MARY HUNTER AUSTIN

THE LOVELY LADY

Mary Austin

The Lovely Lady

Austin M.

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Содержание

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PART ONE

IN WHICH PETER MEETS A DRAGON, AND THE LOVELY LADY MAKES HER APPEARANCE

I

The walls of the Wonderful House rose up straight and shining, pale greenish gold as the slant sunlight on the orchard grass under the apple trees; the windows that sprang arching to the summer blueness let in the scent of the cluster rose at the turn of the fence, beginning to rise above the dusty smell of the country roads, and the evening clamour of the birds in Bloombury wood. As it dimmed and withdrew, the shining of the walls came out more clearly. Peter saw then that they were all of coloured pictures wrought flat upon the gold, and as the glow of it increased they began to swell and stir like a wood waking. They leaned out from the walls, looking all one way toward the increasing light and tap-tap of the Princess' feet along the halls.

"Peter, oh, Peter!"

The tap-tapping grew sharp and nearer like the sound of a crutch on a wooden veranda, and the voice was Ellen's.

"Oh, Peter, you are always a-reading and a-reading!"

Peter rolled off the long settle where he had been stretched and put the book in his pocket apologetically.

"I was just going to quit," he said; "did you want anything, Ellen?"

"The picnic is coming back; I thought we could go down to the turn to meet them. Mrs. Sibley said she would save me some things from the luncheon."

If there was a little sting to Peter in Ellen's eagerness, it was evidence at least, how completely he and his mother had kept her from realizing that it was chiefly because of their not being able to afford the well-filled basket demanded by a Bloombury picnic that they had not accepted the invitation. Ellen had thought it was because Bet, the mare, could not be spared all day from the ploughing nor Peter from hoeing the garden, and her mother was too busy with the plaid gingham dress she was making for the minister's wife, to do any baking. It meant to Ellen, the broken fragments of the luncheon, just so much of what a picnic should mean: the ride in the dusty morning, swings under the trees, easy games that she could play, lemonade, pails and pails of it, pink ham sandwiches and frosted cake; and if Ellen could have any of these, she was having a little piece of the picnic. What it would have meant particularly to Peter over and above a day let loose, the arching elms, the deep fern of Bloombury wood, might have been some passages, perhaps, which could be taken home and made over into the groundwork of new and interesting adventures in the House from which Ellen had recalled him. There was a girl with June apple cheeks and bright brown eyes at that picnic, who could have given points to princesses.

He followed the tapping of his sister's crutch along the thick, bitter smelling dust of the road, rising more and more heavily as the dew gathered, until they came to the turn by the cluster rose and heard below them on the bridge, the din of the wheels and the gay laughter of the picnickers.

"Hi, Peter!"

"Hello, Ellen!"

"Awful sorry you couldn't come … had a bully time.... Killed a copperhead and two water snakes."

"Here, Ellen, catch ahold of this!"

And while she was about it the June apple girl leaned over the end-board of the wagon, and spoke softly to Peter.

"We're going over to Harvey's pasture next Wednesday afternoon, berrying, in the Democrat wagon with our team; Jim Harvey's going to drive. We made it up to-day. Surely you can get away for an afternoon?" That was what the voice said. "To be with me," the eyes added.

"I don't know.... I'd like it...."

It was not altogether the calculation as to how much earlier he would have to get up that morning to be able to take an hour off in the afternoon, that made Peter hesitate, but the sudden swimming of his senses about the point of meeting eyes. "I'll tell you what," he said, "you come by for Ellen, and I'll walk over about four and ride home with you."

"Oh," said the girl; she did not know quite whether to triumph at having gained so much or to be disappointed at so little. "I'll be expecting you."

The horses creaked forward in the harness, the dust puffed up from under the wheels and drowned the smell of the wilding rose, it fell thick on the petals and a little on Peter's spirit, too, as he followed Ellen back to the house, though it never occurred to him to think any more of it than that he had been working too long in the hot sun and was very tired. It did not, however, prevent his eating his share of the picnic dainties as he sat with his mother and Ellen on the veranda. Then as the soft flitter of the bats' wings began in the dusk, he kissed them both and went early up to bed.

Peter's room was close under the roof and that was close under the elm boughs; all hours he could hear them finger it with soft rustling touches. The bed was pulled to the window that gave upon the downslope of the hill; at the foot of it one saw the white bloom-faces of the alders lift and bow above the folded leaves, and the rising of the river damp across the pastures. All the light reflected from the sky above Bloombury wood was no more than enough to make a glimmer on the glass of a picture that hung at the foot of Peter's bed. It served to show the gilt of the narrow frame and the soft black of the print upon which Peter had looked so many times that he thought now he was still seeing it as he lay staring in the dusk—a picture of a young man in bright armour with loosened hair, riding down a particularly lumpy and swollen dragon. Flames came out of the creature's mouth in the immemorial fashion of dragons, but the young man was not hurt by them. He sat there lightly, his horse curvetting, his lance thrust down the dragon's throat and coming out of the back of his head, doing a great deed easily, the way people like to think of great things being done. It was a very narrow picture, so narrow that you might think that it had something to do with the dragon's doubling on himself and the charger's forefeet being up in the air to keep within the limits of the frame, and the exclusion from it of the Princess whom, as his father had told him the story, the young knight George had rescued from those devouring jaws. It came out now, quite clearly, that she must have had cheeks as red as June apples and eyes like the pools of spring rain in Bloombury wood, and her not being there in the picture was only a greater security for her awaiting him at this moment in the House with the Shining Walls.

There was, for the boy still staring at it through the dusk, something particularly personal in the picture, for ever since his father had died, three years ago, Peter had had a dragon of his own to fight. Its name was Mortgage. It had its lair in Lawyer Keplinger's office, from which it threatened twice yearly to come out and eat up his mother and Ellen and the little house and farm, and required to have its mouth stopped with great wads of interest which took all Peter's laborious days to scrape together. This year, however, he had hopes, if the garden turned out well, of lopping off a limb or a claw of the dragon by way of a payment on the principal, which somehow seemed to bring the Princess so much

nearer, that as Peter lay quite comfortably staring up at the glimmer on the wall, the four gold lines of the frame began to stretch up and out and the dark block of the picture to recede until it became the great hall of a palace again, and there was the Princess coming toward him in a golden shimmer.

There was just such another glow on the afternoon when Peter walked over to the berrying and came up with the apple-cheeked girl whose name was Ada, a good half mile from the others. As they climbed together over uneven ground she gave him her hand to hold, and there was very little to say and no need of saying it until they came to the hill overlooking the pasture, yellowing toward the end of summer, full of late bloom and misty colour passing insensibly into light. Threads of gossamer caught on the ends of the scrub or floated free, glinting as they turned and bellied in the windless air, to trick the imagination with the hint of robed, invisible presences.

