frankness. His liking for Grandcourt, even as a schoolboy, had invariably been tinged with tolerance and good-humoured contempt. Dysart had always led in everything; taken what he chose without considering Grandcourt—sometimes out of sheer perversity, he had taken what Grandcourt wanted—not really wanting it himself—as in the case of Rosalie Dene.

"What are you talking about resenting?—my monopolising your dinner partner?" asked Dysart, smiling. "Take her; amuse yourself. I don't want her."

Grandcourt inspected his cigar again. "I'm tired of that sort of thing, too," he said.

"What sort of thing?"

"Contenting myself with what you don't want."

Dysart lit a cigarette, still smiling, then shrugged and turned as though to go. Around them through the smoke rose the laughing clamour of young men gathering at the exit.

"I want to tell you something," said Grandcourt heavily. "I'm an ass to do it, but I want to tell you."

Dysart halted patiently.

"It's this," went on Grandcourt: "between you and my mother, I've never had a chance; she makes me out a fool and you have always assumed it to be true."

Dysart glanced at him with amused contempt.

A heavy flush rose to Grandcourt's cheek-bones. He said slowly:

"I want my chance. You had better let me have it when it comes."

"What chance do you mean?"

"I mean—a woman. All my life you've been at my elbow to step in. You took what you wanted —your shadow always falls between me and anybody I'm inclined to like.... It happened to-night— as usual.... And I tell you now, at last, I'm tired of it."

"What a ridiculous idea you seem to have of me," began Dysart, laughing.

"I'm afraid of you. I always was. Now—let me alone!"

"Have you ever known me, since I've been married—" He caught Grandcourt's eye, stammered, and stopped short. Then: "You certainly are absurd. Delancy! I wouldn't deliberately interfere with you or disturb a young girl's peace of mind. The trouble with you is–"

"The trouble with *you* is that women take to you very quickly, and you are always trying to see how far you can arouse their interest. What's the use of risking heartaches to satisfy curiosity?"

"Oh, I don't have heartaches!" said Dysart, intensely amused.

"I wasn't thinking of you. I suppose that's the reason you find it amusing.... Not that I think there's any real harm in you–"

"Thanks," laughed Dysart; "it only needed that remark to damn me utterly. Now go and dance with little Miss Seagrave, and don't worry about my trying to interfere."

Grandcourt looked sullenly at him. "I'm sorry I spoke, now," he said. "I never know enough to hold my tongue to you."

He turned bulkily on his heel and left the dining-hall. There were others, in throngs, leaving —young, eager-faced fellows, with a scattering of the usual "dancing" men on whom everybody could always count, and a few middle-aged gentlemen and women of the younger married set to give stability to what was, otherwise, a débutante's affair.

Dysart, strolling about, booked a dance or two, performed creditably, made his peace, for the sake of peace, with Sylvia Quest, whose ignorant heart had been partly awakened under his idle investigations. But this was Sylvia's second season, and she would no doubt learn several things of which she heretofore had been unaware. Just at present, however, her heart was very full, and life's outlook was indeed tragic to a young girl who believed herself wildly in love with a married man, and who employed all her unhappy wits in the task of concealing it.

A load of guilt lay upon her soul; the awful fact that she adored him frightened her terribly; that she could not keep away from him terrified her still more. But most of all she dreaded that he might guess her secret.

"I don't know why you thought I minded your not—not talking to me during dinner," she faltered. "I was having a perfectly heavenly time with Peter Tappan."

"Do you mean that?" murmured Dysart. He could not help playing his part, even when it no longer interested him. To murmur was as natural to him as to breathe.

She looked up piteously. "I would rather have talked to you," she said. "Peter Tappan is only an overgrown boy. If you had really cared to talk to me—" She checked herself, flushing deeply.

O Lord! he thought, contemplating in the girl's lifted eyes the damage he had not really expected to do. For it had, as usual, surprised him to realise, too late, how dangerous it is to say too much, and look too long, and how easy it is to awaken hearts asleep.

Dancing was to be general before the cotillion. Sylvia would have given him as many dances as he asked for; he danced once with her as a great treat, resolving never to experiment any more with anybody.... True, it might have been amusing to see how far he could have interested the little Seagrave girl—but he would renounce that; he'd keep away from everybody.

But Dysart could no more avoid making eyes at anything in petticoats than he could help the tenderness of his own smile or the caressing cadence of his voice, or the subtle, indefinite something in him which irritated men but left few women indifferent and some greatly perturbed as he strolled along on his amusing journey through the world.

He was strolling on now, having managed to leave Sylvia planted; and presently, without taking any particular trouble to find Geraldine, discovered her eventually as the centre of a promising circle of men, very young men and very old men—nothing medium and desirable as yet.

For a while, amused, Dysart watched her at her first party. Clearly she was inexperienced; she let these men have their own way and their own say; she was not handling them skilfully; yet there seemed to be a charm about this young girl that detached man after man from the passing throng and added them to her circle—which had now become a half circle, completely cornering her.

Animated, shyly confident, brilliant-eyed, and flushed with the excitement of attracting so much attention, she was beginning to lose her head a little—just a little. Dysart noticed it in her nervous laughter; in a slight exaggeration of gesture with fan and flowers; in the quick movement of her restless little head, as though it were incumbent upon her to give to every man confronting her his own particular modicum of attention—which was not like a débutante, either; and Dysart realised that she was getting on.

So he sauntered up, breaking through the circle, and reminded Geraldine of a dance she had not promised him.

She knew she had not promised, but she was quite ready to give it—had already opened her lips to assent—when a young man, passing, swung around abruptly as though to speak to her, hesitating as Geraldine's glance encountered his without recognition.

But, as he started to move on, she suddenly knew him; and at the same moment Kathleen's admonition rang in her ears. Her own voice drowned it.

"Oh, Duane!" she exclaimed, stretching out her hand across Dysart's line of advance.

"You *are* Geraldine Seagrave, are you not?" he asked smilingly, retaining her hand in such a manner as practically to compel her to step past Dysart toward him.

"Of course I am. You might have known me had you been amiable enough to appear at my coming out."

He laughed easily, still retaining her hand and looking down at her from his inch or two of advantage. Then he casually inspected Dysart, who, not at all pleased, returned his gaze with a careless unconcern verging on offence. Few men cared for Dysart on first inspection—or on later acquaintance; Mallett was no exception.

Geraldine said, with smiling constraint:

"It has been so very jolly to see you again." And withdrew her hand, adding: "I hope—some time–"

"Won't you let me talk to you now for a moment or two? You are not going to dismiss me with that sort of come-back—after all these years—are you?"

He seemed so serious about it that the girl coloured up.

"I—that is, Mr. Dysart was going to—to—" She turned and looked at Dysart, who remained planted where she had left him, exceedingly wroth at experiencing the sort of casual treatment he had so often meted out to others. His expression was peevish. Geraldine, confused, began hurriedly:

"I thought Mr. Dysart meant to ask me to dance."

"*Meant* to?" interrupted Mallett, laughing; "*I* mean to ask for this dance, and I do."

Once more she turned and encountered Dysart's darkening gaze, hesitated, then with a nervous, gay little gesture to him, partly promise, partly adieu, she took Mallett's arm.

It was the first glimmer of coquetry she had ever deliberately displayed; and at the same instant she became aware that something new had been suddenly awakened in her—something which stole like a glow through her veins, exciting her with its novelty.

"Do you know," she said, "that you have taken me forcibly away from an exceedingly nice man?"

"I don't care."

"Oh—but might I not at least have been consulted?"

"Didn't you want to come?" he asked, stopping short. There was something overbearing in his voice and his straight, unwavering gaze.

She didn't know how to take it, how to meet it. Voice and manner required some proper response which seemed to be beyond her experience.

She did not answer; but a slight pressure of her bare arm set him in motion again.

The phenomenon interested her; to see what control over this abrupt young man she really had she ventured a very slight retrograde arm-pressure, then a delicate touch to right, to left, and forward once more. It was most interesting; he backed up, guided right and left, and started forward or halted under perfect control. What had she been afraid of in him? She ventured to glance around, and, encountering a warmly personal interest in his gaze, instantly assumed that cold, blank, virginal mask which the majority of young girls discard at her age.

However, her long-checked growth in the arts of womanhood had already recommenced. She had been growing fast, feverishly, and was just now passing that period where the desire for masculine admiration innocently rules all else, but where the discovery of it chills and constrains.

She passed it at that moment. The next time their glances met she smiled a little. A new epoch in her life had begun.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked. "Are we not going to dance?"

"I thought we might sit out a dance or two in the conservatory—one or two–"

"One," she said decidedly. "Here are some palms. Why not sit here?"

There were a number of people about; she saw them, too, noted his hesitation, understood it.

"We'll sit here," she said, and stood smilingly regarding him while he lugged up two chairs to the most retired corner.

Slowly waving her fan, she seated herself and surveyed the room.

It is quite true that reunion after many years usually ends in constraint and indifference. If she felt slightly bored, she certainly looked it. Neither of them resembled the childish recollections or preconceived notions of the other. They found themselves inspecting one another askance, as though furtively attempting to surprise some familiar feature, some resemblance to a cherished memory.

