The Crimson Tide

By

Robert W. Chambers

THE CRIMSON TIDE

CHAPTER I

On the th of November, , the Premier of the Russian Revolutionary

Government was a hunted fugitive, his ministers in prison, his troops scattered or dead. Three weeks later, the irresponsible Reds had begun their shameful career of treachery, counselled by a pallid, black-eyed man with a muzzle like a mouse—one L. D. Bronstein, called Trotzky; and by two others—one a bald, smooth-shaven, rotund little man with an expression that made men hesitate, and features not trusted by animals and children.

The Red Parliament called him Vladimir Ulianov, and that's what he called himself. He had proved to be reticent, secretive, deceitful, diligent, and utterly unhuman. His lower lip was shaped as though something dripped from it. Blood, perhaps. His eyes were brown and not entirely unattractive. But God makes the eyes; the mouth is fashioned by one's self.

The world knew him as Lenine.

The third man squinted. He wore a patch of sparse cat-hairs on his chin and upper lip.

His head was too big; his legs too short, but they were always in a hurry, always in motion. He had a persuasive and ardent tongue, and practically no mind. The few ideas he possessed inclined him to violence—always the substitute for reason in this sort of agitator. It was this ever latent violence that proved persuasive. His name was Krylenko. His smile was a grin.

These three men betrayed Christ on March d, .

On the Finland Road, outside of Petrograd, the Red ragamuffins held a perpetual carmagnole, and all fugitives danced to their piping, and many paid for the music.

But though White Guards and Red now operated in respectively hostile gangs everywhere throughout the land, and the treacherous hun armies were now in full tide of their Baltic invasion, there still remained ways and means of escape—inconspicuous highways and unguarded roads still open that led out of that white hell to the icy but friendly seas clashing against the northward coasts.

Diplomats were inelegantly "beating it." A kindly but futile Ambassador shook the snow of Petrograd from his galoshes and solemnly and laboriously vanished. Mixed bands of attachés, consular personnel, casuals, emissaries, newspaper men, and mission specialists scattered into unfeigned flight toward those several and distant sections of "God's Country," divided among civilised nations and lying far away somewhere in the outer sunshine.

Sometimes White Guards caught these fugitives; sometimes Red Guards; and sometimes the hun nabbed them on the general hunnish principle that whatever is running away is fair game for a pot shot.

Even the American Red Cross was "suspect"—treachery being alleged in its

relations with Roumania; and hun and Bolshevik became very troublesome—so troublesome, in fact, that Estridge, for example, was having an impossible time of it, arrested every few days, wriggling out of it, only to be collared again and detained.

Sometimes they questioned him concerning gun-running into Roumania; sometimes in regard to his part in conducting the American girl, Miss Dumont, to the convent where the imperial family had been detained.

That the de facto government had requested him to undertake this mission and to employ an American Red Cross ambulance in the affair seemed to make no difference.

He continued to be dogged, spied on, arrested, detained, badgered, until one evening, leaving the Smolny, he encountered an American—a slim, short man who smiled amiably upon him through his glasses, removed a cigar from his lips, and asked Estridge what was the nature of his evident and visible trouble.

So they walked back to the hotel together and settled on a course of action during the long walk. What this friend in need did and how he did it, Estridge never learned; but that same evening he was instructed to pack up, take a train, and descend at a certain station a few hours later.

Estridge followed instructions, encountered no interference, got off at the station designated, and waited there all day, drinking boiling tea.

Toward evening a train from Petrograd stopped at the station, and from the open door of a compartment Estridge saw his chance acquaintance of the previous day making signs to him to get aboard.

Nobody interfered. They had a long, cold, unpleasant night journey, wedged in between two soldiers wearing arm-bands, who glowered at a Russian general officer opposite, and continued to mutter to each other about imperialists, bourgeoisie, and cadets.

At every stop they were inspected by lantern light, their papers examined, and sometimes their luggage opened. But these examinations seemed to be perfunctory, and nobody was detained.

In the grey of morning the train stopped and some soldiers with red arm-bands looked in and insulted the general officer, but offered no violence. The officer gave them a stony glance and closed his cold, puffy eyes in disdain. He was blond and looked like a German.

At the next stop Estridge received a careless nod from his chance acquaintance, gathered up his luggage and descended to the frosty platform.

Nobody bothered to open their bags; their papers were merely glanced at. They had some steaming tea and some sour bread together.

A little later a large sleigh drove up behind the station; their light baggage was stowed aboard, they climbed in under the furs.

“Now,” remarked his calm companion to Estridge, “we’re all right if the Reds, the Whites and the boches don’t shoot us up.”

“What are the chances?” inquired Estridge.

“Excellent, excellent,” said his companion cheerily, “I should say we have about one chance in ten to get out of this alive. I’ll take either end—ten to one we don’t get out—ten to two we’re shot up and not killed—ten to three we are arrested but not killed—one to ten we pull through with whole skins.”

Estridge smiled. They remained silent, probably preoccupied with the hazards of their respective fortunes. It grew colder toward noon.
The young man seated beside Estridge in the sleigh smoked continually.

He was attached to one of the American missions sent into Russia by an optimistic administration—a mission, as a whole, foredoomed to political failure.

In every detail, too, it had already failed, excepting only in that particular part played by this young man, whose name was Brisson.

He, however, had gone about his occult business in a most amazing manner—the manner of a Yankee who knows what he wants and what his country ought to want if it knew enough to know it wanted it.

He was the last American to leave Petrograd: he had taken his time; he left only when he was quite ready to leave.

And this was the man, now seated beside Estridge, who had coolly and cleverly taken his sporting chance in remaining till the eleventh hour and the fifty-ninth minute in the service of his country. Then, as the twelfth hour began to strike, he bluffed his way through.

During the first two or three days of sleigh travel, Brisson learned all he desired to know about Estridge, and Estridge learned almost nothing about Brisson except that he possessed a most unholy genius for wriggling out of trouble.

Nothing, nobody, seemed able to block this young man’s progress. He bluffed his way through White Guards and Red; he squirmed affably out of the clutches of wandering Cossacks; he jollied officials of all shades of political opinion; but he always continued his journey from one étape to the next. Also, he was continually lighting one large cigar after another. Buttoned snugly into his New York-made arctic clothing, and far more comfortable at thirty below zero than was Estridge in Russian costume, he smoked comfortably in the teeth of the icy gale or conversed soundly on any topic chosen. And the range

was wide.

But about himself and his mission in Russia he never conversed except to remark, once, that he could buy better Russian clothing in New York than in Petrograd.

Indeed, his only concession to the customs of the country was in the fur cap he wore. But it was the galoshes of Manhattan that saved his feet from freezing. He had two pair and gave one to Estridge.

During several hundreds of miles in sleighs, Brisson's constant regret was the absence of ferocious wolves. He desired to enjoy the whole show as depicted by the geographies. He complained to Estridge quite seriously concerning the lack of enterprise among the wolves.

But there seemed to be no wolves in Russia sufficiently polite to oblige him; so he comforted himself by patting his stomach where, sewed inside his outer underclothing, reposed documents destined to electrify the civilised world with proof infernal of the treachery of those three men who belong in history and in hell to the fraternity which includes Benedict Arnold and Judas.

One late afternoon, while smoking his large cigar and hopefully inspecting the neighbouring forest for wolves, this able young man beheld a sotnia of Ural Cossacks galloping across the snow toward the flying sleigh, where he and Estridge sat so snugly ensconced.

There was, of course, only one thing to do, and that was to halt. Kaledines had blown his brains out, but his riders rode as swiftly as ever. So the sleigh stopped.

And now these matchless horsemen of the Wild Division came galloping up around the sleigh. Brilliant little slanting eyes glittered under shaggy head-gear; broad, thick-lipped mouths split into grins at sight of the two little American flags fluttering so gaily on the sleigh.

Then two booted and furred riders climbed out of their saddles, and, under their sheepskin caps, Brisson saw the delicate features of two young women, one a big, superb, blue-eyed girl; the other slim, dark-eyed, and ivory-pale.

The latter said in English: "Could you help us? We saw the flags on your sleigh. We are trying to leave the country. I am American. My name is Palla Dumont. My friend is Swedish and her name is Ilse Westgard."

"Get in, any way," said Brisson briskly. "We can't be in a worse mess than we are. I imagine it's the same case with you. So if we're all going to smash, it's pleasanter, I think, to go together."

At that the Swedish girl laughed and aided her companion to enter the sleigh.

“Good-bye!” she called in her clear, gay voice to the Cossacks. “When we come back again we shall ride with you from Vladivostok to Moscow and never see an enemy!”

When the young women were comfortably ensconced in the sleigh, the riders of the Wild Division crowded their horses around them and shook hands with them English fashion.