"Oh, Peter, don't you wish it would stay like this always?"

"Like this," Peter gave her hand the tiniest squeeze to show what there was about this that he would like to keep. "It's just as good to look at any season though," he insisted. "I was here hunting rabbits last winter, in February, and you could find all sorts of things in the runways where the brambles bent over and kept off the snow; bunches of berries and coloured leaves, and little green fern, and birds hopping in and out."

Ada spread her skirts as she sat on a flat boulder and began sticking leaves into Peter's hat.

"Peter, what are you going to do this winter?"

"I don't know, I should like to go over to the high school at Harmony, but I suppose I'll try to get a place to work near home."

"We've been getting up a dancing and singing school, to begin in October. The teacher is coming from Dassonville. It will be once a week; we sing for an hour and then have dancing. It will be cheap as cheap—only two dollars a month. I hope you can come."

"I don't know; I'll think about it." He was thinking then that two dollars did not sound much, but when you come to subtract it from the interest it was a great deal, and then there would be Ellen to pay for, and perhaps a dress for her, and dancing shoes for himself and singing books. And no doubt at the dances there would be basket suppers.

"I should think you could come if you wanted to. Jim Harvey's getting it up.... He wants to keep company with me this winter." Ada was a little nervous about this, but as she stole a glance at Peter's face as he lay biting at a stem of grass, she grew quite comfortable again. "But I don't know as I will," she said. "I don't care very much for Jim Harvey."

Peter picked up a stone and shied it joyously at a thrush in the bushes.

"And I don't know as I want you to," he declared boldly. "I'll come to that dancing school if I possibly can, Ada, and if I can't you'll know it isn't because I don't wish to."

"You must want to with all your might and that'll make it come true. You can wish it on my amethyst ring."

"You won't take it off until October, Ada?"

"I truly won't." And it took Peter such a long time to get the ring on and held in place while the wish was properly made, that it was practically no time at all until the others found them on the way home as they came laughing up the hill.

As it happened, however, Peter did not get to the dancing school once that winter. The first of the cold spell Ellen had slipped on the ice, to the further trying of her lame back, and there were things to be done to it which the doctor said could not possibly be put off, so it happened that the mortgage dragon did not get his payment and Peter gave up the high school to get a place in Greenslet's grocery at Bloombury. And since there were the books to be made up after supper, and as Bet, the mare, after being driven in the delivery wagon all day, could not be let stand half the night in the cold at the schoolhouse door, it turned out that Peter had not been once to the dancing school. In the beginning he had done something for himself in the way of a hall for dancing, thrown out from the House of the Shining Walls, in which he and the Princess Ada, to lovely, soundless strains, had

whirled away, and found occasion to say things to each other such as no ballroom could afford;—bright star pointed occasions which broke and scattered before the little hints of sound that crept up the stair to advise him that Ellen was stifling back the pain for fear of waking him. They had moved Ellen's bed downstairs as a way of getting on better with the possibility of her being bedridden all that winter, and the tiny whispered moan recalled him to the dread that as the half yearly term came around, what with doctor's bills and delicacies, the mortgage dragon would have not even his sop of interest, and remain whole and threatening as before.

When Ellen was able to sit up in bed the mother moved her sewing in beside it. Then Peter would sit on the other side of the lamp with a book, and the walls of the House rose up from its pages gilded finely, and the lights would come out and the dancing begin, but before he could get more than a word with the Princess, he would hear Ellen:

"Peter, oh, Peter! I wish you wouldn't be always with your nose in a book. I wish you would talk sometimes."

"What about, Ellen?"

"Oh, Peter, you are the *worst*. I should think you would take some interest in things."

"What sort of things?" Peter wished to know.

"Why, who comes in the store, and what they say, and everything."

"Mrs. Sleason wanted us to open a kit of mackerel to see if she'd like it," began Peter literally, "and we persuaded her to take two cans of sardines instead. Does that interest you?"

"Have you sold any of the blue tartan yet?"

"Ada Brown bought seven yards of it."

"Oh, Peter! And trimmings?"

"Six yards of black velvet ribbon—yes, I forgot—Mrs. Blackman is to make it up for her. I heard Mrs. Brown say she would call for the linings."

"She's having it made up for Jim Harvey's birthday," Ellen guessed shrewdly. "He's twenty-one, you know.... People say she's engaged to him."

Peter felt the walls of the House which had stood out waiting for him during this interlude, fall inward into the gulf of blackness. Nobody said anything for two or three ticks of the large kitchen clock, and then Ellen burst out:

"I think she's a nasty, flirty, stuck-up *thing*; that's what I think!"

"Shs—hss! Ellen," said her mother.

"Peter," demanded Ellen, "are you reading again?"

"I beg your pardon, Ellen." Peter did not know that he had turned a page.

"Don't you ever wish for anything for yourself, Peter? Don't you wish you were rich?"

"No, Ellen, I don't know that I ever do."

But as the winter got on and the news of Ada Brown's engagement was confirmed, he must have wished it a great many times.

One evening late in January he was sitting with his mother very quietly by the kitchen stove, the front of which was opened to throw out the heat; there was the good smell of the supper in the room, for though he had a meal with the Greenslets at six, his mother always made a point of having something hot for him when he came in from bedding down the mare, and the steam of it on the window-panes made dull smears of the reflected light. The shade of the lamp was drawn down until the ceiling of the room was all in shadow save for the bright escape from the chimney which shone directly overhead, round and yellow as twenty dollars, and as Peter leaned back in his chair, looking up, it might have been that resemblance which gave a turn to his thoughts and led him to say to his mother:

"Why did my father never get rich?"

"I hardly know, Peter. He used to say that he couldn't afford it. There were so many other things he wished to do; and I wished them, too. When we were young we did them together. Then your

father was the sort of man who always gave too much and took too little. I remember his saying once that no one who loved his fellowman very much, *could* get rich."

"Do you wish he had?"

"I don't know that either. No, not if he was happier the way he was. And we *were* happy. Things would have come out all right if it hadn't been for the accident when the thresher broke, and his being ill so long afterward. And my people weren't so kind as they might have been. You see, they always thought him a little queer. Before we were married, before we were even engaged, he had had a little money. It had been left him, and instead of investing it as anybody in Bloombury would, he spent it in travel. I remember his saying that his memories of Italy were the best investment he could have made. But afterward, when he was in trouble, they threw it up to him. We had never got in debt before … and then just as he was getting round, he took bronchitis and died."

She wiped her eyes quietly for a while, and the kettle on the stove began to sing soothingly, and presently Peter ventured:

"Do you wish I would get rich?"