But the changes were too radical; their eyes, looking for old comrades, encountered the unremembered eyes of strangers—for they were strangers—this tall young man, with his gray eyes, pleasantly fashioned mouth, and cleanly moulded cheeks; and this long-limbed girl, who sat, knees crossed, one long, slim foot nervously swinging above its shadow on the floor.

In spite of his youth there was in his manner, if not in his voice, something tinged with fatigue. She thought of what Kathleen had said about him; looked up, instinctively questioning him with curious, uncomprehending eyes; then her gaze wandered, became lost in smiling retrospection as she thought of Dysart, peevish; and she frankly regretted him and his dance.

Young Mallett stirred, passed a rather bony hand over his shaven upper lip, and said abruptly: "I never expected you'd grow up like this. You've turned into a different kind of girl. Once you were chubby of cheek and limb. Do you remember how you used to fight?"

"Did I?"

"Certainly. You hit me twice in the eye because I lost my temper sparring with Scott. Your hands were small but heavy in those days.... I imagine they're heavier now."

She laughed, clasped both pretty hands over her knee, and tilted back against the palm, regarding him from dark, velvety eyes.

"You were a curiously fascinating child," he said. "I remember how fast you could run, and how your hair flew—it was thick and dark, with rather sunny high lights; and you were always running —always on the go.... You were a remarkably just girl; that I remember. You were absolutely fair to everybody."

"I was a very horrid little scrub," she said, watching him over her gently waving fan, "with a dreadful temper," she added.

"Have you it now?"

"Yes. I get over it quickly. Do you find Scott very much changed?"

"Well, not as much as you. Do you find Naïda changed?"

"Not nearly as much as you."

They smiled. The slight embarrassment born of polite indifference brightened into amiable interest, tinctured by curiosity.

"Duane, have you been studying painting all these years?"

"Yes. What have you been doing all these years?"

"Nothing." A shadow fell across her face. "It has been lonely—until recently. I began to live yesterday."

"You used to tell me you were lonely," he nodded.

"I was. You and Naïda were godsends." Something of the old thrill stirred her recollection. She leaned forward, looking at him curiously; the old memory of him was already lending him something of the forgotten glamour.

"How tall you are!" she said; "how much thinner and—how very impressively grown-up you are, Duane. I didn't expect you to be entirely a man so soon—with such a—an odd—expression–"

He asked, smiling: "What kind of an expression have I, Geraldine?"

"Not a boyish one; entirely a man's eyes and mouth and voice—a little too wise, as though, deep inside, you were tired of something; no, not exactly that, but as though you had seen many things and had lived some of them–"

She checked herself, lips softly apart; and the memory of what she had heard concerning him returned to her.

Confused, she continued to laugh lightly, adding: "I believe I was afraid of you at first. Ought I to be, still? You know more than I do—you know different kinds of things: your face and voice and manner show it. I feel humble and ignorant in the presence of so distinguished a European artist."

They were laughing together now without a trace of constraint; and she was aware that his interest in her was unfeigned and unmistakably the interest of a man for a woman, that he was looking at her as other men had now begun to look at her, speaking as other men spoke, frankly interested in her as a woman, finding her agreeable to look at and talk to.

In the unawakened depths of her a conviction grew that her old playmate must be classed with other men—man in the abstract—that indefinite and interesting term, hinting of pleasures to come and possibilities unimagined.

"Did you paint pictures all the time you were abroad?" she asked.

"Not every minute. I travelled a lot, went about, was asked to shoot in England and Austria.... I had a good time."

"Didn't you work hard?"

"No. Isn't it disgraceful!"

"But you exhibited in three salons. What were your pictures?"

"I did a portrait of Lady Bylow and her ten children."

"Was it a success?"

He coloured. "They gave me a second medal."

"Oh, I am so glad!" she exclaimed warmly. "And what were your others?"

"A thing called 'The Witch.' Rather painful."

"What was it?"

"Life size. A young girl arrested in bed. Her frightened beauty is playing the deuce with the people around. I don't know why I did it—the painting of textures—her flesh, and the armour of the Puritan guard, the fur of the black cat—and—well, it was academic and I was young."

"Did they reward you?"

"No."

"What was the third picture?"

"Oh, just a girl," he said carelessly.

"Did they give you a prize for it?"

"Y-yes. Only a mention."

"Was it a portrait?"

"Yes—in a way."

"What was it? Just a girl?"

"Yes."

"Who was she?"

"Oh, just a girl–"

"Was she pretty?"

"Yes. Shall we dance this next–"

"No. Was she a model?"

"She posed–"

Geraldine, lips on the edge of her spread fan, regarded him curiously.

"That is a very romantic life, isn't it?" she murmured.

"What?"

"Yours. I don't know much about it; Kathleen took me to hear 'La Bohême'; and I found Murger's story in the library. I have also read 'Trilby.' Did *you*—were you—was life like that when you studied in the Latin Quarter?"

He laughed. "Not a bit. I never saw that species of life off the stage."

"Oh, wasn't there any romance?" she asked forlornly.

"Well—as much as you find in New York or anywhere."

"Is there any romance in New York?"

"There is anywhere, isn't there? If only one has the instinct to recognise it and a capacity to comprehend it."

"Of course," she murmured, "there are artists and studios and models and poverty everywhere.... I suppose that without poverty real romance is scarcely possible."

He was still laughing when he answered:

"Financial conditions make no difference. Romance is in one's self—or it is nowhere."

"Is it in—you?" she asked audaciously.

He made no pretence of restraining his mirth.

"Why, I don't know, Geraldine. Lots of people have the capacity for it. Poverty, art, a studio, a velvet jacket, and models are not essentials.... You ask if it is in *me*. I think it is. I think it exists in anybody who can glorify the commonplace. To make people look with astonished interest at something which has always been too familiar to arrest their attention—only your romancer can accomplish this."

"Please go on," she said as he ended. "I'm listening very hard. You *are* glorifying commonplaces, you know."

They both laughed; he, a little red, disconcerted, piqued, and withal charmed at her dainty thrust at himself.

"I *was* talking commonplaces," he admitted, "but how was I to know enough not to? Women are usually soulfully receptive when a painter opens a tin of mouldy axioms.... I didn't realise I was encountering my peer–"

"You may be encountering more than that," she said, the excitement of her success with him flushing her adorably.

"Oh, I've heard how terribly educated you and Scott are. No doubt you can floor me on anything intellectual. See here, Geraldine, it's simply wicked!—you are so soft and pretty, and nobody could suspect you of knowing such a lot and pouncing out on a fellow for trying a few predigested platitudes on you–"

"I *don't* know *anything*, Duane! How perfectly horrid of you!"

"Well, you've scared me!"

"I haven't. You're laughing at me. You know well enough that I don't know the things you know."

"What are they, in Heaven's name?"

"Things—experiences—matters that concern life—the world, men, everything!"

"You wouldn't be interesting if you knew such things," he said. She thought there was the same curious hint of indifference, something of listlessness, almost fatigue in the expression of his eyes. And again, apparently apropos of nothing, she found herself thinking of what Kathleen had said about this man.

"I don't understand you," she said, looking at him.

He smiled, and the ghost of a shadow passed from his eyes.

"I was talking at random."

"I don't think you were."

"Why not?"

She shook her head, drawing a long, quiet breath. Silent, lips resting in softly troubled curves, she thought of what Kathleen had said about this man. *What* had he done to disgrace himself?

A few moments later she rose with decision.

"Come," she said, unconsciously imperious.

He looked across the room and saw Dysart.

"But I haven't begun to tell you—" he began; and she interrupted smilingly:

"I know enough about you for a while; I have learned that you are a very wonderful young man and that I'm inclined to like you. You will come to see me, won't you?… No, I can't remain here another second. I want to go to Kathleen. I want you to ask her to dance, too.... Please don't urge me, Duane. I—this is my first dinner dance—yes, my very first. And I *don't* intend to sit in corners—I wish to dance; I desire to be happy. I want to see lots and lots of men, not just one.... You don't know all the lonely years I must make up for every minute now, or you wouldn't look at me in such a sulky, bullying way.... Besides—do you think I find you a compensation for all those delightful people out yonder?"

He glanced up and saw Dysart still watching them. Suddenly he dropped his hand over hers.

"Perhaps you may find that compensation in me some day," he said. "How do you know?"

"What a silly thing to say! Don't paw me, Duane; you hurt my hand. Look at what you've done to my fan!"

"It came between us. I'm sorry for anything that comes between us."

Both were smiling fixedly; he said nothing for a moment; their gaze endured until she flinched.

"Silly," she said, "you are trying to tyrannise over me as you did when we were children. I remember now–"

"*You* did the bullying then."

"Did I? Then I'll continue."

"No, you won't; it's my turn."

"I will if I care to!"

"Try it."

"Very well. Take me to Kathleen."

"Not until I have the dances I want!"

Again their eyes met in silence. Dark little lights glimmered in hers; his narrowed. The fixed smile died out.

"The dances *you* want!" she repeated. "How do you propose to secure them? By crushing my fingers or dragging me about by my hair? I want to tell you something, Duane: these blunt, masterful men are very amusing on the stage and in fiction, but they're not suitable to have tagging at heel–"

"I won't do any tagging at heel," he said; "don't count on it."

"I have no inclination to count on you at all," she retorted, thoroughly irritated.

"You will have it some day."

"Oh! Do you think so?"