“When you come back,” they cried, “you shall find us riding through Petrograd behind Korniloff!” And to Brisson and Estridge, in a friendly manner: “Come also, comrades. We will show you a monument made out of heads and higher than the Kremlin. That would be a funny joke and worth coming back to see.”

Brisson said pleasantly that such an exquisite jest would be well worth their return to Russia.

Everybody seemed pleased; the Cossacks wheeled their shaggy mounts and trotted away into the woods, singing. The sleigh drove on.

“This is very jolly,” said Brisson cheerfully. “Wherever we’re bound for, now, we’ll all go together.”

“Is not America the destination of your long journey?” inquired the big, blue-eyed girl.

Brisson chuckled: “Yes,” he said, “but bullets sometimes shorten routes and alter destinations. I think you ought to know the worst.”

“If that’s the worst, it’s nothing to frighten one,” said the Swedish girl. And her crystalline laughter filled the icy air.

She put one persuasive arm around her slender, dark-eyed comrade:

“To meet God unexpectedly is nothing to scare one, is it, Palla?” she urged coaxingly.

The other reddened and her eyes flashed: “What God do you mean?” she retorted. “If I have anything to say about my destination after death I shall go wherever love is. And it does not dwell with the God or in the Heaven that we have been taught to desire and hope for.”

The Swedish girl patted her shoulder and smiled in good humoured deprecation at Brisson and Estridge.

“God let her dearest friend die under the rifles of the Reds,” she explained cheerfully, “and my little comrade can not reconcile this sad affair with her faith in Divine justice. So she concludes there isn’t any such thing. And no Divinity.” She shrugged: “That is what shakes the faith in youth—the seeming indifference of the Most High.”

Palla Dumont sat silent. The colour had died out in her cheeks, her dark, indifferent eyes became fixed.

Estridge opened the fur collar of his coat and pulled back his fur cap.

“Do you remember me?” he said to Ilse Westgard.

The girl laughed: “Yes, I remember you, now!”

To Palla Dumont he said: “And do *you* remember?”

At that she looked up incuriously; leaned forward slowly; gazed intently at him; then she caught both his hands in hers with a swift, sobbing intake of breath.

“You are John Estridge,” she said. “You took me to her in your ambulance!” She pressed his hands almost convulsively, and he felt her trembling under the fur robe.

“Is it true,” he said, “—that ghastly tragedy?”

“Yes.”

“All died?”

“All.”

Estridge turned to Brisson: “Miss Dumont was companion to the Grand Duchess Marie,” he said in brief explanation.

Brisson nodded, biting his cigar.

The Swedish girl-soldier said: “They were devoted—the little Grand Duchess and Palla.... It was horrible, there in the convent cellar—those young girls——” She gazed out across the snow; then,

“The Reds who did it had already made me prisoner.... They arrested me in uniform after the decree disbanding us.... I was on my way to join Kaledines’ Cossacks—a rendezvous.... Well, the Reds left me outside the convent and went in to do their bloody work. And I gnawed the rope and ran into the chapel to hide among the nuns. And there I saw a White Nun—quite crazed with grief——”

“I had heard the volley that killed her,” said Palla, in explanation, to nobody in particular. She sat staring out across the snow with dry, bright eyes.

Brisson looked askance at her, looked significantly at the Swedish girl, Ilse Westgard: “And what happened then?” he inquired, with the pleasant, impersonal manner of a physician.

Ilse said: “Palla had already begun her novitiate. But what happened in those

terrible moments changed her utterly.... I think she went mad at the moment.... Then the Superior came to me and begged me to hide Palla because the Bolsheviki had promised to return and cut her throat when they had finished their bloody business in the crypt.... So I caught her up in my arms and I ran out into the convent grounds. And at that very moment, God be thanked, a sotnia of the Wild Division rode up looking for me. And they had led horses with them. And we were in the saddle and riding like maniacs before I could think. That is all, except, an hour ago we saw your sleigh."

"You have been hiding with the Cossacks ever since!" exclaimed Estridge to Palla.

"That is her history," replied Ilse, "and mine. And," she added cheerfully but tenderly, "my little comrade, here, is very, very homesick, very weary, very deeply and profoundly unhappy in the loss of her closest friend... and perhaps in the loss of her faith in God."

"I am tranquil and I am not unhappy,"—said Palla. "And if I ever win free of this murderous country I shall, for the first time in my life, understand what the meaning of life really is. And shall know how to live."

"You thought you knew how to live when you took the white veil," said Ilse cheerfully. "Perhaps, after all, you may make other errors before you learn the truth about it all. Who knows? You might even care to take the veil again——"

"Never!" cried Palla in a clear, hard little voice, tinged with the scorn and anger of that hot revolt which sometimes shakes youth to the very source of its vitality.

Ilse said very calmly to Estridge: "With me it is my reason and not mere hope that convinces me of God's existence. I try to reason with Palla because one is indeed to be pitied who has lost belief in God——"

"You are mistaken," said Palla drily; "—one merely becomes one's self when once the belief in that sort of God is ended."

Ilse turned to Brisson: "That," she said, "is what seems so impossible for some to accept—so terrible—the apparent indifference, the lack of explanation—God's dreadful reticence in this thunderous whirlwind of prayer that storms skyward day and night from our martyred world."

Palla, listening, sat forward and said to Brisson: "There is only one religion and it has only two precepts—love and give! The rest—the forms, observances, creeds, ceremonies, threats, promises, are man-made trash!

"If man's man-made God pleases him, let him worship him. That kind of deity does not please me. I no longer care whether He pleases me or not. He no longer exists as far as I am concerned."

Brisson, much interested, asked Palla whether the void left by discredited Divinity did not bewilder her.

“There is no void,” said the girl. “It is already filled with my own kind of God, with millions of Gods—my own fellow creatures.”

“Your fellow beings?”

“Yes.”

“You think your fellow creatures can fill that void?”

“They have filled it.”

Brisson nodded reflectively: “I see,” he said politely, “you intend to devote your life to the cult of your fellow creatures.”

“No, I do not,” said the girl tranquilly, “but I intend to love them and live my life that way unhampered.” She added almost fiercely: “And I shall love them the more because of their ignorant faith in an all-seeing and tender and just Providence which does not exist! I shall love them because of their tragic deception and their helplessness and their heart-breaking unconsciousness of it all.”

Ilse Westgard smiled and patted Palla’s cheeks: “All roads lead ultimately to God,” she said, “and yours is a direct route though you do not know it.”

“I tell you I have nothing in common with the God you mean,” flashed out the girl.

Brisson, though interested, kept one grey eye on duty, ever hopeful of wolves. It was snowing hard now—a perfect geography scene, lacking only the wolves; but the étape was only half finished. There might be hope.

The rather amazing conversation in the sleigh also appealed to him, arousing all his instincts of a veteran newspaper man, as well as his deathless curiosity—that perpetual flame which alone makes any intelligence vital.

Also, his passion for all documents—those sewed under his underclothes, as well as these two specimens of human documents—were now keeping his lively interest in life unimpaired.

“Loss of faith,” he said to Palla, and inclined toward further debate, “must be a very serious thing for any woman, I imagine.”

“I haven’t lost faith in love,” she said, smilingly aware that he was encouraging discussion.

“But you say you have lost faith in spiritual love—”

“I did not say so. I did not mean the other kind of love when I said that love is

sufficient religion for me.”

“But spiritual love means Deity——”

“It does *not*! Can you imagine the all-powerful father watching his child die, horribly—and never lifting a finger! Is that love? Is that power? *Is* that Deity?”

“To penetrate the Divine mind and its motives for not intervening is impossible for us——”

“That is priest’s prattle! Also, I care nothing now about Divine motives. Motives are human, not divine. So is policy. That is why the present Pope is unworthy of respect. He let his flock die. He deserted his Cardinal. He let the hun go unrebuked. He betrayed Christ. I care nothing about any mind weak enough, politic enough, powerless enough, to ignore love for motives!

“One loves, or one does not love. Loving is giving—” The girl sat up in the sleigh and the thickening snowflakes drove into her flushed face. “Loving is giving,” she repeated, “—giving life to love; giving *up* life for love—giving! *giving!* always giving!—always forgiving! That is love! That is the only God!—the indestructible, divine God within each one of us!”

Brisson appraised her with keen and scholarly eyes. “Yet,” he said pleasantly, “you do not forgive God for the death of your friend. Don’t you practise your faith?”

The girl seemed nonplussed; then a brighter tint stained her cheeks under the ragged sheepskin cap.