"Yes, Peter, I do. We are all like that, I suppose, we grown-ups. Things we manage to get along without ourselves, we want for our children. I hope you will be a rich man some day; but, Peter, I don't want you to think it a reflection on your father that he wasn't. He had what he thought was best. He might have left me with more money and fewer happy memories—and that is what women value most, Peter;—the right sort of women. There are some who can't get along without *things*: clothes, and furniture, and carriages. Ada Brown is that kind; sometimes I'm afraid Ellen is a little. She takes after my family."

"It is partly on account of Ellen that I want to get rich."

"You mustn't take it too hard, Peter; we've always got along somehow, and nobody in Bloombury is very rich."

Peter turned that over in his mind the whole of a raw and sleety February. And one day when nobody came into the store from ten till four, and loose winds went in a pack about the village streets, casting up dry, icy dust where now and then some sharp muzzle reared out of the press as they turned the corners, he spoke to Mr. Greenslet about it. It was so cold that day that neither the red apples in the barrels nor the crimson cranberries nor the yellowing hams on the rafters could contribute any appearance of warmth to the interior of the grocery. A kind of icy varnish of cold overlaid the gay lables of the canned goods; the remnants of red and blue tartan exposed for sale looked coarse-grained with the cold, and cold slips of ribbons clung to the glass of the cases like the tongues of children tipped to the frosted panes. Even the super-heated stove took on a purplish tinge of chilblains, roughed by the wind.

A kind of arctic stillness pervaded the place, out of which the two men hailed each other at intervals as from immeasurable deeps of space.

"Mr. Greenslet," ventured Peter at last, "are you a rich man?"

"Not by a long sight."

"Why?" questioned Peter.

"Not built that way."

The grocer lapsed back into the silence and seemed to lean against it meditatively. The wolf wind howled about the corners and cast snow like powdered glass upon the windows contemptuously, and time went by with a large deliberate movement like a fat man turning over, before Peter hailed again.

"Did you ever want to be?"

Mr. Greenslet reached out for the damper of the stove ostensibly to shake down the ashes, but really to pull himself up out of the soundless spaces of thought.

"When I was your age, yes. Thought I was going to be." The shaking of the damper seemed to loosen the springs of speech in him. "I was up in the city working for Siegel Brothers; began as a

bundle boy and meant to be one of the partners. But by the time I worked up to fancy goods I realized that I would have to be as old as Methuselah to make it at that rate. And Mrs. Greenslet didn't like the city; she was a Bloombury girl. It wasn't any place for the children."

"So you came back?"

"We had saved a little. I bought out this place and put in a few notions I'd got from Siegel's. I'm comfortably off, but I'm not rich."

"Would you like to be?"

"I don' know, I don' know. I'd like to give the boys a better start than I had, but I'm my own boss here and one of the leading men. That's always something."

Peter went and looked out of the smudged windows while he considered this. The long scrapes of the wind in the loose snow were like the scratches of great claws. It was now about mail time and a few people began to stir in the street; the clear light and the cold gave them a poverty-bitten look.

"Does anybody ever get rich in Bloombury?"

"Not that I know of. There's Mr. Dassonville in Harmony—Dave Dassonville, the richest man in these parts."

"I suppose he could tell me how to go about it?"

"I suppose he would if he knows. Mostly these things just happen."

Peter did not say anything more just then; he was watching a man and a girl of about his own age who had come out of a frame house farther down the street. The young man was walking so as to shield her from the wind, her rosy cheek was at his shoulder, and she smiled up at him over her muff, from dark, bright eyes.

"What's set you on to talk about riches? Thinking of doing something in that line yourself?"

"Yes," said Peter, kicking at the baseboard with his toes. "I don't know how it is to be done, but I've got to be rich. I've just simply got to."

II

It was along in the beginning of spring on a day full of wet cloud and clearing wind, that Peter walked over to Harmony to inquire of Mr. David Dassonville the way to grow rich. It was Sunday afternoon and the air sweet with the sap adrip from the orchards lately pruned and the smell of the country road dried to elasticity by the winds of March.

Between timidity and the conviction that a week day would have been better suited to his business, he drew on to the place of his errand very slowly, for he was sore with the raking of the dragon's claws, and unrested. It had been a terrible scrape to get together the last instalment of interest, and since Ellen had shattered it with the gossip about Ada Brown's engagement, there had been no House with Shining Walls for Peter to withdraw into out of the dragon's breath of poverty; above all, no Princess.

He did not know where the House had come from any more than he knew now where it had gone. It was a gift out of his childhood to his shy, unfriended youth, but he understood that if ever its walls should waver and rise again to enclose his dreams, there would be no Princess. Never any more. Princesses were for fairy tales; girls wanted Things. There was his mother too—he had wished so to get her a new dress this winter. It was an ache to him to cut off yards and yards of handsome stuffs at Mr. Greenslet's, and all the longing in the world had not availed to get one of them for his mother. Plainly the mastery of Things was accomplished by being rich; he was on his way to Mr. Dassonville to find out how it was done.

It was quite four of the clock when he paused at the bottom of the Dassonville lawn to look up at the lace curtains at the tall French windows. Nobody in Bloombury was rich enough to have lace curtains at all the windows, and the boy's spirit rose at the substantial evidence of being at last fairly in the track of his desire.

He found Mr. Dassonville willing to receive him in quite a friendly way, sitting in his library, keeping the place with his finger in the book he had been reading to his wife. Peter also found himself a little at a loss to know how to begin in the presence of this lady, for he considered it a matter quite between men, but suddenly she looked up and smiled. It came out on her face fresh and delicately as an apple orchard breaking to bloom, and besides making it quite spring in the room, discovered in herself a new evidence of the competency of Mr. David Dassonville to advise the way of riches. She looked fragile and expensive as she sat in her silken shawl, her dark hair lifted up in a half moon from her brow, her hands lying in her lap half-covered with the lace of her sleeves, white and perfect like twin flowers. He saw rings flashing on the one she lifted to motion to the maid to bring a chair.

"If you have walked over from Bloombury you must be tired," she said, "and chilled, perhaps. Come nearer the fire."

"No, thank you," Peter had managed, "I am quite warm," as in fact he was, and a little flushed. He sat down provisionally on the edge of the chair and looked at Mr. Dassonville.

"I came on business. I don't know if you will mind its being Sunday, but I couldn't get away from the store on other days."

"Quite right, quite right." Mr. Dassonville had lost his place in the book and laid it on his knee. "Private business? My dear, perhaps–"

"Oh, no—no," protested Peter handsomely. "I'd rather she stayed. It isn't. At least … I don't know if you will consider it private or not."

"Go on," urged Mr. Dassonville.

"I just came to ask you," Peter explained, "if you don't mind telling me, how you got rich?"

"But bless you, young man," exclaimed Mr. Dassonville, "I'm not rich."