"Yes.... I didn't mean to speak the way I did. Won't you give me a dance or two?"

"No. I had no idea how horrid you could be.... I was told you were.... Now I can believe it. Take me to Kathleen; do you hear me?"

After a step or two he said, not looking at her:

"I'm really sorry, Geraldine. I'm not a brute. Something about that fellow Dysart upset me."

"Please don't talk about it any more."

"No.... Only I *am* glad to see you again, and I do care for your regard."

"Then earn it," she said unevenly, as her anger subsided. "I don't know very much about men in the world, but I know enough to understand when they're offensive."

"Was I?"

"Yes.... Because you carried me away with a high hand, you thought it the easiest way to take with me on every occasion.... Duane, do you know, in some ways, we are somewhat alike? And that is why we used to fight so."

"I believe we are," he said slowly. "But—I was never able to keep away from you."

"Which makes our outlook rather stormy, doesn't it?" she said, turning to him with all of her old sweet friendly manner. "*Do* let us agree, Duane. Mercy on us! we ought to adore each other—unless we have forgotten the quarrelsome but adorable friendship of our childhood. *I* thought you were the perfection of all boys."

"I thought there was no girl to equal you, Geraldine."

She turned audaciously, not quite knowing what she was saying:

"Think so now, Duane! It will be good for us both."

"Do you mean it?"

"Not—seriously," she said.... "And, Duane, please don't be too serious with me. I am—you make me uncertain—you make me uncomfortable. I don't know just what to say to you or just how it will be taken. You mustn't be—that way—with *me*; you won't, will you?"

He was silent for a moment; then his face lighted up. "No," he said, laughing; "I'll open another can of platitudes.... You're a dear to forgive me."

Dancing had been general before the cotillion; débutantes continued to arrive in shoals from other dinners, a gay, rosy, eager throng, filling drawing-rooms, conservatory, and library with birdlike flutter and chatter, overflowing into the breakfast-room, banked up on the stairs in bright-eyed battalions.

The cotillion, led by Jack Dysart dancing alone, was one of those carefully thought out intellectual affairs which shakes New York society to its intellectual foundations.

In one figure Geraldine came whizzing into the room in a Palm Beach tricycle-chair trimmed with orchids and propelled by Peter Tappan; and from her seat amid the flowers she distributed favours—live white cockatoos, clinging, flapping, screeching on gilded wands; fans spangled with tiny electric jewels; parasols of pink silk set with incandescent lights; crystal cages containing great, pale-green Luna moths alive and fluttering; circus hoops of gilt filled with white tissue paper, through which the men jumped.

There was also a Totem-pole figure—and other things, including supper and champagne, and the semi-obscurity of conservatory and stairs; and there was the usual laughter to cover heart-aches, and the inevitable torn gowns and crushed flowers; and a number of young men talking too loud and too much in the cloak-room, and Rosalie Dysart admitting to Scott Seagrave in the conservatory that nobody really understood her; and Delancy Grandcourt edging about the outer borders of the flowery, perfumed vortex, following Geraldine and losing her a hundred times.

On one of these occasions she was captured by Duane Mallett and convoyed to the supper-room, where later she became utterly transfigured into a laughing, blushing, sparkling, delicious creature, small ears singing with her first venturesome glass of champagne.

All the world seemed laughing with her; life itself was only an endless bubble of laughter, swelling the gay, unending chorus; life was the hot breeze from scented fans stirring a thousand roses; life was the silken throng and its whirling and its feverish voices crying out to her to live!

Her childhood's playmate had come back a stranger, but already he was being transformed, through the magic of laughter, into the boy she remembered; awkwardness of readjusting her relations with him had entirely vanished; she called him dear Duane, laughed at him, chatted with him, appealed, contradicted, rebuked, tyrannised, until the young fellow was clean swept off his feet.

Then Dysart came, and for the second time the note of coquetry was struck, clearly, unmistakably, through the tension of a moment's preliminary silence; and Duane, dumb, furious, yielded her only when she took Dysart's arm with a finality that became almost insolent as she turned and looked back at her childhood's comrade, who followed, scowling at Dysart's graceful back.

Confused by his hurt and his anger, which seemed out of all logical proportion to the cause of it, he turned abruptly and collided with Grandcourt, who had edged up that far, waiting for the opportunity of which Dysart, as usual, robbed him.

Grandcourt apologised, muttering something about Mrs. Severn wishing him to find Miss Seagrave. He stood, awkwardly, looking after Geraldine and Dysart, but not offering to follow them.

"Lot of débutantes here—the whole year's output," he said vaguely. "What a noisy supper-room—eh, Mallett? I'm rather afraid champagne is responsible for some of it."

Duane started forward, halted.

"Did you say Mrs. Severn wants Miss Seagrave?"

"Y—yes.... I'd better go and tell her, hadn't I?"

He flushed heavily, but made no movement to follow Geraldine and Dysart, who had now entered the conservatory and disappeared.

For a full minute, uncomfortably silent, the two men stood side by side; then Duane said in a constrained voice:

"I'll speak to Miss Seagrave, if you'll find her brother and Mrs. Severn"; and walked slowly toward the palm-set rotunda.

When he found them—and he found them easily, for Geraldine's overexcited laughter warned and guided him—Dysart, her fan in his hands, looked up at Duane intensely annoyed, and the young girl tossed away a half-destroyed rose and glanced up, the laughter dying out from lips and eyes.

"Kathleen sent for you," said Duane drily.

"I'll come in a minute, Duane."

"In a moment," repeated Dysart insolently, and turned his back.

The colour surged into Mallett's face; he turned sharply on his heel.

"Wait!" said Geraldine; "Duane—do you hear me?"

"I'll take you back," began Dysart, but she passed in front of him and laid her hand on Mallett's arm.

"Won't you wait for me, Duane?"

And suddenly things seemed to be as they had been in their childhood, the resurgence swept them both back to the old and stormy footing again.

"Duane!"

"What?"

"I tell you to wait for me—*here*!" She stamped her foot.

He scowled—but waited. She turned on Dysart:

"Good-night!"—offering her hand with decision.

Dysart began: "But I had expected–"

"*Good-night!*"

Dysart stared, took the offered hand, hesitated, started to speak, thought better of it, made a characteristically graceful obeisance, and an excellent exit, all things considered.

Geraldine drew a deep breath, moved forward through the flower-set dimness a step or two, halted, and, as Mallett came up, passed her arm through his.

"Duane," she said, "the champagne has gone to my head."

"Nonsense!"

"It *has*! My cheeks are queer—the skin fits too tight. My legs don't belong to me—but they'll do."

She laughed and turned toward him; her feverish breath touched his cheek.

"My first dinner! Isn't it disgraceful? But how could I know?"

"You mustn't let it scare you."

"It doesn't. I don't care. I knew something would go wrong. I—the truth is, that I don't know how to act—how to accept my liberty. I don't know how to use it. I'm a perfect fool.... Do you think Kathleen will notice this? Isn't it terrible! She never dreamed I would touch any wine. Do I look—queer?"

"No. It isn't so, anyway—and you'll simply lean on me–"

"Oh, my knees are perfectly steady. It's only that they don't seem to belong to me. I'm—I'm excited—I've laughed too much—more than I have ever laughed in all the years of my life put together. You don't know what I mean, do you, Duane? But it's true; I've talked to-night more than I ever have in any one week.... And it's gone to my head—all this—all these people who laugh with me over nothing—follow me, tell me I am pretty, ask me for dances, favours, beg me for a word with them—as though I would need asking or urging!—as though my impulse is not to open my heart to every one of them—open my arms to them—thank them on my knees for being here—for being nice to me—all these boys who make little circles around me—so funny, so quaint in their formality–"

She pressed his arm tighter.

"*Let* me rattle on—let me babble, Duane. I've years of silence to make up for. Let me talk like a fool; *you* know I'm not one.... Oh, the happiness of this one night!—the happiness of it! I never shall have enough dancing, never enough of pleasure.... I—I'm perfectly mad over pleasure; I like men.... I suppose the champagne makes me frank about it—but I don't care—I do like men–"

"*That* one?" demanded Mallett, halting her on the edge of the palms which screened the conservatory doors.

"You mean Mr. Dysart? Yes—I—do like him."

"Well, he's married, and you'd better not," he snapped.

"C-can't I *like* him?" in piteous astonishment which set the colour flying into his face.

"Why, yes—of course—I didn't mean–"

"*What* did you mean? Isn't it—shouldn't he be–"

"Oh, it's all right, Geraldine. Only he's a sort of a pig to keep you away from—others–"

"Other—*pigs*?"

He turned sharply, seized her, and forcibly turned her toward the light. She made no effort to control her laughter, excusing it between breaths:

"I didn't mean to turn what you said into ridicule; it came out before I meant it.... Do let me laugh a little, Duane. I simply cannot care about anything serious for a while—I want to be frivolous–"

"Don't laugh so loud," he whispered.

She released his arm and sank down on a marble seat behind the flowering oleanders.

"Why are you so disagreeable?" she pouted. "I know I'm a perfect fool, and the champagne has gone to my silly head—and you'll never catch me this way again.... Don't scowl at me. Why don't you act like other men? Don't you know how?"

"Know how?" he repeated, looking down into the adorably flushed face uplifted. "Know how to do what?"