“Forgive God!” she cried. “If there really existed that sort of God, what would be the use of forgiving what He does? He’d only do it again. That is His record!” she added fiercely, “—indifference to human agony, utter silence amid lamentations, stone deaf, stone dumb, motionless. It is not in me to fawn and lick the feet of such an image. No! It is not in me to believe it alive, either. And I do not! But I know that love lives: and if there be any gods at all, it must be that they are without number, and that their substance is of that immortality born inside us, and which we call love! Otherwise, to me, now, symbols, signs, saints, rituals, vows—these things, in my mind, are all scrapped together as junk. Only, in me, the warm faith remains—that within me there lives a god of sorts—perhaps that immortal essence called a soul—and that its only name is love. And it has given us only one law to live by—the Law of Love!”

Brisson’s cigar had gone out. He examined it attentively and found it would be worth relighting when opportunity offered.

Then he smiled amiably at Palla Dumont:

“What you say is very interesting,” he remarked. But he was too polite to add that it had been equally interesting to numberless generations through the many, many centuries during which it all had been said before, in various ways and by many, many people.

Lying back in his furs reflectively, and deriving a rather cold satisfaction from his cigar butt, he let his mind wander back through the history of theocracy and of mundane philosophy, mildly amused to recognize an ancient theory resurrected and made passionately original once more on the red lips of this young girl.

But the Law of Love is not destined to be solved so easily; nor had it ever been solved in centuries dead by Egyptian, Mongol, or Greek—by priest or princess, prophet or singer, or by any vestal or acolyte of love, sacred or profane.

No philosophy had solved the problem of human woe; no theory convinced. And Brisson, searching leisurely the forgotten corridors of treasured lore, became interested to realise that in all the history of time only the deeds and example of one man had invested the human theory of divinity with any real vitality—and that, oddly enough, what this girl preached—what she demanded of divinity—had been both preached and practised by that one man alone—Jesus Christ.

Turning involuntarily toward Palla, he said: “Can’t you believe in Him, either?”

She said: “He was one of the Gods. But He was no more divine than any in whom love lives. Had He been more so, then He would still intervene to-day! He is powerless. He lets things happen. And we ourselves must make it up to the world by love. There is no other divinity to intervene except only our own hearts.”

But that was not, as the young girl supposed, her fixed faith, definite, ripened, unshakable. It was a phase already in process of fading into other phases, each less stable, less definite, and more dangerous than the other, leaving her and her ardent mind and heart always unconsciously drifting toward the simple, primitive and natural goal for which all healthy bodies are created and destined—the instinct of the human being to protect and perpetuate the race by the great Law of Love.

Brisson’s not unkindly cynicism had left his lips edged with a slight smile. Presently he leaned back beside Estridge and said in a low voice:

“Purely pathological. Ardent religious instinct astray and running wild in consequence of nervous dislocations due to shock. Merely over-storage of superb physical energy. Intellectual and spiritual wires overcrowded. Too many volts.... That girl ought to have been married early. Only a lot of

children can keep her properly occupied. Only outlet for her kind. Interesting case. Contrast to the Swedish girl. Fine, handsome, normal animal that. She could pick me up between thumb and finger. Great girl, Estridge."

"She is really beautiful," whispered Estridge, glancing at Ilse.

"Yes. So is Mont Blanc. That sort of beauty—the super-sort. But it's the other who is pathologically interesting because her wires are crossed and there's a short circuit somewhere. Who comes in contact with her had better look out."

"She's wonderfully attractive."

"She is. But if she doesn't disentangle her wires and straighten out she'll burn out.... What's that ahead? A wolf!"

It was the rest house at the end of the étape—a tiny, distant speck on the snowy plain.

Brisson leaned over and caught Palla's eye. Both smiled.

"Well," he said, "for a girl who doesn't believe in anything, you seem cheerful enough."

"I am cheerful because I *do* believe in everything and in everybody."

Brisson laughed: "You shouldn't," he said. "Great mistake. Trust in God and believe nobody—that's the idea. Then get married and close your eyes and see what God will send you!"

The girl threw back her pretty head and laughed.

"Marriage and priests are of no consequence," she said, "but I adore little children!"

CHAPTER II

They were a weary, half-starved and travel-stained quartette when the Red Guards stopped them for the last time in Russia and passed them through, warning them that the White Guards would surely do murder if they caught them.

The next day the White Guards halted them, but finally passed them through, counselling them to keep out of the way of the Red Guards if they wished to escape being shot at sight.

In the neat, shiny, carefully scrubbed little city of Helsingfors they avoided the

huns by some miracle—one of Brisson's customary miracles—but another little company of Americans and English was halted and detained, and one harmless Yankee among them was arrested and packed off to a hun prison.

Also, a large and nervous party of fugitives of mixed nationalities and professions—consuls, chargés, attachés, and innocent, agitated citizens—was summarily grabbed and ordered into indefinite limbo.

But Brisson's daily miracles continued to materialise, even in the land of the Finn. By train, by sleigh, by boat, his quartette floundered along toward safety, and finally emerged from the white hell of the Red people into the sub-arctic sun—Estridge with painfully scanty luggage, Palla Dumont with none at all, Ilse Westgard carrying only her Cossack saddle-bags, and Brisson with his damning papers still sewed inside his clothes, and owing Estridge ten dollars for not getting murdered.

They all had become excellent comrades during those anxious days of hunger, fatigue and common peril, but they were also a little tired of one another, as becomes all friends when subjected to compulsory companionship for an unreasonable period.

And even when one is beginning to fall in love, one can become surfeited with the beloved under such circumstances.

Besides, Estridge's budding sentiment for Ilse Westgard, and her wholesome and girlish inclination for him, suffered an early chill. For the poor child had acquired trench pets from the Cossacks, and had passed on a few to Estridge, with whom she had been constantly seated on the front seat.

Being the frankest thing in Russia, she told him with tears in her blue eyes; and they had a most horrid time of it before they came finally to a sanitary plant erected to attend to such matters.

Episodes of that sort discourage sentiment; so does cold, hunger and discomfort incident on sardine-like promiscuousness.

Nobody in the party desired to know more than they already knew concerning anybody else. In fact, there was little more to know, privacy being impossible. And the ever instinctive hostility of the two sexes, always and irrevocably latent, became vaguely apparent at moments.

Common danger swept it away at times; but reaction gradually revealed again what is born under the human skin—the paradox called sex-antipathy. And yet the men in the party would not have hesitated to sacrifice their lives in defence of these women, nor would the women have faltered under the same test.

Brisson was the philosophical stoic of the quartette. Estridge groused sometimes. Palla, when she thought herself unnoticed, camouflaged her face in her furs and cried now and then. And occasionally Ilse Westgard tried the

patience of the others by her healthy capacity for unfeigned laughter—sometimes during danger-laden and inopportune moments, and once in the shocking imminence of death itself.

As, for example, in a vile little village, full of vermin and typhus, some hunger-crazed peasants, armed with stolen rifles and ammunition, awoke them where they lay on the straw of a stable, cursed them for aristocrats, and marched them outside to a convenient wall, at the foot of which sprawled half a dozen blood-soaked, bayoneted and bullet-riddled landlords and land owners of the district.

And things had assumed a terribly serious aspect when, to their foolish consternation, the peasants discovered that their purloined cartridges did not fit their guns.

Then, in the very teeth of death, Ilse threw back her blond head and laughed. And there was no mistaking the genuineness of the girl's laughter.

Some of their would-be executioners laughed too;—the hilarity spread. It was all over; they couldn't shoot a girl who laughed that way. So somebody brought a samovar; tea was boiled; and they all went back to the barn and sat there drinking tea and swapping gossip and singing until nearly morning.

That was a sample of their narrow escapes. But Brisson's only comment before he went to sleep was that Estridge would probably owe him a dollar within the next twenty-four hours.

They had a hair-raising time in Helsingfors. On one occasion, German officers forced Palla's door at night, and the girl became ill with fear while soldiers searched the room, ordering her out of bed and pushing her into a corner while they ripped up carpets and tore the place to pieces in a swinishly ferocious search for "information."

But they did nothing worse to her, and, for some reason, left the hotel without disturbing Brisson, whose room adjoined and who sat on the edge of his bed with an automatic in each hand—a dangerous opportunist awaiting events and calmly determined to do some recruiting for hell if the huns harmed Palla.

She never knew that. And the worst was over now, and the Scandinavian border not far away. And in twenty-four hours they were over—Brisson impatient to get his papers to Washington and planning to start for England on a wretched little packet-boat, in utter contempt of mines, U-boats, and the icy menace of the North Sea.

As for the others, Estridge decided to cable and await orders in Copenhagen; Palla, to sail for home on the first available Danish steamer; Ilse, to go to Stockholm and eventually decide whether to volunteer once more as a soldier of the proletariat or to turn propagandist and carry the true gospel to America,

where, she had heard, the ancient liberties of the great Democracy were becoming imperilled.

The day before they parted company, these four people, so oddly thrown together out of the boiling cauldron of the Russian Terror, arranged to dine together for the last time.