This for a beginning, was, on the face of it, disconcerting. Peter looked about at the rows of books, at the thick, soft carpet and the leather-covered furniture, and at the rings on Mrs. Dassonville's hand. If Mr. Dassonville were not rich, how then—unless–

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I thought—that is, everybody says you are the richest man in these parts."

"As to that, well, perhaps, I have a little more money than my neighbours."

Peter breathed relief. The beautiful Mrs. Dassonville's rings were paid for, then.

"But as to being *rich*, why, when you come to a really rich man all I've got wouldn't be a pinch to him." Mr. Dassonville illustrated with his own thumb and fingers how little that would be. "We don't have really rich men in a place like Harmony," he concluded. "You have to go to the city for that."

"You've got everything you want, haven't you?"

Mr. Dassonville looked over at his wife, and the smile bloomed again; he smiled quietly to himself as he admitted it. "Yes, I've got everything I want."

They were quiet, all of them, for a little while, with Peter turning his hat over in his hands and Mr. Dassonville laying the tips of his fingers together before him, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair.

"I wish," said Peter at last, "you would tell me how you did it."

"How I got more money than my neighbours? Well, I wasn't born with it."

This was distinctly encouraging. Neither was Peter.

"No two men, I suppose, make money in the same way," went on the man who had, "but there are three or four things to be observed by all of them. In the first place one must be very hard-working."

"Yes," said Peter.

"And one must never lose sight of the object worked for. Not"—as if he had followed the boy's inward drop of dismay—"that a man should think of nothing but getting money. On the contrary, I consider it very essential for a man to have some escape from his business, some change of pasture to

run his mind in. He comes fresher to his work so. What I mean is that *when* he works he must make every stroke count toward the end he has in view. Do you understand?"

"I think so." The House and the Shining Walls were safe, at any rate.

"And then," Mr. Dassonville checked off the points on his fingers, "he must always save something from his income, no matter how small it is."

"I try to do that," confessed Peter, "but what with Ellen's back being bad, and the interest on the mortgage, it's not so easy."

"Is there a mortgage? I am sorry for that, for the next thing I was going to say is that he must never go into debt, never on any account."

"My father was sick; it was an accident," Peter protested loyally.

"So! I think I remember. Well, it is unfortunate, but where there is a debt the only thing is to reduce it as steadily as possible, and if this mortgage teaches you the trick of saving it may not be such a bad thing for you. But when a man works and saves for a long time without getting any sensible benefit, he sometimes thinks that saving and working are not worth while. You must never make that mistake."

"Oh, no," said Peter. It seemed to him that they were getting on very well indeed.

"There is another thing I should like to say," Mr. Dassonville went on, "but I am not sure I can put it plainly. It is that you must not try to be too wise." He smiled a little to Peter's blankness. "I believe in Harmony it is called looking on all sides of a thing, but there is always one side of everything like the moon which is turned from us. You must just start from where you are and keep moving."

"I see," said Peter, looking thoughtfully into the fire, in imitation of Mr. Dassonville. And there being no more advice forthcoming he began to wonder if he ought to sit a while from politeness, as people did in Bloombury, or go at once. Mrs. Dassonville got up and came behind her husband's chair.

"Don't you think you ought to tell him, David, that there are other things worth having besides money; better worth?"

"You, perhaps." Mr. Dassonville took the hand of his wife laid on his shoulder and held it against his cheek; it brought out for Peter suddenly, how many years younger she was, and what he had heard of Mr. Dassonville having married her from among the summer folk who came to Harmony for the pine woods and the sea air. "Ah, but I'm not sure I'd have you without a great deal of it. It takes money to raise rare plants like you. But I ought to say," still holding his wife's hand to his cheek and watching Peter across it, "that I think it is a very good sign that you are willing to ask. The most of poor men will sit about and rail and envy the rich, but hardly one would think to ask how it is done, or believe if he were told. They've a notion it's all gouging and luck, and you couldn't beat that out of them if you tried. Very few of them understand how simple success is; it isn't easy often, but it is always simple."

Peter supposed that he really ought to go after that, though he did not know how to manage it until Mrs. Dassonville smiled at him over her husband's shoulder and asked him what sort of work he did. "Oh, if you know about gardens," she interrupted him, "you can help a little. There are such a lot of things coming up in mine that I don't know the names of."

It flashed out to Peter long afterward that she had simply provided an easy way for him to get out of the house now that his visit was terminated. She held the white fold of her shawl over her head with one hand and gathered the trailing skirts with the other. They rustled as she moved like the leaves of the elms at night above the roof, as she led him along the walk where little straight spears of green and blunt flower crowns faintly tinged with colour came up thickly in the borders. So by degrees she got him down past the hyacinth beds and the nodding buds of the daffodils to the gate and on the road again, walking home in the chill early twilight with the pricking of a pleasant excitement in his veins.

It was that, perhaps, and the sense of having got so much more out of it than any account of his visit would justify, that kept Peter from saying much to his mother that night about his talk with the rich man; he asked her instead if she had ever seen Mrs. Dassonville.

"Yes," she assured him. "Mr. Dassonville drove her over to Mrs. Tillinghurst's funeral in October. They had only been married a little while then; she is the second Mrs. Dassonville, you know; the first died years ago. I thought her a very lovely lady."

"A lovely lady," Peter said the phrase under his breath. The sound of it was like the soft drawing of silken skirts.

His mother looked at him across the supper table and was pleased to see the renewal of cheerfulness, and then, motherlike, sighed to think that Peter was getting so old now that if he didn't choose to tell her things she had no right to ask him. "Your walk has done you good," was all she said, and it must have been the case, for that very night as soon as his head had touched the pillow he was off again, as he hadn't been since Ellen fell ill, to the House of the Shining Walls. It rose stately against a blur of leafless woods and crocus-coloured sky. The garden before it was all full of spring bulbs and the scent of daffodils. The Princess came walking in it as before, but she was no Princess now, merely a woman with her dark hair brushed up in a half moon from her brow and her skirts drawing after her with a silken rustle; her face was dim and sweet, with only a faint, a very faint, reminder of Ada, and her name was the Lovely Lady.

PART TWO

IN WHICH PETER BECOMES INVISIBLE ON THE WAY TO GROWING RICH

In the late summer of that year Peter went up to the city with Mr. Greenslet to lay in his winter stock and remained in canned goods with Siegel Brothers' Household Emporium. That his mother had rented the farming land for cash was the immediate occasion of his setting out, but there were several other reasons and a great many opinions. Mr. Greenslet had a boy of his own coming on for Peter's place; Bet, the mare, had died, and the farm implements wanted renewing; in spite of which Mrs. Weatheral could hardly have made up her mind to spare him except for the opportune appearance of the cash renter. With that and the chickens and the sewing, she and Ellen could take care of themselves and the interest, which would leave all that Peter could make to count against the mortgage.