"To flirt. I don't. Everybody has tried to teach me to-night—everybody except you … Duane.... I'm ready to go home; I'll go. Only my head is whirling so—Tell me—*are* you glad to see me again? … Really?… And you don't mind my folly? And my tormenting you?… And my—my turning *your* head a little?"

"You've done *that*," he said, forcing a laugh.

"Have I?… I knew it.... You see, I am horridly truthful to-night. *In vino veritas!* … Tell me—did I, all by myself, turn that too-experienced head of yours?"

"You're doing it now," he said.

She laughed deliciously. "Now? Am I? Yes, I know I am. I've made a lot of men think hard to-night.... I didn't know I could; I never before thought of it.... And—even *you*, too?… You're not very serious, are you?"

"Yes, I am. I tell you, Geraldine, I'm about as much in love with you as–"

"In *love*!"

"Yes–"

"No!"

"Yes, I am–"

But she would not have it put so crudely.

"You dear boy," she said, "we'll both be quite sane to-morrow.... No, I don't mind your kissing my hand—I'm dreadfully tired, anyway.... We'll find Kathleen, shall we? My head doesn't buzz much."

"Geraldine," he said, deliberately encircling her waist, "you are only the same small girl I used to know, after all."

"Y-yes, I'm afraid so."

"And you're not really old enough to really care for anybody, are you?"

"Care?"

"Love."

"No, I'm not. Don't talk to me that way, Duane."

He drew her suddenly into his arms and kissed her on the cheek twice, and again on the mouth, as, crimson, breathless, she strained away from him.

"Duane!" she gasped—"why did you?" Then the throbbing of her body and crushed lips made her furious. "Why did you do that?" she cried fiercely—but her voice ended in a dry sob; she covered her head and face with bare arms; her hands tightened convulsively and clenched.

"Oh," she said, "how could you!—when I came to you—feeling—afraid of myself! I know you now. You are what they say you are."

"What do they say I am?" he stammered.

"Horrid—I don't know—wild!—whatever that implies.... I didn't care—I didn't care even to understand, because I thought you generous and nice to me—and I was so confident of you that I came with you and told you I had had some champagne which made my head swim.... And you—did this! It—it was contemptible."

He bit his lip, but said nothing.

"Why did you do it?" she demanded, dropping her arms from her face and staring at him. "Is that the sort of thing you did abroad?"

"Can't you see I'm in love with you?" he said.

"Oh! Is *that* love? Then keep it for your models and—and Bohemian grisettes! A decent man couldn't have done such a thing to me. I—I loathe myself for being silly and weak enough to have touched that wine, but I have more contempt for you than I have for myself. What you did was cowardly!"

Much of the colour had fled from her face; her eyes, bluish underneath the lower lids, turned wearily, helplessly in search of Kathleen.

"I knew I was unfit for liberty," she said, half to herself. "What an ending to my first pleasure!"

"For Heaven's sake, Geraldine," he broke out, "don't take an accident so tragically–"

"I want Kathleen. Do you hear?"

"Very well; I'll find her.... And, whatever you say or think, I *am* in love with you," he added fiercely.

His voice, his words, were meaningless; she was conscious only of the heavy pulse in throat and temple, of the desire for her room and darkness. Lights, music, the scent of dying flowers, laughter, men, all had become abhorrent. Something within her lay bruised and stunned; and, as never before, the vast and terrible phantom of her loneliness rose like a nightmare to menace her.

Later Kathleen came and took her away.

CHAPTER IV
THE YEAR OF DISCRETION

Her first winter resembled, more or less, the first winter of the average débutante.

Under the roof of the metropolitan social temple there was a niche into which her forefathers had fitted. Within the confines of this she expected, and was expected, to live and move and have her being, and ultimately wing upward to her God, leaving the consecrated cubby-hole reserved for her descendants.

She did what her sister débutantes did, and some things they did not do, was asked where they were asked, decorated the same tier of boxes at the opera, appeared in the same short-skirted entertainments of the Junior League, saw what they saw, was seen where they were seen, chattered, danced, and flirted with the same youths, was smitten by the popular "dancing" man, convalesced in average time, smoked her first cigarette, fell a victim to the handsome and horrid married destroyer, recovered with a shock when, as usual, he overdid it, played at being engaged, was kissed once or twice, adored Sembrich, listened ignorantly but with intuitive shudders to her first scandals, sent flowers to Ethel Barrymore, kept Lent with the pure fervour of a conscience troubled and untainted, drove four in the coaching parade, and lunched afterward at the Commonwealth Club, where her name was subsequently put up for election.

Spectacular charities lured her from the Plaza to Sherry's, from Sherry's to the St. Regis; church work beguiled her; women's suffrage, led daintily in a series of circles by Fashion and Wealth, enlisted her passive patronage. She even tried the slums, but the perfume was too much for her.

All the small talk and epigrams of the various petty impinging circles under the social dome passed into and out of her small ears—gossip, epigrams, aphorisms, rumours, apropos surmises, asides, and off-stage observations, subtle with double entendre, harmless and otherwise.

She met people of fashion, of wealth, and both; and now and then encountered one or two of those men and women of real distinction whose names and peregrinations are seldom chronicled in the papers.

She heard the great artists of the two operas sing in private; was regaled with information concerning the remarkable decency or indecency of their private careers. She saw fashionable plays which instructed the public about squalor, murder, and men's mistresses, which dissected very skilfully and artistically the ethics of moral degradation. And being as healthy and curious as the average girl, she found in the theatres material with which to inform herself about certain occult mysteries concerning which, heretofore, she had been left mercifully in doubt.

In spite of Kathleen, it was inevitable that she should acquire from the fashionable in literature, music, and the drama, that sorry and unnecessary wisdom which ages souls.

And if what she saw or heard ever puzzled her, there was always somebody, young or old, to enlighten her innocent perplexity; and with each illumination she shrank a little less aloof from this shabby wisdom gilded with "art," which she could not choose but accept as fact, but the depravity of which she never was entirely able to comprehend.

In March the Seagrave twins arrived at the alleged age of discretion. On their twenty-first birthday the Half Moon Trust Company went solemnly into court and rendered an accounting of its stewardship; the yearly reports which it had made during the term of its trusteeship were brought forward, examined by the court, and the great Half Moon Trust Company was given an honourable discharge. It had done its duty. The twins were masters of their financial and moral fate.

It was about that moribund period of the social solstice when the fag end of the season had fizzled out like a wet firecracker in the April rains; and Geraldine and Kathleen were tired, mentally

and bodily. And Scott was buying polo ponies from a British friend and shotguns from a needy gentleman from Long Island.

It had been rather trying work to rid Geraldine of the aspirants for her fortune; during the winter she was proposed to under almost every conceivable condition and circumstance. Kathleen had been bored and badgered and bothered and importuned to the verge of exhaustion; Scott was used, shamelessly, without his suspecting it, and he generally had in tow a string of financially spavined aspirants who linked arms with him from club to club, from theatre to opera, from grille to grille, until he was pleasantly bewildered at his own popularity.

Geraldine was surprised, confused, shamed, irritated in turn with every new importunity. But she remained sensible enough to be quite frank and truthful with Kathleen, except for an exciting secret engagement with Bunbury Gray which lasted for two weeks. And Kathleen was given strength sufficient for each case as it presented itself; and now the fag end of the season died out; the last noble and indigent foreigner had been eluded; the last old beau foiled; the last squab-headed dancing man successfully circumvented. And now the gallinaceous half of the world was leaving town in noisy and glittering migration, headed for temporary roosts all over the globe, from Newport to Nova Scotia, from Kineo to Kara Dagh.

Country houses were opening throughout the Western Hemisphere; Long Island stirred from its long winter lethargy, stung into active life by the Oyster Bay mosquito; town houses closed; terrace, pillar, portico, and windows were already being boarded over; lace curtains came down; textiles went to the cleaners; the fresh scent of camphor and lavender lingered in the mellow half-light of rooms where furniture and pictures loomed linen-shrouded and the polished floor echoed every footstep.

In the sunny gloom of the Seagrave house Geraldine found a grateful retreat from the inspiring glare and confused racket of her first winter; ample time for rest, reverie, and reflection, with only a few intimates to break her meditations, only informality to reckon with, and plenty of leisure to plan for the summer.

Around the house, trees and rhododendrons were now in freshest bloom, flower-beds fragrant, grass tenderly emerald. The moving shadows of maple leaves patterned the white walls of her bedroom; wind-blown gusts of wistaria fragrance, from the long, grapelike, violet-tinted bunches swaying outside the window, puffed out her curtains every morning.

At night subtler perfumes stole upward from the dark garden; the roar of traffic from the avenues was softened; carriage lights in the purpling dusk of the Park moved like firebugs drifting through level wooded vistas. Across the reservoir lakes the jewelled night-zone of the West Side sparkled, reflected across the water in points of trembling flame; south, a gemmed bar of topaz light, upright against the sky, marked the Plaza; beyond, sprinkled into space like constellations dusting endless depths, the lights of the city receded far as the eye could see.

In the zenith the sky is always tinted with the strange, sinister night-glow of the metropolis, red as fire-licked smoke when fog from the bay settles, pallid as the very shadow of light when nights are clear; but it is always there—always will be there after the sun goes down into the western seas, and the eyes of the monstrous iron city burn on through the centuries.