Theirs were the appetites of healthy wolves; theirs was the thirst of the marooned on waterless islands; and theirs, too, was the feverish gaiety of those who had escaped great peril by land and sea; and who were still physically and morally demoralized by the glare and the roar of the hellish conflagration which was still burning up the world around them.

So they met in a private dining room of the hotel for dinner on the eve of separation.

Brisson and Estridge had resurrected from their luggage the remains of their evening attire; Ilse and Palla had shopped; and they now included in a limited wardrobe two simple dinner gowns, among more vital purchases.

There were flowers on the table, no great variety of food but plenty of champagne to make up—a singular innovation in apology for short rations conceived by the hotel proprietor.

There was a victrola in the corner, too, and this they kept going to stimulate their nerves, which already were sufficiently on edge without the added fillip of music and champagne.

“As for me,” said Brisson, “I’m in sight of nervous dissolution already;—I’m going back to my wife and children, thank God—” he smiled at Palla. “I’m grateful to the God you don’t believe in, dear little lady. And if He is willing, I’ll report for duty in two weeks.” He turned to Estridge:

“What about you?”

“I’ve cabled for orders but I have none yet. If they’re through with me I shall go back to New York and back to the medical school I came from. I hate the idea, too. Lord, how I detest it!”

“Why?” asked Palla nervously.

“I’ve had too much excitement. You have too—and so have Ilse and Brisson. I’m not keen for the usual again. It bores me to contemplate it. The thought of Fifth Avenue—the very idea of going back to all that familiar routine, social and business, makes me positively ill. What a dull place this world will be when we’re all at peace again!”

“We won’t be at peace for a long, long while,” said Ilse, smiling. She lifted a goblet in her big, beautifully shaped hand and drained it with the vigorous

grace of a Viking's daughter.

"You think the war is going to last for years?" asked Estridge.

"Oh, no; not this war. But the other," she explained cheerfully.

"What other?"

"Why, the greatest conflict in the world; the social war. It's going to take many years and many battles. I shall enlist."

"Nonsense," said Brisson, "you're not a Red!"

The girl laughed and showed her snowy teeth: "I'm one kind of Red—not the kind that sold Russia to the boche—but I'm very, very red."

"Everybody with a brain and a heart is more or less red in these days," nodded Palla. "Everybody knows that the old order is ended—done for. Without liberty and equal opportunity civilisation is a farce. Everybody knows it except the stupid. And they'll have to be instructed."

"Very well," said Brisson briskly, "here's to the universal but bloodless revolution! An acre for everybody and a mule to plough it! Back to the soil and to hell with the counting house!"

They all laughed, but their brimming glasses went up; then Estridge rose to re-wind the victrola. Palla's slim foot tapped the parquet in time with the American fox-trot; she glanced across the table at Estridge, lifted her head interrogatively, then sprang up and slid into his arms, delighted.

While they danced he said: "Better go light on that champagne, Miss Dumont."

"Don't you think I can keep my head?" she demanded derisively.

"Not if you keep up with Ilse. You're not built that way."

"I wish I were. I wish I were nearly six feet tall and beautiful in every limb and feature as she is. What wonderful children she could have! What magnificent hair she must have had before she sheared it for the Woman's Battalion! Now it's all a dense, short mass of gold—she looks like a lovely boy who requires a barber."

"Your hair is not unbecoming, either," he remarked, "—short as it is, it's a mop of curls and very fetching."

"Isn't it funny?" she said. "I sheared mine for the sake of Mother Church; Ilse cut off hers for the honour of the Army! Now we're both out of a job—with only our cropped heads to show for the experience!—and no more army and no more church—at least, as far as I am concerned!"

And she threw back hers with its thick, glossy curls and laughed, looking up at him out of her virginal brown eyes of a child.

“I’m sorry I cut my hair,” she added presently. “I look like a Bolshevik.”

“It’s growing very fast,” he said encouragingly.

“Oh, yes, it grows fast,” she nodded indifferently. “Shall we return to the table? I am rather thirsty.”

Ilse and Brisson were engaged in an animated conversation when they reseated themselves. The waiter arrived about that time with another course of poor food.

Palla, disregarding Estridge’s advice, permitted the waiter to refill her glass.

“I can’t eat that unappetising entrée,” she insisted, “and champagne, they say, is nourishing and I’m still hungry.”

“As you please,” said Brisson; “but you’ve had two glasses already.”

“I don’t care,” she retorted childishly; “I mean to live to the utmost in future. For the first time in my silly existence I intend to be natural. I wonder what it feels like to become a little intoxicated?”

“It feels rotten,” remarked Estridge.

“Really? *How* rotten?” She laughed again, laid her hand on the goblet’s stem and glanced across at him defiantly, mischievously. However, she seemed to reconsider the matter, for she picked up a cigarette and lighted it at a candle.

“Bah!” she exclaimed with a wry face. “It stings!”

But she ventured another puff or two before placing it upon a saucer among its defunct fellows.

“Ugh!” she complained again with a gay little shiver, and bit into a pear as though to wash out the contamination of unaccustomed nicotine.

“Where are you going when we all say good-bye?” inquired Estridge.

“I? Oh, I’m certainly going home on the first Danish boat—home to Shadow Hill, where I told you I lived.”

“And you have nobody but your aunt?”

“Only that one old lady.”

“You won’t remain long at Shadow Hill,” he predicted.

“It’s very pretty there. Why don’t you think I am likely to remain?”

“You won’t remain,” he repeated. “You’ve slipped your cable. You’re hoisting sail. And it worries me a little.”

The girl laughed. “It’s a pretty place, Shadow Hill, but it’s dull. Everybody in the town is dull, stupid, and perfectly satisfied: everybody owns at least that acre which Ilse demands; there’s no discontent at Shadow Hill, and no reason for it. I really couldn’t bear it,” she added gaily; “I want to go where there’s healthy discontent, wholesome competition, natural aspiration—where things must be bettered, set right, helped. You understand? That is where I wish to be.”

Brisson heard her. “Can’t you practise your loving but godless creed at Shadow Hill?” he inquired, amused. “Can’t you lavish love on the contented and well-to-do?”

“Yes, Mr. Brisson,” she replied with sweet irony, “but where the poor and loveless fight an ever losing battle is still a better place for me to practise my godless creed and my Law of Love.”

“Aha!” he retorted, “—a brand new excuse for living in New York because all young girls love it!”

“Indeed,” she said with some little heat, “I certainly do intend to live and not to stagnate! I intend to live as hard as I can—live and enjoy life with all my might! Can one serve the world better than by loving it enough to live one’s own life through to the last happy rags? Can one give one’s fellow creatures a better example than to live every moment happily and proclaim the world good to live in, and mankind good to live with?”

Ilse whispered, leaning near: “Don’t take any more champagne, Palla.”

The girl frowned, then looked serious: “No, I won’t,” she said naïvely. “But it is wonderful how eloquent it makes one feel, isn’t it?”

And to Estridge: “You know that this is quite the first wine I have ever tasted—except at Communion. I was brought up to think it meant destruction. And afterward, wherever I travelled to study, the old prejudice continued to guide me. And after that, even when I began to think of taking the veil, I made abstinence one of my first preliminary vows.... And *look* what I’ve been doing to-night!”

She held up her glass, tasted it, emptied it.

“There,” she said, “I desired to shock you. I don’t really want any more. Shall we dance? Ilse! Why don’t you seize Mr. Brisson and make him two-step?”

“Please seize me,” added Brisson gravely.

Ilse rose, big, fresh, smilingly inviting; Brisson inspected her seriously—he

was only half as tall—then he politely encircled her waist and led her out.

They danced as though they could not get enough of it—exhilaration due to reaction from the long strain during dangerous days.

It was already morning, but they danced on. Palla's delicate intoxication passed—returned—passed—hovered like a rosy light in her brain, but faded always as she danced.

There were snapping-crackers and paper caps; and they put them on and pelted each other with the drooping table flowers.

Then Estridge went to the piano and sang an ancient song, called "The Cork Leg"—not very well—but well intended and in a gay and inoffensive voice.

But Ilse sang some wonderful songs which she had learned in the Battalion of Death.

And that is what was being done when a waiter knocked and asked whether they might desire to order breakfast.

That ended it. The hour of parting had arrived.

No longer bored with one another, they shook hands cordially, regretfully.

It was not a very long time, as time is computed, before these four met again.

CHAPTER III

The dingy little Danish steamer *Elsinore* passed in at dawn, her camouflage obscured by sea-salt, her few passengers still prostrated from the long battering administered by the giant seas of the northern route.

A lone Yankee soldier was aboard—an indignant lieutenant of infantry named Shotwell—sent home from a fighting regiment to instruct the ambitious rookie at Camp Upton.