They put it hopefully to one another so, as they sat about the kitchen stove, all three of them holding hands, on the evening before his departure. But the opinions, which were rather thicker at Bloombury than opportunities, were by no means so confident as Peter could have wished if he had known them. Mr. Greenslet thought it couldn't be much worse than Peter's present situation, and the neighbours were sure it wasn't much better. The minister had a great deal to say of the temptations of a young man in the city, which was afterward invalidated by the city's turning out quite another place than he described it.

It was left for Ellen and Mrs. Jim Harvey to make the happy prognostication. "You can trust Peter," Ada was confident.

"But you got to be mighty cute to get in with those city fellows," her husband warned her, "and Peter's so dashed simple; never sees anything except what's right in front of him. Now a man"—Jim assumed this estate for himself in the right of being three months married—"has got to look on all sides of a thing."

As for Ellen, she hadn't the slightest doubt that Peter was shortly to become immensely wealthy and she was to go up and keep house for him.

"There'll be gold chairs in the parlour and real Brussels," she anticipated. Peter affected to think it unlikely that she could be spared by the highly mythical person who was to carry her off to keep house for himself. Somehow Peter could never fall into the normal Bloombury attitude of thinking that if you had hip disease, your life was bound to be different from everybody's and you might as well say so right out, flat-footed, and be done with it.

With all this, finally he was got off to the city in the wake of Mr. Greenslet, and the first discovery he made there was that outside of Siegel Brothers, and a collarless man with a discouraged moustache who appeared in the hall of his lodging-house when the rent was due, he was practically invisible. As he went up and down the stairs sodden with scrub water which never by any possible chance left them scrubbed, nobody spoke to him. Nobody in the street saw him walking to and fro in his young loneliness. There were men passing there with faces like Mr. Dassonville's, keen and competent, and lovely ladies in soft becoming wraps and bright winged hats—such hats! Peter would like to have hailed some of these as one immeasurably behind but still in the way, seized of that precious inward quality which manifests itself in competency and brightness. He would have liked to feel them looking on friendlily at his business of becoming rich; but he remained, as far as any word from them was concerned, completely invisible. He came after a while to the conclusion that most of those who went up and down with him were in the same unregarded condition.

The city appeared quite habituated to this state of affairs; hordes of them came and went unconfronted between banked windows of warmth and loveliness, past doors from which light and music overflowed into the dim street in splashes of colour and sound, where people equally under the prohibition lapped them up hungrily like dogs at puddles. Sometimes in the street cars or subways he brushed against fair girls from whom the delicate aroma of personality was like a waft out of that country of which his preferences and appreciations acknowledged him a native, but no smallest flutter of kinship ever put forth from them to Peter. The place was crammed full of everything that anybody could want and nobody could get at it, at least not Peter, nor anybody he knew at Siegel Brothers. And at the lodging house they seemed never to have heard of the undiminished heaps of splendour that lay piled behind plate glass and polished counters. It was extraordinary, incredible, that he wasn't to have the least of them.

As the winter closed in on him, the restrictions of daily living rose so thick upon him that they began to prevent him from his dreams. He could no longer get through them to the House with the Shining Walls. Often as he lay in his bed trying to believe he was warm enough, he would set off for it down the lanes of blinding city light through which the scream of the trolley pursued him, only to see it glimmer palely on him through impenetrable plate glass, or defended from him by huge trespass signs that appeared to have some relation to the fact that he was not yet so rich as he expected to be. Times when he would wake out of his sleep, it would be to a strange sense of severances and loss, and though he did not know exactly what ailed him, it was the loss of all his dreams. After a while the whole city seemed to ache with that loss. He would lie in his narrow bed and think that if he did not see his mother and Bloombury again he would probably die of it.

Then along in the beginning of April somebody saw him. It was in the dusk between supper and bed time, walking on the viaduct where he had the park below him. There was a wash of blue still in the sky and a thin blade of a moon tinging it with citron; here and there the light glittered on the trickle of sap on the chafed boughs. It was just here that he met her. She was about his own age, and she was walking oddly, as though unconscious of the city all about her, with short picked steps, and her hat with the tilt to it of a girl who knows herself admired. She had a rose at her breast which she straightened now and then, or smoothed a fold of her dress and hummed as she walked. Her cheeks were bright even in the dusk, and some strange, quick fear kept pace with her glancing. Peter was walking heavily himself, as the young do when the dreams have gone out of them, and as they passed in the light of the arc that danced delicately to the wandering air, the girl's look skimmed him like a swallow. She must have turned just behind him, for in a moment she drifted past his shoulder.

"Hello!" she said.

"Hello!" said Peter, but, in the moment it had taken to drag that up from under his astonishment, she had passed him; her laugh as she went brushed the tip of his youth like a swallow's wing. It remained with him as a little, far spark; it seemed as if a dream was about to spin itself out from it. He went around that way several times on his evening walks in hopes that he might meet her again.

As though the spark had lightened a little of the blank unrecognition with which the city met him, he was seen that day and in no unfriendly aspect by "our Mr. Croker" of Siegel Brothers. The running gear of a great concern like the Household Emporium pressed, in the days of Peter's apprenticeship, unequally at times on its employees, and the galled spot of the canned goods department was Blinders the bundle boy. His other name was Horace and he was chiefly remarkable for pimples which he seemed to think interesting, and for a state of active resentment against anybody who gave him anything to do. The world for Horace was a dark jungle full of grouches and pulls and privilege and devious guile.

That the propensity which Peter had developed for inquiring every half hour or so if he hadn't got that done yet, could be nothing else but a cabal directed against Blinders' four dollars and a half a week, he was convinced. In all the time that he could spare from his pimples, Horace rehearsed a martyr's air designed to convey to Mr. Croker that though he would suffer in silence he was none the

less suffering. It being precisely Mr. Croker's business to rap out grouches as an expert mechanician taps defective cogs, it happened the day after Peter's meeting with the girl that the worst hopes of Horace were realized.

"Aw, they're always a pickin' on me, Mr. Croker, that's what they are, Mr. Croker," Horace defended himself, preparing to snivel if the occasion seemed to demand it, by taking out his gum and sticking it on the inside of his sleeve. "I can't handle 'em no faster, Mr. Croker."

"Not the way you go at it," Peter assured him. Anybody could have told by the way he included Mr. Croker in his cheerfulness that there was something between them. "You turn 'em over too many times and you use too much paper and too much string." Suddenly Peter reddened with embarrassment. "Not that that makes any difference to a big firm like this," he apologized, "but in a small place every little counts." He turned the package deftly and began to illustrate his method. "When you're tying up calico with one hand and taking in eggs and butter with the other and telling three people the price of things at the same time," he explained, "you have to notice things like this."

"I see," said Mr. Croker. "You try it, Blinders."