One morning late in April Geraldine Seagrave rode up under the porte-cochère with her groom, dismounted, patted her horse sympathetically, and regarded with concern the limping animal as the groom led him away to the stables. Then she went upstairs.

To Kathleen, who was preparing to go out, she said:

"I had scarcely entered the Park, my dear, when poor Bibi pulled up lame. No, I told Redmond not to saddle another; I suppose Duane will be furious. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Shall I wait for you? I've ordered a victoria."

"No, thanks. You look so pretty this morning, Kathleen. Sometimes you appear younger than I do. Scott was pig enough to say so the other day when I had a headache. It's true enough, too," she added, smiling.

Kathleen Severn laughed; she looked scarcely more than twenty-five and she knew it.

"You pretty thing!" exclaimed Geraldine, kissing her, "no wonder you attract the really interesting men and leave me the dreadful fledglings! It's bad of you; and I don't see why I'm stupid enough to have such an attractive woman for my closest"—a kiss—"dearest friend! Even Duane is villain enough to tell me that he finds you overwhelmingly attractive. Did you know it?"

Geraldine's careless gaiety seemed spontaneous enough; yet there was the slightest constraint in Kathleen's responsive smile:

"Duane isn't to be taken seriously," she said.

"Not by any means," nodded Geraldine, twirling her crop.

"I'm glad you understand him," observed Kathleen, gazing at the point of her sunshade. She looked up presently and met Geraldine's dark gaze. Again there came that almost imperceptible hesitation; then:

"I certainly do understand Duane Mallett," said Geraldine carelessly.

"Shall I wait for you?" asked Kathleen. "We can lunch out together and drive in the Park later."

"I'm too lazy even to take off my boots and habit. Where's that volume of Mendez you thought fit to hide from me, you wretch?"

"Why on earth did you buy it?"

"I bought it because Rosalie Dysart says Mendez is a great modern master of prose–"

"And Rosalie is a great modern mistress of pose. Don't read Mendez."

"Isn't it necessary for a girl to read–"

"No, it isn't!"

"I don't want to be ignorant. Besides, I'm—curious to know–"

"Be decently curious, dearest. There's a danger mark; don't cross it."

"I don't wish to."

She stretched out her arms, crop in hand, doubled them back, and head tipped on one side, yawned shamelessly at her own laziness.

"Scott is becoming very restless," she said.

"About going away?"

"Yes. I really do think, Kathleen, that we ought to have some respectable country place to go to. It would be nice for Scott and the servants and the horses; and you and I need not stay there if it bores us–"

"Is he still thinking of that Roya-Neh place? It's horridly expensive to keep up. Oh, I knew quite well that Scott would bully you into consenting–"

"Roya-Neh seems to suit us both," admitted the girl indifferently. "The shooting and fishing naturally attract Scott; they say it's secluded enough for you and me to recuperate in; and if we ever want any guests, it's big enough to entertain dozens in.... I really don't care one way or the other; you know I never was very crazy about the country—and poison ivy, and mosquitoes and oil-smelling roads, and hot nights, and the perfume of fertilisers–"

"You poor child!" laughed Kathleen; "you don't know anything about the country except where you've been on Long Island in the immediate vicinity of your grandfather's horrid old place."

"Is it any more agreeable up there near Canada?"

"Roya-Neh is very lovely—of course—but—it's certainly not a wise investment, dear."

"Well, if Scott and I buy it, we'd never wish to sell it–"

"Suppose you were obliged to?"

Geraldine's velvet eyes widened lazily:

"Obliged to? Oh—yes—you mean if we went to smash."

Then her gaze became remote as she stood slowly tapping her gloved palm with her riding-crop.

"I think I'll dress," she said absently.

"Good-bye, then," nodded Kathleen.

"Good-bye," said the girl, turning lightly away across the hall. Kathleen's eyes followed the slender retreating figure, so slimly compact in its buoyancy. There was always something fascinatingly boyish in Geraldine's light, free carriage—just a touch of carelessness in the poise—almost a swing at times to the step. Duane had once said: "She has a bully walk!" Kathleen thought of it as, passing a mirror, she caught sight of herself. And the sudden glimpse of her own warm, rich beauty in all its exquisite maturity startled her. Surely she seemed to be growing younger.

She was. Dark-violet eyes, ruddy hair, a superb figure, a skin so white that it looked fragrant, made Kathleen Severn amazingly attractive. Men found her, to their surprise, rather unresponsive. She was amiable enough, nicely formal, and perfectly bred, it is true, but inclined to that sort of aloofness which is marked by lapses of inattention and the smiling silences of preoccupation.

She had married, very young, an army officer convalescing from Texan fever. He died suddenly on the very eve of their postponed wedding-trip. This was enough to account for lapses of inattention in any woman.

But Kathleen Severn had never been demonstrative. She was slow to care for people. Besides, the responsibility of bringing up the Seagrave twins had been sufficient to subdue anybody's spirits. She was only nineteen and a widow of a month when her distant relative, Magnelius Grandcourt, found her the position as personal guardian of the twins, then aged nine. Now they were twenty-one and she thirty-one; twelve years of service, twelve years of steady fidelity, which long ago had become a changeless and passionate devotion, made up of all she might have given to the dead, and of the unborn happiness she had never known. What other sort of love, if there was any, lay within her undeveloped, nobody knew because nobody had ever aroused it.

Sunshine transformed into great golden transparencies the lowered shades in the living room where Geraldine stood, pensive, distraite, idly twirling her crop by the loop. Presently it flew off her gloved forefinger and fell clattering across the carpetless floor. She bathed and dressed leisurely; later, when luncheon was brought to her, she dropped into a low, wide chair and, ignoring everything except the strawberries, turned her face to the breeze which was softly rattling the southern curtains.

Errant thoughts, light as summer fleece, drifted across her mind. Often, in such moments, she strove to realise that she was now mistress of herself; but never could completely.

"For example: if I want to buy Roya-Neh," she mused, biting into an enormous strawberry, "I can do it.... All I have to do is to say that I'll buy it.... And I can live there if I choose—as long as I choose.... It's a very agreeable sensation.... I can have anything I fancy, without asking Mr. Tappan.... It's rather odd that I don't want anything."

She crossed her ankles and lay back watching the sun-moats floating.

"Suppose," she murmured with perverse humour, "that I wished to build a bungalow in Timbuctoo … or stand on my head, now, this very moment! Nobody on earth could stop me.... I believe I *will* stand on my head for a change."

The sudden smile made the curve of her cheek delicious. She sprang to her feet, spread her napkin on the polished floor, then gravely bending double, placed both palms flat on the square of damask, balanced and raised her body until the straight, slim limbs were rigidly pointed toward heaven.

Down tumbled her hair; her cheeks crimsoned; then dainty as a lithe and spangled athlete, she turned clean over in the air, landing lightly on both feet breathing fast.

"It's disgraceful!" she murmured; "I am certainly out of condition. Late hours are my undoing. Also cigarettes. I wish I didn't like to smoke."

She lighted one and strolled about the room, knotting up her dark hair, heels clicking sharply over the bare, polished floor.

Lacking a hair-peg, she sauntered off to her own apartments to find one, where she remained, lolling in the chaise-longue, alternately blowing smoke rings into the sunshine and nibbling a bonbon soaked in cologne. Only a girl can accomplish such combinations. How she ever began this silly

custom of hers she couldn't remember, except that, when a small child, somebody had forbidden her to taste brandied peach syrup, which she adored; and the odour of cologne being similarly pleasant, she had tried it on her palate and found that it produced agreeable sensations.

It had become a habit. She was conscious of it, but remained indifferent because she didn't know anything about habits.

So all that sunny afternoon she lay in the chaise-longue, alternately reading and dreaming, her scented bonbons at her elbow. Later a maid brought tea; and a little later Duane Mallett was announced. He sauntered in, a loosely knit, graceful figure, still wearing his riding-clothes and dusty boots of the morning.

Geraldine Seagrave had had time enough to discover, during the past winter, that her old playfellow was not at all the kind of man he appeared to be. Women liked him too easily and he liked them without effort. There was always some girl in love with him until he was found kissing another. His tastes were amiably catholic; his caress instinctively casual. Beauty when responsive touched him. No girl he knew needed to remain unconsoled.

The majority of women liked him; so did Geraldine Seagrave. The majority instinctively watched him; so did she. In close acquaintance the man was a disappointment. It seemed as though there ought to be something deeper in him than the lightly humourous mockery with which he seemed to regard his very great talent—a flippancy that veiled always what he said and did and thought until nobody could clearly understand what he really thought about anything; and some people doubted that he thought at all—particularly the thoughtless whom he had carelessly consoled.

Women were never entirely indifferent concerning him; there remained always a certain amount of curiosity, whether they found him attractive or otherwise.

His humourous indifference to public opinions, bordering on effrontery, was not entirely unattractive to women, but it always, sooner or later, aroused their distrust.

The main trouble with Duane Mallett seemed to be his gaily cynical willingness to respond to any advance, however slight, that any pretty woman offered. This responsive partiality was disconcerting enough to make him dreaded by ambitious mothers, and an object of uneasy interest to their decorative offspring who were inclined to believe that a rescue party of one might bring this derelict into port and render him seaworthy for the voyage of life under their own particular command.