He had hailed his assignment with delight, thankfully rid himself of his cooties, reported in Paris, reported in London; received orders to depart via Denmark; and, his mission there fullfilled, he had sailed on the *Elsinore*, already disenchanted with his job and longing to be back with his regiment.

And now, surly from sea-sickness, worried by peace rumours, but still believing that the war would last another year and hopeful of getting back before it ended, he emerged from his stuffy quarters aboard the *Elsinore* and gazed without enthusiasm at the minarets of Coney Island, now visible off the

starboard bow.

Near him, in pasty-faced and shaky groups, huddled his fellow passengers, whom he had not seen during the voyage except when lined up for life-drill.

He had not wished to see them, either, nor, probably, had they desired to lavish social attentions on him or upon one another.

These pallid, discouraged voyagers were few—not two dozen cabin passengers in all.

Who they might be he had no curiosity to know; he had not exchanged ten words with any of them during the entire and nauseating voyage; he certainly did not intend to do so now.

He favoured them with a savage glance and walked over to the port side—the Jersey side—where there seemed to be nobody except a tired Scandinavian sailor or two.

In the grey of morning the Hook loomed up above the sea, gloomy as a thunder-head charged with lightning.

After a while the batteries along the Narrows slipped into view. Farther on, camouflaged ships rode sullenly at anchor, as though ashamed of their frivolous and undignified appearance. A battleship was just leaving the Lower Bay, smoke pouring from every funnel. Destroyers and chasers rushed by them, headed seaward.

Then, high over the shore mists and dimly visible through rising vapours, came speeding a colossal phantom.

Vague as a shark's long shadow sheering translucent depths, the huge dirigible swept eastward and slid into the Long Island fog.

And at that moment somebody walked plump into young Shotwell; and the soft, fragrant shock knocked the breath out of both.

She recovered hers first:

"I'm sorry!" she faltered. "It was stupid. I was watching the balloon and not looking where I was going. I'm afraid I hurt you."

He recovered his breath, saluted ceremoniously, readjusted his overseas cap to the proper angle.

Then he said, civilly enough: "It was my fault entirely. It was I who walked into you. I hope I didn't hurt you."

They smiled, unembarrassed.

"That was certainly a big dirigible," he ventured. "There are bigger Zeps, of

course.”

“Are there really?”

“Oh, yes. But they’re not much good in war, I believe.”

She turned her trim, small head and looked out across the bay; and Shotwell, who once had had a gaily receptive eye for pulchritude, thought her unusually pretty.

Also, the steady keel of the *Elsinore* was making him feel more human now; and he ventured a further polite observation concerning the pleasures of homecoming after extended exile.

She turned with a frank shake of her head: “It seems heartless to say so, but I’m rather sorry I’m back,” she said.

He smiled: “I must admit,” he confessed, “that I feel the same way. Of course I want to see my people. But I’d give anything to be in France at this moment, and that’s the truth!”

The girl nodded her comprehension: “It’s quite natural,” she remarked. “One does not wish to come home until this thing is settled.”

“That’s it exactly. It’s like leaving an interesting play half finished. It’s worse—it’s like leaving an absorbing drama in which you yourself are playing an exciting rôle.”

She glanced at him—a quick glance of intelligent appraisal.

“Yes, it must have seemed that way to you. But I’ve been merely one among a breathless audience.... And yet I can’t bear to leave in the very middle—not knowing how it is to end. Besides,” she added carelessly, “I have nobody to come back to except a rather remote relative, so my regrets are unmixed.”

There ensued a silence. He was afraid she was about to go, but couldn’t seem to think of anything to say to detain her.

For the girl was very attractive to a careless and amiably casual man of his sort—the sort who start their little journey through life with every intention of having the best kind of a time on the way.

She was so distractingly pretty, so confidently negligent of convention—or perhaps disdainful of it—that he already was regretting that he had not met her at the beginning of the voyage instead of at the end.

She had now begun to button up her ulster, as though preliminary to resuming her deck promenade. And he wanted to walk with her. But because she had chosen to be informal with him did not deceive him into thinking that she was likely to tolerate further informality on his part. And yet he had a vague notion

that her inclinations were friendly.

“I’m sorry,” he said rather stupidly, “that I didn’t meet you in the beginning.”

The slightest inclination of her head indicated that although possibly she might be sorry too, regrets were now useless. Then she turned up the collar of her ulster. The face it framed was disturbingly lovely. And he took a last chance.

“And so,” he ventured politely, “you have really been on board the *Elsinore* all this time!”

She turned her charming head toward him, considered him a moment; then she smiled.

“Yes,” she said; “I’ve been on board all the time. I didn’t crawl aboard in mid-ocean, you know.”

The girl was frankly amused by the streak of boyishness in him—the perfectly transparent desire of this young man to detain her in conversation. And, still amused, she leaned back against the rail. If he wanted to talk to her she would let him—even help him. Why not?

“Is that a wound chevron?” she inquired, looking at the sleeve of his tunic.

“No,” he replied gratefully, “it’s a service stripe.”

“And what does the little cord around your shoulder signify?”

“That my regiment was cited.”

“For bravery?”

“Well—that was the idea, I believe.”

“Then you’ve been in action.”

“Yes.”

“Over the top?”

“Yes.”

“How many times?”

“Several. Recently it’s been more open work, you know.”

“And you were not hit?”

“No.”

She regarded him smilingly: “You are like all soldiers have faced death,” she said. “You are not communicative.”

At that he reddened. “Well, everybody else was facing it, too, you know. We all had the same experience.”

“Not all,” she said, watching him. “Some died.”

“Oh, of course.”

The girl’s face flushed and she nodded emphatically: “Of course! And *that* is our Yankee secret;—embodied in those two words—‘of course.’ That is exactly why the boche runs away from our men. The boche doesn’t know why he runs, but it is because you all say, ‘of course!—of course we’re here to kill and get killed. What of it? It’s in the rules of the game, isn’t it? Very well; we’re playing the game!’

“But the rules of the hun game are different. According to their rules, machine guns are not charged on. That is not according to plan. Oh, no! But it is in your rules of the game. So after the boche has killed a number of you, and you say, ‘of course,’ and you keep coming on, it first bewilders the boche, then terrifies him. And the next time he sees you coming he takes to his heels.”

Shotwell, amused, fascinated, and entirely surprised, began to laugh.

“You seem to know the game pretty well yourself,” he said. “You are quite right. That is the idea.”

“It’s a wonderful game,” she mused. “I can understand why you are not pleased at being ordered home.”

“It’s rather rotten luck when the outfit had just been cited,” he explained.

“Oh. I should think you *would* hate to come back!” exclaimed the girl, with frank sympathy.

“Well, I was glad at first, but I’m sorry now. I’m missing a lot, you see.”

“Why did they send you back?”

“To instruct rookies!” he said with a grimace. “Rather inglorious, isn’t it? But I’m hoping I’ll have time to weather this detail and get back again before we reach the Rhine.”

“I want to get back again, too,” she reflected aloud, biting her lip and letting her dark eyes rest on the foggy statue of Liberty, towering up ahead.

“What was your branch?” he inquired.

“Oh, I didn’t do anything,” she exclaimed, flushing. “I’ve been in Russia. And now I must find out at once what I can do to be sent to France.”

“The war caught you over there, I suppose,” he hazarded.

“Yes.... I’ve been there since I was twenty. I’m twenty-four. I had a year’s travel and study and then I became the American companion of the little Russian Grand Duchess Marie.”

“They all were murdered, weren’t they?” he asked, much interested.

“Yes.... I’m trying to forget——”

“I beg your pardon——”

“It’s quite all right. I, myself, mentioned it first; but I can’t talk about it yet. It’s too personal——” She turned and looked at the monstrous city.

After a silence: “It’s been a rotten voyage, hasn’t it?” he remarked.

“Perfectly rotten. I was so ill I could scarcely keep my place during life-drill.... I didn’t see you there,” she added with a faint smile, “but I’m sure you were aboard, even if you seem to doubt that I was.”

And then, perhaps considering that she had been sufficiently amiable to him, she gave him his congé with a pleasant little nod.

“Could I help you—do anything—” he began. But she thanked him with friendly finality.

They sauntered in opposite directions; and he did not see her again to speak to her.

Later, jolting toward home in a taxi, it occurred to him that it might have been agreeable to see such an attractively informal girl again. Any man likes informality in women, except among the women of his own household, where he would promptly brand it as indiscretion.

He thought of her for a while, recollecting details of the episode and realising that he didn’t even know her name. Which piqued him.

“Serves me right,” he said aloud with a shrug of finality. “I had more enterprise once.”

Then he looked out into the sunlit streets of Manhattan, all brilliant with flags and posters and swarming with prosperous looking people—his own people. But to his war-enlightened and disillusioned eyes his own people seemed almost like aliens; he vaguely resented their too evident prosperity, their irresponsible immunity, their heedless preoccupation with the petty things of life. The acres of bright flags fluttering above them, the posters that made a gay back-ground for the scene, the sheltered, undisturbed routine of peace seemed to annoy him.