"Aw, what's the matter with the way I was doin' it?" wailed Horace.

"If you don't feel quite up to it–" Mr. Croker hinted. Horace did, he wrapped with alacrity and Peter showed him how to hold the string.

"You come along with me, Weatheral," Mr. Croker commanded. Horace took his gum out of his cuff and made dark prognostication as to what was probably to be done to Peter.

What Peter thought was that he should probably become very unpopular with his fellow clerks. Croker took him across to dry goods, where girls were tying bundles in little cages over the sales ladies' heads, and had him repeat the method of handling string. Except that he thought he should get to like Mr. Croker, the incident made no particular impression on Peter—so dulled were all his senses for want of dreams,—and passed wholly out of mind.

It was two or three days after that he saw the girl again, nearer the end of the viaduct, where four or five streets poured light and confusion into Venable Square. She was going on ahead, hurrying and pretending not to hurry to overtake a man to whom she wished to speak. She was quite close to him, she was speaking, and suddenly he gave a little outward jerk with his elbow which caught hers unexpectedly and whirled her back against the parapet. The little purse she was carrying fell from her hand. The man gave a quick laugh over his shoulder and ploughed his way across the street.

"The skunk!" Peter's list of expletives was not extensive. He picked up the flat little purse and handed it back to her. "Shall I go after him? Did you know him?"

The girl was holding on to the parapet with a little choky laugh. "Oh, yes, I know that kind. No, I don't want him!"

"He ought to have a good thrashing," Peter was convinced. The girl looked up at him with a sudden curiosity.

"You're from the country, ain't you? I thought so the other night. I can always tell."

"I guess you're from the country yourself," Peter hazarded. She was prettier even than he had thought. Her glance had left his, however, and was roving up and down the hurrying crowd as though testing it for some plunge she was about to make.

"If you wanted me to see you home–" Peter hinted; he did not know quite what was expected of him. She answered with a little sharp noise which ended in a cough.

"I guess you're real kind," she admitted, "but I ain't goin' home just yet. I got a date." She moved off then, and since it was in the direction he was going, there was nothing for Peter to do but move with her, on the other side of the wide pavement. At the turn she drifted back to his side again; it seemed to Peter there was amusement in her tone.

"You got anything to do Saturday about this time?" Peter hadn't. "Well, I'll be here—savvy?" But before he could make her any assurance she laughed again and slipped into the crowd.

Peter knew a great many facts about life. There were human failings even in Bloombury, and what Peter didn't know about the city had been largely made up to him by the choice conversation of J. Wilkinson Cohn, in staples, at the next counter to him. Anybody who listened long enough to J. Wilkinson's personal reminiscences would have found himself fully instructed for every possible contingency likely to arise between a gentleman of undoubted attractions and the ladies, but there are forces in youth that are stronger than experience. It is a very old, old way of the world for young things to walk abroad in the spring and meet one another.

Peter strolled along the viaduct Saturday and felt his youth beat in him pleasantly when he saw her come. She had on a different hat, and the earlier hour showed him the shining of her eyes above the raddled cheeks.

"We could go down in the park a piece," he suggested as they turned in together along the parapet. There was a delicate damp smell coming up from it on the night, like the Bloombury lanes.

"You're regular country, aren't you?" There was an accent of impatience in her tone, "I haven't had my supper yet."

"Well, what do you say to a piece of roast beef and a cup of coffee?" Peter had planned this magnificence as he came along fingering his pay envelope. He knew just the place, he told her. The feeling of his proper male ascendency as he drew her through the crowd was a tonic to him; the man tossing pancakes in the window where he hesitated looking for the ladies' entrance seemed quite to enjoy doing it, as though he had known all along there was to be company.

"Oh, I don't care for any of these places." Peter felt her pull at his elbow. "I'll show you." They went along then, brushing lightly shoulder to shoulder until they came to one of those revolving doors from which gusts of music issued. There was a girl standing up to sing as they sat down and the whole air of the place was beyond even the retailed splendour of J. Wilkinson. The girl threw back her wraps and began to order freely. Peter, who had a glimpse of the card, stiffened.

"I—I guess I'm not so very hungry," he cautioned. She looked up from the menu sharply and her face softened; she made one or two deft changes in it.

"This is Dutch, you know," she threw out. "Oh, I know you invited me, but you didn't think I was one of the kind that let a strange gentleman pay for my dinner, did you?" Peter denied it, stricken with embarrassment. She seemed in the light, to take him in more completely.

"Say, would you have licked that fellow the other night, honest?"

"Well, if he was disrespectful to a lady–" Peter began.

"Oh, *excuse* me!" She turned her head aside for a moment in her long gloves. "You *are* country!" she said again, but it seemed not to displease her. "I don't care so much for her voice, do you?" She turned on the singer. They discussed the entertainment and the dinner. They were a long time about it. The orchestra played a waltz at last, and Ethel—she had told him to call her that—put her arms on the table and leaned across to him, and though Peter knew by this time that her cheeks were painted, he didn't somehow mind it.

"What's it like up in the country where you lived?" she wished to know.

"Hills mostly, little wooded ones, and high pastures, and the apple orchards going right up over them...."

"I know," she nodded. "I guess it's them I been smelling … or laylocks."

"Things coming up in the garden," Peter contributed: "peonies, and long rows of daffodils...." He did not realize it, but he had described to her no place that he had known but the way to the House. The girl cut him off.

"Don't!" she said sharply. "You know," she half apologized, "you kind of remind me of somebody … a boy I knew up country. It was him that got me here–" She made her little admission quietly, the horror of it long worn down to daily habit. "That first time I saw you, it seemed almost as if it was him … I ain't never blamed him—much. He didn't mean to be bad, but when the trouble came he couldn't help none.... I guess real help is about the hardest thing to find there is."

"I guess it is."

"Oh, well, we gotta make the best of it." She glanced at Peter with her head on one side as she twiddled her fingers across the cloth to the tune of the orchestra.

They went out at last and walked in the least frequented streets, and Peter held her hand; the warmth of it ran with a pleasant tingling in his veins. He seemed to have touched in her palm the point at which the city came alive to him. They walked and walked and yet it seemed that something lacked to bring the evening to a finish; it was incredible to Peter that after all his loneliness he should have to let her go.

"We could go up to my place," Ethel suggested. "It's up here." He hadn't suspected that she had been guiding him.

"I guess not to-night." Peter's blood was singing in his ears. In the dark of the unfrequented street he could feel her young body leaning toward his.

"Say, you know I ain't after the money the way some girls are; I like you … honest–"

"I guess I'd better go home." But they went on up the side street a little farther. "Good-bye," he said, but he did not let her go.

She shook her hand free at last.

"Oh, well, of course, if you don't want to...." He felt her soft hands fumbling at his face; she drew him down to a kiss. Suddenly she sprang away, laughing. "Go, you silly!"