Besides, he was a painter. Women like them when they are carefully washed and clothed.

As Duane Mallett strolled into the living-room, Geraldine felt again, as she so often did, a slight sense of insecurity mingle with her liking for the man, or what might have been liking if she could ever feel absolute confidence in him. She had been, at times, very close to caring a great deal for him, when now and again it flashed over her that there must be in him something serious under his brilliant talent and the idle perversity which mocked at it.

But now she recognised in his smile and manner everything that kept her from ever caring to understand him—the old sense of insecurity in his ironical formality; and her outstretched hand fell away from his with indifference.

"I didn't have the happiness of riding with you, after all," he said, serenely seating himself and dropping one lank knee over the other. "Promises wouldn't be valuable unless somebody broke a lot now and then."

"You probably had the happiness of riding with some other woman."

He nodded.

"Who, this time?"

"Rosalie Dysart."

Rumour had been busy with their names recently. The girl's face became expressionless.

"Sorry you didn't come," he said, looking out of the window where the flapping shade revealed a lilac in bloom.

"How long did you wait for me?"

"About a minute. Then Rosalie passed–"

"Rosalies will always continue to pass through your career, my omnivorous friend.... Did it even occur to you to ride over here and find out why I missed our appointment?"

"No; why didn't you come?"

"Bibi went lame. I'd have had another horse saddled if I hadn't seen you, over my shoulder, join Mrs. Dysart."

"Too bad," he commented listlessly.

"Why? You had a perfectly good time without me, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, pretty good. Delancy Grandcourt was out after luncheon, and when Rosalie left he stuck to me and talked about you until I let my horse bolt, and it stirred up a few mounted policemen and riding-schools, I can tell you!"

"Oh, so you lunched with Mrs. Dysart?"

"Yes. Where is Kathleen?"

"Driving," said the girl briefly. "If you don't care for any tea, there is mineral water and a decanter over there."

He thanked her, rose and mixed himself what he wanted, and began to walk leisurely about, the ice tinkling in the glass which he held. At intervals he quenched his thirst, then resumed his aimless promenade, a slight smile on his face.

"Has anything particularly interesting happened to you, Duane?" she asked, and somehow thought of Rosalie Dysart.

"No."

"How are your pictures coming on?"

"The portrait?" he asked absently.

"Portrait? I thought all the very grand ladies you paint had left town. Whose portrait are you painting?"

Before he answered, before he even hesitated, she knew.

"Rosalie Dysart's," he said, gazing absently at the lilac-bush in flower as the wind-blown curtain revealed it for a moment.

She lifted her dark eyes curiously. He began to stir the ice in his glass with a silver paper-cutter.

"She is wonderfully beautiful, isn't she?" said the girl.

"Overwhelmingly."

Geraldine shrugged and gazed into space. She didn't exactly know why she had given that little hitch to her shoulders.

"I'd like to paint Kathleen," he observed.

A flush tinted the girl's cheeks. She said nervously:

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I've meant to. Somehow, one doesn't ask things lightly of Kathleen."

"One doesn't ask things of some women at all," she remarked.

He looked up; she was examining her empty teacup with fixed interest.

"Ask what sort of thing?" he inquired, walking over to the table and resting his glass on it.

"Oh, I don't know what I meant. Nothing. What is that in your glass? Let me taste it.... Ugh! It's Scotch!"

She set back the glass with a shudder. After a few moments she picked it up again and tasted it disdainfully.

"Do you like this?" she demanded with youthful contempt.

"Pretty well," he admitted.

"It tastes something like brandied peaches, doesn't it?"

"I never noticed that it did."

And as he remained smilingly aloof and silent, at intervals, tentatively, uncertain whether or not she exactly cared for it, she tasted the iced contents of the tall, frosty glass and watched him where he sat loosely at ease flicking at sun-moats with the loop of his riding-crop.

"I'd like to see a typical studio," she said reflectively.

"I've asked you to mine often enough."

"Yes, to tea with other people. I don't mean that way. I'd like to see it when it's not all dusted and in order for feminine inspection. I'd like to see a man's studio when it's in shape for work—with the gr-r-reat painter in a fine frenzy painting, and the model posing madly–"

"Come on, then! If Kathleen lets you, and you can stand it, come down and knock some day unexpectedly."

"O Duane! I *couldn't*, could I?"

"Not with propriety. But come ahead."

"Naturally, impropriety appeals to you."

"Naturally. To you, too, doesn't it?"

"No. But wouldn't it astonish you if you heard a low, timid knocking some day when you and your Bohemian friends were carousing and having a riotous time there–"

"Yes, it would, but I'm afraid that low, timid knocking couldn't be heard in the infernal uproar of our usual revelry."

"Then I'd knock louder and louder, and perhaps kick once or twice if you didn't come to the door and let me in."

He laughed. After a moment she laughed, too; her dark eyes were very friendly now. Watching the amusement in his face, she continued to sip from his tall, frosted glass, quite unconscious of any distaste for it. On the contrary, she experienced a slight exhilaration which was gradually becoming delightful to her.

"Scotch-and-soda is rather nice, after all," she observed. "I had no idea—*What* is the matter with you, Duane?"

"You haven't swallowed all that, have you?"

"Yes, is it much?"

He stared, then with a shrug: "You'd better cut out that sort of thing."

"What?" she asked, surprised.

"What you're doing."

"Tasting your Scotch? Pooh!" she said, "it isn't strong. Do you think I'm a baby?"

"Go ahead," he said, "it's your funeral."

Legs crossed, chin resting on the butt of his riding-crop, he lay back in his chair watching her.

Women of her particular type had always fascinated him; Fifth Avenue is thronged with them in sunny winter mornings—tall, slender, faultlessly gowned girls, free-limbed, narrow of wrist and foot; cleanly built, engaging, fearless-eyed; and Geraldine was one of a type characteristic of that city and of the sunny Avenue where there pass more beautiful women on a December morning than one can see abroad in half a dozen years' residence.

How on earth this hemisphere has managed to evolve them out of its original material nobody can explain. And young Mallett, recently from the older hemisphere, was still in a happy trance of surprise at the discovery.

Lounging there, watching her where she sat warmly illumined by the golden light of the window-shade, he said lazily:

"Do you know that Fifth Avenue is always thronged with you, Geraldine? I've nearly twisted my head off trying not to miss the assorted visions of you which float past afoot or driving. Some day one of them will unbalance me. I'll leap into her victoria, ask her if she'd mind the temporary inconvenience of being adored by a stranger; and if she's a good sport she'll take a chance. Don't you think so?"

"It's more than I'd take with you," said the girl.

"You've said that several times."

He laughed, then looked up at her half humorously, half curiously.

"*You* would be taking no chances, Geraldine."

"I'd be taking chances of finding you holding some other girl's hands within twenty-four hours. And you know it."

"Hasn't anybody ever held yours?"

Displeasure tinted her cheeks a deeper red, but she merely shrugged her shoulders.

It was true that in the one evanescent and secret affair of her first winter she had not escaped the calf-like transports of Bunbury Gray. She had felt, if she had not returned them, the furtively significant pressure of men's hands in the gaiety and whirl of things; ardent and chuckle-headed youth had declared itself in conservatories and in corners; one impetuous mauling from a smitten Harvard boy of eighteen had left her furiously vexed with herself for her passive attitude while the tempest passed. True, she had vigorously reproved him later. She had, alas, occasion, during her first season, to reprove several demonstrative young men for their unconventionally athletic manner of declaring their suits. She had been far more severe with the humble, unattractive, and immobile, however, than with the audacious and ornamental who had attempted to take her by storm. A sudden if awkward kiss followed by the fiery declaration of the hot-headed disturbed her less than the persistent stare of an enamoured pair of eyes. As a child the description of an assault on a citadel always interested her, but she had neither sympathy nor interest in a siege.

Now, musing there in the sunlight on the events of her first winter, she became aware that she had been more or less instructed in the ways of men; and, remembering, she lifted her disturbed eyes to inspect this specimen of a sex which often perplexed but always interested her.

"What are you smiling about, Duane?" she asked defiantly.

"Your arraignment of me when half the men in town have been trying to marry you all winter. You've made a reputation for yourself, too, Geraldine."

"As what?" she asked angrily.

"A head-twister."

"Do you mean a flirt?"

"Oh, Lord! Only the French use that term now. But that's the idea, Geraldine. You are a born one. I fell for the first smile you let loose on me."

"You seem to have been a sort of general Humpty Dumpty for falls all your life, Duane," she said with dangerous sweetness.

"Like that immortal, I've had only one which permanently shattered me."

"Which was that, if you please?"

"The fall you took out of me."

"In other words," she said disdainfully, "you are beginning to make love to me again."

"No.... I *was* in love with you."

"You were in love with yourself, young man. You are on such excellent terms with yourself that you sympathise too ardently with any attractive woman who takes the least and most innocent notice of you."

He said, very much amused: "I was perfectly serious over you, Geraldine."

"The selfish always take themselves seriously."

It was she, however, who now sat there bright-eyed and unsmiling, and he was still laughing, deftly balancing his crop on one finger, and glancing at her from time to time with that glimmer of ever-latent mockery which always made her restive at first, then irritated her with an unreasoning desire to hurt him somehow. But she never seemed able to reach him.