An odd irritation invaded him; he had a sudden impulse to stop his taxi and

shout, “Fat-heads! Get into the game! Don’t you know the world’s on fire? Don’t you know what a hun really is? You’d better look out and get busy!”

Fifth Avenue irritated him—shops, hotels, clubs, motors, the well-dressed throngs began to exasperate him.

On a side street he caught a glimpse of his own place of business; and it almost nauseated him to remember old man Sharrow, and the walls hung with plans of streets and sewers and surveys and photographs; and his own yellow oak desk——

“Good Lord!” he thought. “If the war ends, have I got to go back to that!——”

The family were at breakfast when he walked in on them—only two—his father and mother.

In his mother’s arms he suddenly felt very young and subdued, and very glad to be there.

“Where the devil did you come from, Jim?” repeated his father, with twitching features and a grip on his son’s strong hand that he could not bring himself to loosen.

Yes, it was pretty good to get home, after all— ... And he might not have come back at all. He realised it, now, in his mother’s arms, feeling very humble and secure.

His mother had realised it, too, in every waking hour since the day her only son had sailed at night—that had been the hardest!—at night—and at an unnamed hour of an unnamed day!—her only son—gone in the darkness——

On his way upstairs, he noticed a red service flag bearing a single star hanging in his mother’s window.

He went into his own room, looked soberly around, sat down on the lounge, suddenly tired.

He had three days’ leave before reporting for duty. It seemed a miserly allowance. Instinctively he glanced at his wrist-watch. An hour had fled already.

“The dickens!” he muttered. But he still sat there. After a while he smiled to himself and rose leisurely to make his toilet.

“Such an attractively informal girl,” he thought regretfully.

“I’m sorry I didn’t learn her name. Why didn’t I?”

Philosophy might have answered: “But to what purpose? No young man

expects to pick up a girl of his own kind. And he has no business with other kinds."

But Shotwell was no philosopher.

The "attractively informal girl," on whom young Shotwell was condescending to bestow a passing regret while changing his linen, had, however, quite forgotten him by this time. There is more philosophy in women.

Her train was now nearing Shadow Hill; she already could see the village in its early winter nakedness—the stone bridge, the old-time houses of the well-to-do, Main Street full of automobiles and farmers' wagons, a crowded trolley-car starting for Deepdale, the county seat.

After four years the crudity of it all astonished her—the stark vulgarity of Main Street in the sunshine, every mean, flimsy architectural detail revealed—the dingy trolley poles, the telegraph poles loaded with unlovely wires and battered little electric light fixtures—the uncompromising, unrelieved ugliness of street and people, of shop and vehicle, of treeless sidewalks, brick pavement, car rails, hydrants, and rusty gasoline pumps.

Here was a people ignorant of civic pride, knowing no necessity for beauty, having no standards, no aspirations, conscious of nothing but the grosser material needs.

The hopelessness of this American town—and there were thousands like it—its architectural squalor, its animal unconsciousness, shocked her after four years in lands where colour, symmetry and good taste are indigenous and beauty as necessary as bread.

And the girl had been born here, too; had known no other home except when at boarding school or on shopping trips to New York.

Painfully depressed, she descended at the station, where she climbed into one of the familiar omnibuses and gave her luggage check to the lively young driver.

Several drummers also got in, and finally a farmer whom she recognised but who had evidently forgotten her.

The driver, a talkative young man whom she remembered as an obnoxious boy who delivered newspapers, came from the express office with her trunk, flung it on top of the bus, gossiped with several station idlers, then leisurely mounted his seat and gathered up the reins.

Rattling along the main street she became aware of changes—a brand new yellow brick clothing store—a dreadful Quick Lunch—a moving picture theatre—other monstrosities. And she saw familiar faces on the street.

The drummers got out with their sample cases at the Bolton House—Charles H. Bolton, proprietor. The farmer descended at the “Par Excellence Market,” where, as he informed the driver, he expected to dispose of a bull calf which he had finally decided “to veal.”

“Which way, ma’am?” inquired the driver, looking in at her through the door and chewing gum very fast.

“To Miss Dumont’s on Shadow Street.”

“Oh!...” Then, suddenly he knew her. “Say, wasn’t you her niece?” he demanded.

“I *am* Miss Dumont’s niece,” replied Palla, smiling.

“Sure! I didn’t reckonise you. Used to leave the *Star* on your doorstep! Been away, ain’t you? Home looks kinda good to you, even if it’s kinda lonesome—” He checked himself as though recollecting something else. “Sure! You been over in Rooshia livin’ with the Queen! There was a piece in the *Star* about it. Gee!” he added affably. “That was pretty soft! Some life, I bet!”

And he grinned a genial grin and climbed into his seat, chewing rapidly.

“He means to be friendly,” thought the heart-sick girl, with a shudder.

When Palla got out she spoke pleasantly to him as she paid him, and inquired about his father—a shiftless old gaffer who used, sometimes, to do garden work for her aunt.

But the driver, obsessed by the fact that she had lived with the “Queen of Rooshia,” merely grinned and repeated, “Pretty soft,” and, shouldering her trunk, walked to the front door, chewing furiously.

Martha opened the door, stared through her spectacles.

“Land o’ mercy!” she gasped. “It’s Palla!” Which, in Shadow Hill, is the manner and speech of the “hired girl,” whose “folks” are “neighbours” and not inferiors.

“How do you do, Martha,” said the girl smilingly; and offered her gloved hand.

“Well, I’m so’s to be ’round—” She wheeled on the man with the trunk: “Here, *you*! Don’t go-a-trackin’ mud all over my carpet like that! Wipe your feet like as if you was brought up respectful!”

“Ain’t I wipin’ em?” retorted the driver, in an injured voice. “Now then, Marthy, where does this here trunk go to?”

“Big room front—wait, young fellow; you just follow me and be careful don’t bang the banisters——”

Half way up she called back over her shoulder: “Your room’s all ready, Palla—” and suddenly remembered something else and stood aside on the landing until the young man with the trunk had passed her; then waited for him to return and get himself out of the house. Then, when he had gone out, banging the door, she came slowly back down the stairs and met Palla ascending.

“Where is my aunt?” asked Palla.

And, as Martha remained silent, gazing oddly down at her through her glasses:

“My aunt isn’t ill, is she?”

“No, she ain’t ill. H’ain’t you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Didn’t you get my letter?”

“*Your* letter? Why did *you* write? What is the matter? Where is my aunt?” asked the disturbed girl.

“I wrote you last month.”

“*What* did you write?”

“You never got it?”

“No, I didn’t! What has happened to my aunt?”

“She had a stroke, Palla.”

“What! Is—is she dead!”

“Six weeks ago come Sunday.”

The girl’s knees weakened and she sat down suddenly on the stairs.

“Dead? My Aunt Emeline?”

“She had a stroke a year ago. It made her a little stiff in one leg. But she wouldn’t tell you—wouldn’t bother you. She was that proud of you living as you did with all those kings and queens. ‘No,’ sez she to me, ‘no, Martha, I ain’t a-goin’ to worry Palla. She and the Queen have got their hands full, what with the wicked way those Rooshian people are behaving. No,’ sez she, ‘I’ll git well by the time she comes home for a visit after the war——’”

Martha’s spectacles became dim. She seated herself on the stairs and wiped them on her apron.

“It came in the night,” she said, peering blindly at Palla.... “I wondered why she was late to breakfast. When I went up she was lying there with her eyes open—just as natural——”

Palla’s head dropped and she covered her face with both hands.

CHAPTER IV

There remained, now, nothing to keep Palla in Shadow Hill.

She had never intended to stay there, anyway; she had meant to go to France.

But already there appeared to be no chance for that in the scheme of things. For the boche had begun to squeal for mercy; the frightened swine was squirting life-blood as he rushed headlong for the home sty across the Rhine; his death-stench sickened the world.

Thicker, ranker, reeked the bloody abomination in the nostrils of civilisation, where Justice strode ahead through hell’s own devastation, kicking the boche to death, kicking him through Belgium, through France, out of Light back into Darkness, back, back to his stinking sty.

The rushing sequence of events in Europe since Palla’s arrival in America bewildered the girl and held in abeyance any plan she had hoped to make.

The whole world waited, too, astounded, incredulous as yet of the cataclysmic debacle, slowly realising that the super-swine were but swine—maddened swine, devil driven. And that the Sea was very near.

No romance ever written approached in wild extravagance the story of doom now unfolding in the daily papers.

Palla read and strove to comprehend—read, laid aside her paper, and went about her own business, which alone seemed dully real.

And these new personal responsibilities—now that her aunt was dead—must have postponed any hope of an immediate departure for France.