"Ethel!" he cried, but he lost her in the dark. He should have let her go at that; he knew he should. In spite of her paying half, his dinner had cost him more than two ordinary dinners … and besides.... He couldn't help, however, walking around by the viaduct for several evenings the next week, and at last he saw her. She was going by without speaking, but he got squarely in front of her.

"Ethel!"

She pretended just to have recognized him.

"Oh, you here? I thought you'd gone back to the country!"

"You aren't mad with me about … the other night?" He did not quite know how to express the quality of his desertion.

"Who? Me?" airily. "Oh, I guess there's just as good fish in the sea–" She changed all at once under his young hunger for companionship. "You're good," she said; "you're the real thing."

"You're good, too," he was certain, "when you're with me."

"Oh, it rubs off. Say, kid, I guess you got folks at home you're sending money to and all that, and you got to get ahead in the world. Well, you don't want to have nothing to do with my kind, and that's straight." The deviltry she put on toward him failed pitifully. "Chase yourself, kid; I just ain't good for you any more." Nevertheless they moved along the parapet to the dark interval between the lights and there they kissed again, this time with no undercurrent.

"Good-bye, Ethel."

"Good-bye, boy." The little spark was out.

PART THREE

IN WHICH PETER BECOMES A BACHELOR

I

The day before leaving for his summer vacation Peter was notified that he was wanted in his private office by the younger Siegel Brother. Though he couldn't quite fall in with the dark prognostications of Blinders that he was about to be mulcted of his salary by a plot which had been plainly indicated by the marked partiality of our Mr. Croker, the incident gave him some uneasiness. The young Siegel Brother must have been younger than somebody of course, though it couldn't have been by more than a scratch, and he might have been any age without betraying it, so deeply was he sunk in the evidence of the surpassing quality of the grocery department. However, there was something surprisingly young looking out at Peter from the junior brother's red and white rotundity, at which he took heart immensely.

"Weatheral, Peter, canned goods, recommended by Mr. Greenslet," Siegel Brother ticked him off from a manilla envelope. "Just a little honorarium, Mr. Weatheral, we are in the habit of distributing to such of our employees as make practical suggestions to the advantage of the business." Contriving to make his hands meet in front of him by clasping them very high up on his chest, Siegel Brother assumed that he had folded his arms, and waited to see what Peter would do about it.

"We have also a little savings bank for the benefit of our employees which pays 3 per cent., yet I believe we have you not among our depositors." There was the slightest possible burr to his speech as though it were blunted by so much fatness.

"Well, you see, sir—there's a mortgage." Peter was afraid he should damage himself by the admission, but the firm heard him out.

"How much?"

"It was a thousand, but we've got it down to seven hundred—six hundred and sixty," Peter corrected himself with a glance at his honorarium.

"And the farm, it is worth–" Siegel Brother parted his hands slightly to admit of any valuation.

"Two thousand."

"So! Well, Mr. Weatheral, that is not so bad, and if I were you, when I had occasion to speak of it I would say, not 'I am paying a mortgage,' that is dead work, Mr. Weatheral, but 'I am buying a farm.' It goes easier so."

"Thank you, sir, I'll remember." He supposed his employer was done with him, but as he turned to go he heard his name again.

"You will report to our Mr. Croker when you return, Mr. Weatheral; he thinks he can use you."

Two weeks later when he came back rested from Bloombury, Peter found himself visible to at least ten persons, all of whom pertained to the boarding-house of the exclusive Mrs. Blodgett, where, by the advice of J. Wilkinson Cohn, he engaged a small room on the third floor with a window opening some six feet from the rear wall of a wholesale stationery, and one electric light discreetly placed to discourage the habit of reading in bed.

From this time on he was visible to Mrs. Blodgett and Aggie and Miss Thatcher, whom he already knew as the pure food demonstrator in dairy products, to two inconsiderable young women from the wholesale stationer's, and a gentleman from a shoe store, the whole of whose physiognomy appeared to be occupied with the effort to express an engaging youthfulness which the crown of his head explicitly denied. He was occasionally visible to the representative of gentlemen's outfitters who

was engaged to Aggie and took Sunday dinners with them, and he was particularly and pleasingly visible to J. Wilkinson Cohn and Miss Minnie Havens. The rest of his fellow boarders were so much of a likeness, a kind of family likeness that spread all over Siegel Brothers and such parts of the city as Peter had been admitted to, that it was a relief to Peter to realize from his profile that J. Wilkinson's last name probably ought to have been spelled Cohen. The determinedly young gentleman explained to him that J. Wilkinson's intrusion into the exclusiveness of Blodgett's was largely a concession to Aggie's being as good as married and not liable to social contamination, and to the fact that the little Jew was amusing and pretty near white, anyway.

Miss Minnie Havens did typewriting and stenography in a downtown office and was understood to be in search of economic independence, rather than under the necessity of making a living. She had a high fluffy pompadour and a half discoverable smile which could be brought to a very agreeable laugh if one spent a little pains at it. J. Wilkinson Cohn appeared to find it worth the pains.

The particular advantage of Blodgett's, besides the fact that you could have two helps of everything without paying extra for it, was that it was exclusive and social. Mrs. Blodgett had collected her family of boarders on the principle of not having anybody who wasn't a suitable companion for Aggie. There was also a pianola which gave the place a tone.

There was fire and light in the dining-room at Blodgett's from seven to nine always, and in the parlour with the pianola on Saturday evening and all day Sunday. Sometimes, even on week days after supper, J. Wilkinson would open the door into the darkened room, push away the pianola and sing topical songs to his own accompaniment until his stiffened fingers clattered on the keys. Other times he would give imitations of popular stage celebrities until Blodgett's shouted with laughter. At all times they appeared to have a great many engagements. Peter was advised to join this or that organization, and to enter upon social occasions that unfortunately presented themselves in the light of occasions to spend money. Apparently there were no dragons tracking the path of Blodgett's boarders. Miss Havens did better than any of them for him. She explained to him how to get books from the circulating library, and let him read hers until he could arrange for a card. She said it was a pleasure to think there was going to be somebody in the house who was congenial. It wasn't that she had anything against Miss Thatcher and the rest of them—they just didn't have the same tastes. She thought a person ought to spend some of the time improving their minds. Although the expression was ambiguous, it served as a sort of sedative to the aching vacuity of the hours which Peter spent away from Siegel Brothers. He found himself spending as many as possible of them with Miss Havens. She had a way of making the frivolling talk of the supper table appear a warrantable substitute for the things that Peter knew, even while he echoed her phrases, that he wasn't getting. He found himself skidding on the paths of self-improvement and the obligations of seeing life, along the edges of desolation. He immersed himself as far as possible in the atmosphere of Blodgett's in order that he needn't have any time left in which to consider how far it fell short of what he had come to find. For this reason he was usually the last at the supper table, but there were occasions when he found it discreet to slip away as early and quietly as possible.