"Sooner or later," she said, "women will find you out, thoroughly."

"And then, just think what a rush there will be to marry me!"

"There will be a rush to avoid you, Duane. And it will set in before you know it—" She thought of the recent gossip coupling his name with Rosalie's, reddened and bit her lip in silence. But somehow the thought irritated her into speech again:

"Fortunately, I was among the first to find you out—the first, I think."

"Heavens! when was that?" he asked in pretended concern, which infuriated her.

"You had better not ask me," she flashed back. "When a woman suddenly discovers that a man is untrustworthy, do you think she ever forgets it?"

"Because I once kissed you? What a dreadful deed!"

"You forget the circumstances under which you did it."

He flushed; she had managed to hurt him, after all. He began patiently:

"I've explained to you a dozen times that I didn't know–"

"But I *told* you!"

"And I couldn't believe you–"

"But you expect me to believe *you*?"

He could not exactly interpret her bright, smiling, steady gaze.

"The trouble with you is," she said, "that there is nothing to you but good looks and talent. There was once, but it died—over in Europe—somewhere. No woman trusts a man like you. Don't you know it?"

His smile did not seem to be very genuine, but he answered lightly:

"When I ask people to have confidence in me, it will be time for them to pitch into me."

"Didn't you once ask me for your confidence—and then abuse it?" she demanded.

"I told you I loved you—if that is what you mean. And you doubted it so strenuously that, perhaps I might be excused for doubting it myself.... What is the use of talking this way, Geraldine?"

There was a ring of exasperation in her laughter. She lifted his glass, sipped a little, and, looking over it at him:

"I drink to our doubts concerning each other: may nothing ever occur to disturb them."

Her cheeks had begun to burn, her eyes were too bright, her voice unmodulated.

"Whether or not you ever again take the trouble to ask me to trust you in that way," she said, "I'll tell you now why I don't and why I never could. It may amuse you. Shall I?"

"By all means," he replied amiably; "but it seems to me as though you are rather rough on me."

"You were rougher with me the first time I saw you, after all those years. I met you with perfect confidence, remembering what you once were. It was my first grown-up party. I was only a fool of a girl, merely ignorant, unfit to be trusted with a liberty I'd never before had.... And I took one glass of champagne and it—you know what it did.... And I was bewildered and frightened, and I told you; and—you perhaps remember how my confidence in my old play-fellow was requited. Do you?"

Reckless impulse urged her on. Heart and pulses were beating very fast with a persistent desire to hurt him. Her animation, brilliant colour, her laughter seemed to wing every word like an arrow. She knew he shrank from what she was saying, in spite of his polite attention, and her fresh, curved cheek and parted lips took on a brighter tint. Something was singing, seething in her veins. She lifted her glass, set it down, and suddenly pushed it from her so violently that it fell with a crash. A wave of tingling heat mounted to her face, receded, swept back again. Confused, she straightened up in her chair, breathing fast. *What* was coming over her? Again the wave surged back with a deafening rush; her senses struggled, the blood in her ran riot. Then terror clutched her. Neither lips nor tongue were very flexible when she spoke.

"Duane—if you don't mind—would you go away now? I've a wretched headache."

He shrugged and stood up.

"It's curious," he said reflectively, "how utterly determined we seem to be to misunderstand each other. If you would give me half a chance—well—never mind."

"I wish you would go," she murmured, "I really am not well." She could scarcely hear her own voice amid the deafening tumult of her pulses. Fright stiffened the fixed smile on her lips. Her plight paralysed her for a moment.

"Yes, I'll go," he answered, smiling. "I usually am going somewhere—most of the time."

He picked up hat, gloves, and crop, looked down at her, came and stood at the table, resting one hand on the edge.

"We're pretty young yet, Geraldine.... I never saw a girl I cared for as I might have cared for you. It's true, no matter what I have done, or may do.... But you're quite right, a man of that sort isn't to be considered"—he laughed and pulled on one glove—"only—I knew as soon as I saw you that it was to be you or—everybody. First, it was anybody; then it was you—now it's everybody. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she managed to say. The dizzy waves swayed her; she rested her cheeks between both hands and, leaning there heavily, closed her eyes to fight against it. She had been seated on the side of a lounge; and now, feeling blindly behind her, she moved the cushions aside, turned and dropped among them, burying her blazing face. Over her the scorching vertigo swept, subsided, rose, and swept again. Oh, the horror of it!—the shame, the agonised surprise. What was this dreadful thing that, for the second time, she had unwittingly done? And this time it was so much more terrible. How could such an accident have happened to her? How could she face her own soul in the disgrace of it?

Fear, loathing, frightened incredulity that this could really be herself, stiffened her body and clinched her hands under her parted lips. On them her hot breath fell irregularly.

Rigid, motionless, she lay, breathing faster and more feverishly. Tears came after a long while, and with them relaxation and lassitude. She felt that the dreadful thing which had seized and held her was letting go its hold, was freeing her body and mind; and as it slowly released her and passed on its terrible silent way, she awoke and sat up with a frightened cry—to find herself lying on her own bed in utter darkness.

A moment later her bedroom door opened without a sound and the light from the hall streamed over Kathleen's bare shoulders and braided hair.

"Geraldine?"

The girl scarcely recognised Kathleen's altered voice. She lay listening, silent, motionless, staring at the white figure.

"Dearest, I thought you called me. May I come in?"

"I am not well."

But Kathleen entered and stood beside the bed, looking down at her in the dim light.

"Dearest," she began tremulously, "Duane told me you had a headache and had gone to your room to lie down, so I didn't disturb you–"

"Duane," faltered the girl, "is he here? What did he say?"

"He was in the library before dinner when I came in, and he warned me not to waken you. Do you know what time it is?"

"No."

"It is after midnight.... If you feel ill enough to lie here, you ought to be undressed. May I help you?"

There was no answer. For a moment Kathleen stood looking down at the girl in silence; then a sudden shivering seized her; she strove to control it, but her knees seemed to give way under it and she dropped down beside the bed, throwing both arms around Geraldine's neck.

"Oh, don't, *don't*!" she whimpered. "It is too terrible! It ruined your father and your grandfather! Darling, I couldn't bear to tell you this before, but now I've got to tell you! It is in your blood. Seagraves die of it! Do you understand?"

"W-what?" stammered the girl.

"That all their lives they did what—what you have done to-day—that you have inherited their terrible inclinations. Even as a little child you frightened me. Have you forgotten what you and I talked over and cried over after your first party?"

The girl said slowly: "I don't know how—it—happened, Kathleen. Duane came in.... I tasted what he had in his glass.... I don't know why I did it. I wish I were dead!"

"There is only one thing to do—never to touch anything—anything–"

"Y-yes, I know that I must not. But how was I to know before? Will you tell me?"

"You understand *now*, thank God!"

"N-not exactly.... Other girls seem to do as they please without danger.... It is amazing that such a horrible thing should happen to me–"

"It is a shameful thing that it should happen to any woman. And the horror of it is that almost every hostess in town lets girls of your age run the risk. Darling, don't you know that the only chance a woman has with the world is in her self-control? When that goes, her chances go, every one of them! Dear—we have latent in us much the same vices that men have. We have within us the same possibilities of temptations, the same capacity for excesses, the same capabilities for resistance. Because you are a girl, you are not immune from unworthy desires."

"I know it. The—the dreadful thing about it is that I do desire such things. Perhaps I had better not even nibble sugar scented with cologne–"

"Do you do *that*?" faltered Kathleen.

"I did not know there was any danger in it," sobbed the girl. "You have scared me terribly, Kathleen."

"Is that true about the cologne?"

"Y-yes."

"You don't do it now, do you?"

"Yes."

"You don't do it every day, do you?"

"Yes, several times."

"How long"—Kathleen's lips almost refused to move—"how long have you done this?"

"For a long time. I've been ashamed of it. It's—it's the alcohol in it that I like, isn't it? I never thought of it in that way till now."

Kathleen, on her knees by the bedside, was crying silently. The girl slipped from her arms, turned partly over, and lying on her back, stared upward through the darkness.

So this was the secret reason that, unsuspected, had long been stirring her to instinctive uneasiness, which had made her half ashamed, half impatient with this silly habit which already inconvenienced her. Yet even now she could not feel any real alarm; she could not understand that the fangs of a habit can poison when plucked out. Of course there was now only one thing to do—keep aloof from everything. That would be easy. The tingling warmth of the perfume was certainly agreeable, but she must not risk even such a silly indulgence as that. Really, it was a very simple matter. She sat up, supporting her weight on one arm.

"Kathleen, darling," she whispered, bending forward and drawing the elder woman up onto the bed, "you mustn't be frightened about me. I've learned some things I didn't know. Do you think Duane—" In the darkness the blood scorched her face, the humiliation almost crushed her. But she went on: "Do you think Duane suspects that—that–"

"I don't think Duane suspects anything," said Kathleen, striving to steady her voice. "You came in here as soon as you felt—ill; didn't you?"

"I—yes–"

She could say no more. How she came to be on her bed in her own room she could not remember. It seemed to her as though she had fallen asleep on the lounge. Somehow, after Duane had gone, she must have waked and gone to her own room. But she could not recollect doing it.