Her inheritance under her aunt’s will, the legal details, the inventory of scattered acreage and real estate, plans for their proper administration, consultations with an attorney, conferences with Mr. Pawling, president of the local bank—such things had occupied and involved her almost from the moment of her arrival home.

At first the endless petty details exasperated her—a girl fresh from the tremendous tragedy of things where, one after another, empires were crashing amid the conflagration of a continent. And she could not now keep her mind

on such wretched little personal matters while her heart battered passionately at her breast, sounding the exciting summons to active service.

To concentrate her thoughts on mortgages and deeds when she was burning to be on her way to France—to confer power of attorney, audit bills for taxes, for up-keep of line fences, when she was mad to go to New York and find out how quickly she could be sent to France—such things seemed more than a girl could endure.

In Shadow Hill there was scarcely anything to remind her that the fate of the world was being settled for all time.

Only for red service flags here and there, here and there a burly figure in olive-drab swaggering along Main Street, nothing except war-bread, the shortage of coal and sugar, and outrageous prices reminded her that the terrific drama was still being played beyond the ocean to the diapason of an orchestra thundering from England to Asia and from Africa to the Arctic.

But already the eternal signs were pointing to the end. She read the *Republican* in the morning, the *Star* at night. Gradually it became apparent to the girl that the great conflagration was slowly dying down beyond the seas; that there was to be no chance of her returning; that there was to be no need of her services even if she were already equipped to render any, and now, certainly, no time for her to learn anything which might once have admitted her to comradeship in the gigantic conflict between man and Satan. She was too late. The world's tragedy was almost over.

With the signing of the armistice, all dreams of service ended definitely for her.

False news of the suspension of hostilities should have, in a measure, prepared her. Yet, the ultimately truthful news that the war was over made her almost physically ill. For the girl's ardent religious fervour had consumed her emotional energy during the incessant excitement of the past three years. But now, for this natural ardour, there was no further employment. There was no outlet for mind or heart so lately on fire with spiritual fervour. God was no more; her friend was dead. And now the war had ended. And nobody in the world had any need of her—any need of this woman who needed the world—and love—spiritual perhaps, perhaps profane.

The false peace demonstration, which set the bells of Shadow Hill clanging in the wintry air and the mill whistles blowing from distant villages, left her tired, dazed, indifferent. The later celebration, based on official news, stirred her spiritually even less. And she felt ill.

There was a noisy night celebration on Main Street, but she had no desire to see it. She remained indoors reading the *Star* in the sitting room with Max, the

cat. She ate no dinner. She cried herself to sleep.

However, now that the worst had come—as she naïvely informed the shocked Martha next morning—she began to feel relieved in a restless, feverish way.

A healthful girl accumulates much bodily energy over night; Palla's passionate little heart and her active mind completed a storage battery very quickly charged—and very soon over-charged—and an outlet was imperative.

Always, so far in her brief career, she had had adequate outlets. As a child she found satisfaction in violent exercises; in flinging herself headlong into every outdoor game, every diversion among the urchins of her circle. As a school girl her school sports and her studies, and whatever social pleasures were offered, had left the safety valve open.

Later, mistress of her mother's modest fortune, and grown to restless, intelligent womanhood, Palla had gone abroad with a married school-friend, Leila Vance. Under her auspices she had met nice people and had seen charming homes in England—Colonel Vance being somebody in the county and even somebody in London—a diffident, reticent, agriculturally inclined land owner and colonel of yeomanry. And long ago dead in Flanders. And his wife a nurse somewhere in France.

But before the war a year's travel and study had furnished the necessary outlet to Palla Dumont. And then—at a charity bazaar—a passionate friendship had flashed into sacred flame—a friendship born at sight between her and the little Grand Duchess Marie.

War was beginning; Colonel Vance was dead; but imperial inquiry located Leila. And imperial inquiry was satisfied. And Palla became the American companion and friend of the youthful Grand Duchess Marie. For three years that blind devotion had been her outlet—that and their mutual inclination for a life to be dedicated to God.

What was to be her outlet now?—now that the little Grand Duchess was dead—now that God, as she had conceived him, had ceased to exist for her—now that the war was ended, and nobody needed that warm young heart of hers—that ardent little heart so easily set throbbing with the passionate desire to give.

The wintry sunlight flooded the familiar sitting room, setting potted geraniums ablaze, gilding the leather backs of old books, staining prisms on the crystal chandelier with rainbow tints, and causing Max, the family cat, to blink until the vertical pupils of his amber eyes seemed to disappear entirely.

There was some snow outside—not very much—a wild bird or two among the naked apple trees; green edges, still, where snowy lawn and flower border

met.

And there was colour in the leafless shrubbery, too—wine-red stems of dogwood, ash-blue berry-canes, and the tangled green and gold of willows. And over all a pale cobalt sky, and a snow-covered hill, where, in the woods, crows sat cawing on the taller trees, and a slow goshawk sailed.

A rich land, this, even under ice and snow—a rich, rolling land hinting of fat furrows and heavy grain; and of spicy, old-time gardens where the evenings were heavy with the scent of phlox and lilies.

Palla, her hands behind her back, seeming very childish and slim in her black gown, stood searching absently among the books for something to distract her—something in harmony with the restless glow of hidden fires hot in her restless heart.

But war is too completely the great destroyer, killing even the serener pleasures of the mind, corrupting normal appetite, dulling all interest except in what pertains to war.

War is the great vandal, too, obliterating even that interest in the classic past which is born of respect for tradition. War slays all yesterdays, so that human interest lives only in the fierce and present moment, or blazes anew at thought of what may be to-morrow.

Only the chronicles of the burning hour can hold human attention where war is. For last week is already a decade ago; and last year a dead century; but to-day is vital and to-morrow is immortal.

It was so with Palla. Her listless eyes swept the ranks of handsome, old-time books—old favourites bound in gold and leather, masters of English prose and poetry gathered and garnered by her grand-parents when books were rare in Shadow Hill.

Not even the modern masters appealed to her—masters of fiction acclaimed but yesterday; virile thinkers in philosophy, in science; enfranchised poets who had stridden out upon Olympus only yesterday to defy the old god’s lightning with unshackled strophes—and sometimes unbuttoned themes.

But it was with Palla as with others; she drifted back to the morning paper, wherein lay the interest of the hour. And nothing else interested her or the world.

Martha announced lunch. Max accompanied her on her retreat to the kitchen. Palla loitered, not hungry, nervous and unquiet under the increasing need of occupation for that hot heart of hers.

After a while she went out to the dining room, ate enough, endured Martha to the verge, and retreated to await the evening paper.

Her attorney, Mr. Tiddley, came at three. They discussed quit-claims, mortgages, deeds, surveys, and reported encroachments incident to the decay of ancient landmarks. And the conversation maddened her.

At four she put on a smart mourning hat and her black furs, and walked down to see the bank president, Mr. Pawling. The subject of their conversation was investments; and it bored her. At five she returned to the house to receive a certain Mr. Skidder—known in her childhood as Blinky Skidder, in frank recognition of an ocular peculiarity—a dingy but jaunty young man with a sheep's nose, a shrewd upper lip, and snapping red-brown eyes, who came breezily in and said: "Hello, Palla! How's the girl?" And took off his faded mackinaw uninvited.

Mr. Skidder's business had once been the exploitation of farmers and acreage; his specialty the persuasion of Slovak emigrants into the acquisition of doubtful land. But since the war, emigrants were few; and, as honest men must live, Mr. Skidder had branched out into improved real estate and city lots. But the pickings, even here, were scanty, and loans hard to obtain.

"I've changed my mind," said Palla. "I'm not going to sell this house, Blinky."

"Well, for heaven's sake—ain't you going to New York?" he insisted, taken aback.

"Yes, I am. But I've decided to keep my house."

"That," said Mr. Skidder, snapping his eyes, "is silly sentiment, not business. But please yourself Palla. I ain't saying a word. I ain't trying to tell you I can get a lot more for you than your house is worth—what with values falling and houses empty and the mills letting men go because there ain't going to be any more war orders!—but please yourself, Palla. I ain't saying a word to urge you."

"You've said several," she remarked, smilingly. "But I think I'll keep the house for the present, and I'm sorry that I wasted your time."

"Please yourself, Palla," he repeated. "I guess you can afford to from all I hear. I guess you can do as you've a mind to, now.... So you're fixing to locate in New York, eh?"

"I think so."

"Live in a flat?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do in New York?" he asked curiously.

"I'm sure I don't know. There'll be plenty to do, I suppose."

“You bet,” he said, blinking rapidly, “there’s always something doing in that little old town.” He slapped his knee: “Palla,” he said, “I’m thinking of going into the movie business.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’m considering it. Slovaks and bum farms are played out. There’s no money in Shadow Hill—or if there is, it’s locked up—or the income tax has paralysed it. No, I’m through. There’s nothing doing in land; no commissions. And I’m considering a quick getaway.”