It was one evening about two months after his instalment at Blodgett's. Peter was sitting in his room when he heard them yammering at his door with so much hilarious insistence that he found himself getting up to open it, without giving himself time to put down the book he was reading or to take off the overcoat he had put on for want of a fire, and finding himself in some embarrassment because of the misapprehension which this fact involved.

"Ready, Peter?"

"Come along, Peter!"

"I … I'm not going," said Peter.

"What? Not going to the rink with us to-night? Why, you said–" The bright group of his fellow boarders hung upon the narrow landing like bees at the threshold of a hive.

"I said I'd go if I could—" protested Peter, "and I can't."

"Gee! What's the matter with you?"

"Don't be a beastly stiff!"

"Come on, fellows, we'll miss the car. Let him be a stiff if he wants to."

Peter heard their feet retreating on the stairs, and then he saw that Minnie Havens still hesitated at the landing. She had on her best silk waist and her blond pompadour was brushed higher than ever. Her eyes, which were blue, were fixed directly on him with something in the meeting that gave him the impression, gaspingly, of being about to step off into space. He seemed suddenly to see a path opening directly through the skating rink and the Saturday Social Club to the House of the Shining Walls, and Minnie Havens walking in it beside him. He wrenched his mind away forcibly from that and fixed it on the figure of his weekly salary.

"Couldn't you?" she persuaded.

"No," said Peter. "I'm much obliged to you, but I really couldn't."

But before he had time to take up his reading, which somehow he was not able to do immediately, he heard Mrs. Blodgett, who made a point of being as kind to her boarders as she could afford to be, tapping at his door.

"I thought you'd be going to the rink to-night."

"No," said Peter.

"You don't think it's wrong, or anything?"

"Oh, no, not in the least."

"Well, Mr. Weatheral, I've seen a power of young folks, comin' and goin', in my business and it don't pay for 'em to get too stodgy like. They need livenin' up." She hung upon the door as Peter waited for her to go. "Miss Havens is a nice girl," she ventured.

Peter admitted it. "I've my mother and sister to think of," he told her, and presently he found he had told her a great deal more.

"Well," commented Mrs. Blodgett, "you do have a lot to carry.... Was you readin' now, Mr. Weatheral? … because it's warmer down in my sittin' room, and there's only Aggie and me sewin'.... Besides," she argued triumphantly, "it's savin' light."

First and last he heard a great deal about saving at Blodgett's. Aggie, who was making up her white things, had something to tell every evening almost, about the price of insertion. But it was saving for a purpose; they were in the way, most of them, of being investors. J. Wilkinson had sixty dollars in his brother's cigar stand on Fifty-fourth street. He used to let his brother off for Sunday afternoons with quite a proprietary air. The shoe gentleman, whose very juvenile name was Wally Whitaker, didn't believe in such a mincing at prosperity. He talked freely about tips and corners and margins and had been known to make twenty-seven dollars in copper once. He offered Peter some exclusive inside information in B and C's before he had been in the house a month.

"Well, you see," Peter explained himself, "I'm buying a farm up our way!" His fellow boarders laid down their forks to look at him; he could see reflected from their several angles how he had placed himself by the mere statement of his situation. He felt at once the resistance it gave him, the sense of something to pull against, of having got his feet under him. It was the point at which the conquest of the mortgage dragon began to present itself to him as a thing accomplished rather than a thing escaped.

It must have been this feeling of release which opened up for him, from pictures that he saw occasionally with Miss Havens on Sundays, from books he read and discussed with her, avenues that appeared to lead more or less directly to the House. There were times when he found himself walking in them with Miss Minnie Havens, and yet always curiously expecting the Lovely Lady when they found her there, to be quite another person. He came within an inch of telling her about it on the occasion on which she presented him with an embroidered hat marker for Christmas, and when he took her to the theatre with tickets the floor walker had presented to him on account of Mrs. Floor Walker not feeling up to it. It appeared, further, that Miss Havens had a way of falling into profound

psychological difficulties which required a vast amount of talking over, and a great many appeals to Peter's disinterested judgment to extract her, not without some subtle intimations of dizzying escapes for himself. Peter supposed that was always the way with girls. It came to a crisis later where Miss Havens' whole destiny hung upon the point as to whether she could accept a situation offered her in her own town, or should stay on in the city and see what came of it.

"You'd get more salary there, and be able to live cheaper?" Peter wished to know.

"Oh, yes." The implication of her tone was that she didn't see what that had to do with it. It was toward the end of June, and she was looking very pretty in a white dress and a hat that set off her pompadour to advantage, and there was no special reason, as they had the afternoon before them, why they should not have taken some of the by-paths that the girl perceived to lead out from the subject into breathless wonder. She had ways, which were maidenly and good, of opening up to Peter comfortable little garden plots of existence which, though they lay far this side of the House and the Lovely Lady, had in the monotony of the long climb up the scale of Siegel Brothers, moments of importunate invitation.

"And you came up to the city," Peter went on in the gravelled walk of fact, "just to improve yourself in shorthand so you could get such a situation? I don't see why you hesitate."

Miss Havens could hardly say why herself.

"There were so many ways of bettering one's self in the city. I've a great many friends here," she hinted.

"Not so many," Peter reminded her, "as you'd have where you were brought up."

"You are staying in the city?" Miss Havens suggested.

"That's different. I have to." He had already told her about Ellen and also about his mother.

"And are you always going to stay on here like this, working and working and never taking any time for yourself? Aren't you ever going to … marry?"

"I know too much what poverty is like to ask any woman to share it," Peter protested.

"Suppose she should ask you?"

"They don't do that; the right sort."

"I don't see why … if some girl … cared … and if she saw … anybody struggling along under burdens she would be glad to share, and she knew because of that he didn't mean to ask her … You think she ought not to let him know?"

"I think it wouldn't be best," said Peter.

"You think the man would despise her?"

"Not that; but if he liked her a little … he might consent to it … just because he liked her and was tired maybe … and that wouldn't be good for either of them."

"Well, anyway, it doesn't concern either of us," said Miss Havens.

The next evening as Peter was letting himself in at his own door—he had moved to the second floor front by this time—Mrs. Blodgett stopped him.

"Miss Havens left her regards for you," she explained. "She went to-day."

"Oh," said Peter, "wasn't it sudden?"

"Sort of. She'd been considerin' of it for some time, and last night she made up her mind. But I did think," said Mrs. Blodgett, "that she'd have said good-bye to *you*." And not eliciting anything by way of a reply, she added: "Miss Havens is a nice girl. I hate to think of her slavin' her life out in an office. She'd ought to get married."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.