Now she realised that she was tired, wretched, feverish. She suffered Kathleen to undress her, comb her hair, bathe her, and dry the white, slender body and limbs in which the veins still burned and throbbed.

When at length she lay between the cool sheets, silent, limp, heavy-lidded, Kathleen turned out the electric brackets and lighted the candle.

"Dear," she said, trying to speak cheerfully, "do you know what your brother has done?"

"What?" asked Geraldine drowsily.

"He has bought Roya-Neh, if you please, and he invites you to draw a check for half of it and to move there next week. As for me, I was furious with him. What do you think?"

Her voice softened to a whisper; she bent over the girl, looking closely at the closed lids. Under them a faint bluish tint faded into the whiteness of the cheek.

"Darling, darling!" whispered Kathleen, bending closer over the sleeping girl, "I love you so—I love you so!" And even as she said it, between the sleeper's features and her own floated the vision of Scott's youthfully earnest face; and she straightened suddenly to her full height and laid her hand on her breast in consternation. Under the fingers' soft pressure her heart beat faster. Again, with new dismay, this incredible sensation was stealing upon her, threatening to transform itself into something real, something definite, something not to be stifled or ignored.

She extinguished the candle; as she felt her way out of the darkness, arms extended, far away in the house she heard a door open and shut, and she bent over the balustrade to listen.

"Is that you, Scott?" she called softly.

"Yes; Duane and I did some billiards at the club." He looked up at her, the same slight pucker between his brows, boyishly slender in his evening dress. "You're not going to bed at once, are you, Kathleen, dear?"

"Yes, I am," she said briefly, backing into her own room, but holding the door ajar so that she could look out at him.

"Oh, come out and talk to a fellow," he urged; "I'm quite excited about this Roya-Neh business–"

"You're a perfect wretch, Scott. I don't want to talk about your unholy extravagance."

The boy laughed and stood at ease looking at the pretty face partly disclosed between door and wall with darkness for a velvety background.

"Just come out into the library while I smoke one cigarette," he began in his wheedling way. "I'm dying to talk to you about the game-preserve–"

"I can't; I'm not attired for a tête-à-tête with anything except my pillow."

"Then put on one of those fetching affairs you wear sometimes–"

"Oh, Scott, you are a nuisance!"

When, a few moments later, she came into the library in a delicate shimmering thing and little slippers of the same elusive tint, Scott jumped up and dragged a big chair forward.

"You certainly are stunning, Kathleen," he said frankly; "you look twenty with all the charm of thirty. Sit here; I've a map of the Roya-Neh forest to show you."

He drew up a chair for himself, lifted a big map from the table, and, unrolling it, laid it across her knees. Then he began to talk enthusiastically about lake and stream and mountain, and about wild boar and deer and keepers and lodges; and she bent her pretty head over the map, following his moving pencil with her eyes, sometimes asking a question, sometimes tracing a road with her own delicate finger.

Once or twice it happened that their hands touched en passant; and at the light contact, she was vaguely aware that somewhere, deep within her, the same faint dismay awoke; that in her, buried in depths unsuspected, something incredible existed, stirred, threatened.

"Scott, dear," she said quietly, "I am glad you are happy over Roya-Neh forest, but it *was* too expensive, and it troubles me; so I'm going to sleep to dream over it."

"You sweet little goose!" laughed the boy impulsively, passing his arm around her. He had done it so often to this nurse and mother.

They both rose abruptly; the map dropped; his arm fell away from her warm, yielding body.

He gazed at her flushed face rather stupidly, not realising yet that the mother and nurse and elder sister had vanished like a tinted bubble in that strange instant—that Kathleen was gone—that, in her calm, sweet, familiar guise stood a woman—a stranger, exquisite, youthful, with troubled violet eyes and vivid lips, looking at him as though for the first time she had met his gaze across the world.

She recovered her composure instantly.

"I'm sorry, Scott, but I'm too sleepy to talk any more. Besides, Geraldine isn't very well, and I'm going to doze with one eye open. Good-night, dear."

"Good-night," said the boy vacantly, not offering the dutiful embrace to which he and she had so long and so lightly been accustomed.

CHAPTER V
ROYA-NEH

Late on a fragrant mid-June afternoon young Seagrave stood on the Long Terrace to welcome a guest whose advent completed a small house-party of twelve at Roya-Neh.

"Hello, Duane!" cried the youthful landowner in all the pride of new possession, as Mallett emerged from the motor; "frightfully glad to see you, old fellow! How is it in town? Did you bring your own rods? There are plenty here. What do you think of my view? Isn't that rather fine?"—looking down through the trees at the lake below. "There are bass in it. Those things standing around under the oaks are only silly English fallow deer. Sorry I got 'em. What do you think of my house? It's merely a modern affair worked up to look old and colonial.... Yes, it certainly does resemble the real thing, but it isn't. No Seagraves fit and bled here. Those are Geraldine's quarters up there behind the leaded windows. Those are Kathleen's where the dinky woodbine twineth. Mine face the east, and yours are next. Come on out into the park–"

"Not much!" returned young Mallett. "I want a bath!"

"The park," interrupted Scott excitedly, "is the largest fenced game-preserve in America! It's only ten minutes to the Sachem's Gate, if we walk fast."

"I want a bath and fresh linen."

"Don't you care to see the trout? Don't you want to try to catch a glimpse of a wild boar? I should think you'd be crazy to see–"

"I'm crazy about almost any old thing when I'm well scrubbed; otherwise, I'm merely crazy. That was a wild trip up. I'm all over cinders."

A woman came quietly out onto the terrace, and Duane instantly divined it, though his back was toward her and her skirts made no sound.

"Oh, is that you, Kathleen?" he cried, pivoting. "How d'ye do?" with a vigorous handshake. "Every time I see you you're three times as pretty as I thought you were when I last saw you."

"Neat but involved," said Kathleen Severn. "You have a streak of cinder across that otherwise fascinating nose."

"I don't doubt it! I'm going. Where's Geraldine?"

"Having her hair done in your honour; return the compliment by washing your face. There's a maid inside to show you."

"Show me how to wash my face!" exclaimed Duane, delighted. "This is luxury–"

"I want him to see the Gray Water before it's too late, with the sunlight on the trees and the big trout jumping," protested Scott.

"I'll do my own jumping if you'll furnish the tub," observed Duane. "Where's that agreeable maid who washes your guests' faces?"

Kathleen nodded an amused dismissal to them. Arm in arm they entered the house, which was built out of squared blocks of field stone. Scott motioned the servants aside and did the piloting himself up a broad stone stairs, east along a wide sunny corridor full of nooks and angles and antique sofas and potted flowers.

"Not that way," he said; "Dysart is in there taking a nap. Turn to the left."

"Dysart?" repeated Duane. "I didn't know there was to be anybody else here."

"I asked Jack Dysart because he's a good rod. Kathleen raised the deuce about it when I told her, but it was too late. Anyway, I didn't know she had no use for him. He's certainly clever at dry-fly casting. He uses pneumatic bodies, not cork or paraffine."

"Is his wife here?" asked Duane carelessly.

"Yes. Geraldine asked her as soon as she heard I'd written to Jack. But when I told her the next day that I expected you, too, she got mad all over, and we had a lively talk-fest. What was there wrong in my having you and the Dysarts here at the same time? Don't you get on?"

"Charmingly," replied Duane airily.... "It will be very interesting, I think. Is there anybody else here?"

"Delancy Grandcourt. Isn't he the dead one? But Geraldine wanted him. And there's that stick of a Quest girl, and Bunbury Gray. Naïda came over this afternoon from the Tappans' at Iron Hill —thank goodness–"

"I didn't know my sister was to be here."

"Yes; and you make twelve, counting Geraldine and me and the Pink 'uns."

"You didn't tell me it was to be a round-up," repeated Duane, absently surveying his chintz-hung quarters. "This is a pretty place you've given me. Where do you get all your electric lights? Where do you get fancy plumbing in this wilderness?"

"Our own plant," explained the boy proudly. "Isn't that corking water? Look at it—heavenly cold and clear, or hot as hell, whichever way you're inclined—" turning on a silver spigot chiselled like a cherub. "That water comes from Cloudy Lake, up there on that dome-shaped mountain. Here, stand here beside me, Duane, and you can see it from your window. That's the Gilded Dome—that big peak. It's in our park. There are a few elk on it, not many, because they'd starve out the deer. As it is, we have to cut browse in winter. For Heaven's sake, hurry, man! Get into your bath and out again, or we'll miss the trout jumping along Gray Water and Hurryon Brook."

"Let 'em jump!" retorted Duane, forcibly ejecting his host from the room and locking the door. Then, lighting a cigarette, he strolled into the bath room and started the water running into the porcelain tub.

He was in excellent spirits, quite undisturbed by the unexpected proximity of Rosalie Dysart or the possible renewal of their hitherto slightly hazardous friendship. He laid his cigarette aside for the express purpose of whistling while undressing.

Half an hour later, bathed, shaved, and sartorially freshened, he selected a blue corn-flower from the rural bouquet on his dresser, drew it through his buttonhole, gave a last alluring twist to his tie, surveyed himself in the mirror, whistled a few bars, was perfectly satisfied with himself, then, unlocking the door, strolled out into the corridor. Having no memory for direction, he took the wrong turn.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.