“Where do you expect to go?”

“Say, Palla, when you kiss your old home good-bye, there’s only one place to go. Get me?”

“New York?” she inquired, amused.

“That’s me! There’s a guy down there I used to correspond with—a feller named Puma—Angelo Puma—not a regular wop, as you might say, but there’s some wop in him, judging by his map—or Mex—or kike, maybe—or something. Anyway, he’s in the moving picture business—The Ultra-Fillum Company. I guess there’s a mint o’ money in fillums.”

She nodded, a trifle bored.

“I got a chance to go in with Angelo Puma,” he said, snapping his eyes.

“Really?”

“You know, Palla, I’ve made a little money, too, since you been over there living with the Queen of Russia.”

“I’m very glad, Blinky.”

“Oh, it ain’t much. And,” he added shrewdly, “it ain’t so paltry, neither. Thank the Lord, I made hay while the Slovaks lasted.... So,” he added, getting up from his chair, “maybe I’ll see you down there in New York, some day——”

He hesitated, his blinking eyes redly intent on her as she rose to her slim height.

“Say, Palla.”

She looked at him inquiringly.

“Ever thought of the movies?”

“As an investment?”

“Well—that, too. There’s big money in it. But I meant—I mean—it strikes me

you'd make a bird of a movie queen."

The suggestion mildly amused her.

"I mean it," he insisted. "Grab it from me, Palla, you've got the shape, and you got the looks and you got the walk and the ways and the education. You got something peculiar—like you had been born a rich swell—I mean you kinda naturally act that way—kinda cocksure of yourself. Maybe you got it living with that Queen——"

Palla laughed outright.

"So you think because I've seen a queen I ought to know how to act like a movie queen?"

"Well," he said, picking up his hat, "maybe if I go in with Angelo Puma some day I'll see you again and we'll talk it over."

She shook hands with him.

"Be good," he called back as she closed the front door behind him.

The early winter night had fallen over Shadow Hill. Palla turned on the electric light, stood for a while looking sombrely at the framed photographs of her father and mother, then, feeling lonely, went into the kitchen where Martha was busy with preparations for dinner.

"Martha," she said, "I'm going to New York."

"Well, for the land's sake——"

"Yes, and I'm going day after to-morrow."

"What on earth makes you act like a gypsy, Palla?" she demanded querulously, seasoning the soup and tasting it. "Your pa and ma wasn't like that. They was satisfied to set and rest a mite after being away. But you've been gone four years 'n more, and now you're up and off again, hippity-skip! clippity-clip!——"

"I'm just going to run down to New York and look about. I want to look around and see what——"

"That's *you*, Palla! That's what you allus was doing as a child—allus looking about you with your wide brown eyes, to see what you could see in the world!... You know what curiosity did to the cat?"

"What?"

"Pinched her paw in the mouse-trap."

"I'll be careful," said the girl, laughing.

CHAPTER V

In touch with his unexciting business again, after many months of glorious absence, and seated once more at his abhorred yellow-oak desk, young Shotwell discovered it was anything except agreeable for him to gather up the ravelled thrums of civilian life after the thrilling taste of service over seas.

For him, so long accustomed to excitement, the zest of living seemed to die with the signing of the armistice.

In fact, since the Argonne drive, all luck seemed to have deserted him; for in the very middle of operations he had been sent back to the United States as instructor; and there the armistice had now caught him. Furthermore, then, before he realised what dreadful thing was happening to him, he had been politely assigned to that vague limbo supposedly inhabited by a mythical organisation known as The Officers' Reserve Corps, and had been given indefinite leave of absence preliminary to being mustered out of the service of the United States.

To part from his uniform was agonising, and he berated the fate that pried him loose from tunic and puttees. So disgusted was he that, although the Government allowed three months longer before discarding uniforms, he shed his in disgust for "cits."

But James Shotwell, Jr., was not the only man bewildered and annoyed by the rapidity of events which followed the first days of demobilisation. Half a dozen other young fellows in the big real estate offices of Clarence Sharrow & Co. found themselves yanked out of uniform and seated once more at their familiar, uninviting desks of yellow oak—very young men, mostly, assigned to various camps of special three-month instruction; and now cruelly interrupted while scrambling frantically after commissions in machine-gun companies, field artillery, flying units, and tank corps.

And there they were, back again at the old grind before they could realise their horrid predicament—the majority already glum and restless under the reaction, and hating Shotwell, who, among them all, had been the only man to cross the sea.

This war-worn and envied veteran of a few months, perfectly aware that his military career had ended, was now trying to accept the situation and habituate himself to the loathly technique of commerce.

Out of uniform, out of humour, out of touch with the arts of peace; still, at times, all a-quiver with the nervous shock of his experience, it was very hard for him to speak respectfully to Mr. Sharrow.

As instructor to rookie aspirants he would have been somebody: he had already been somebody as a lieutenant of infantry in the thunderous scheme of things in the Argonne.

But in the offices of Clarence Sharrow & Co. he was merely a rather nice-looking civilian subordinate, whose duties were to aid clients in the selection and purchase of residences, advise them, consult with them, make appointments to show them dwelling houses, vacant or still tenanted, and in every stage of repair or decrepitude.

On the wall beside his desk hung a tinted map of the metropolis. Upon a table at his elbow were piled ponderous tomes depicting the Bronx in all its beauty, and giving details of suburban sewers. Other volumes contained maps of the fashionable residential district, showing every consecrated block and the exact location as well as the linear dimensions of every awesome residence and back yard from Washington Square to Yorkville.

By referring to a note-book which he carried in his breast pocket, young Shotwell could inform any grand lady or any pompous or fussy gentleman what was the “asking price” of any particular residence marked for sale upon the diagrams of the ponderous tomes.

Also—which is why Sharrow selected him for that particular job—clients liked his good manners and his engaging ways.

The average client buys a freshly painted house in preference to a well-built one, but otherwise clamours always for a bargain. The richer the client the louder the clamour. And to such demands Shotwell was always sympathetic—always willing to inquire whether or not the outrageous price asked for a dwelling might possibly be “shaded” a little.

It always could be shaded; but few clients knew that; and the majority, much flattered at their own business acumen, entertained kind feelings toward Sharrow & Co. and sentiments almost cordial toward young Shotwell when the “shading” process had proved to be successful.

But the black-eye dealt the residential district long ago had not yet cleared up. Real property of that sort was still dull and inactive except for a flare-up now and then along Park Avenue and Fifth.

War, naturally, had not improved matters; and, as far as the residential part of their business was concerned, Sharrow & Co. transacted the bulk of it in leasing apartments and, now and then, a private house, usually on the West Side.

That morning, in the offices of Sharrow & Co., a few clients sat beside the desks of the various men who specialised in the particular brand of real estate desired: several neat young girls performed diligently upon typewriters; old

man Sharrow stood at the door of his private office twirling his eyeglasses by the gold chain and urbanely getting rid of an undesirable visitor—one Angelo Puma, who wanted some land for a moving picture studio, but was persuasively unwilling to pay for it.

He was a big man, too heavy, youngish, with plump olive skin, black hair, lips too full and too red under a silky moustache, and eyes that would have been magnificent in a woman—a Spanish dancer, for example—rich, dark eyes, softly brilliant under curling lashes.

He seemed to covet the land and the ramshackle stables on it, but he wanted somebody to take back a staggering mortgage on the property. And Mr. Sharrow shook his head gently, and twirled his eyeglasses.

“For me,” insisted Puma, “I do not care. It is good property. I would pay cash if I had it. But I have not. No. My capital at the moment is tied up in production; my daily expenses, at present, require what cash I have. If your client is at all reasonable——”

“He isn’t,” said Sharrow. “He’s a Connecticut Yankee.”

For a moment Angelo Puma seemed crestfallen, then his brilliant smile flashed from every perfect tooth:

“That is very bad for me,” he said, buttoning-his showy overcoat. “Pardon me; I waste your time—” pulling on his gloves. “However, if your client should ever care to change his mind——”

“One moment,” said Sharrow, whose time Mr. Puma had indeed wasted at intervals during the past year, and who heartily desired to be rid of property and client: “Suppose you deal directly with the owner. We are not particularly anxious to carry the property; it’s a little out of our sphere. Suppose I put you in direct communication with the owner.”

“Delighted,” said Puma, flashing his smile and bowing from the waist; and perfectly aware that his badgering had bored this gentleman to the limit.

“I’ll write out his address for you,” said Sharrow, “—one moment, please——”

Angelo Puma waited, his glossy hat in one hand, his silver-headed stick and folded suede gloves in the other.

Like darkly brilliant searchlights his magnificent eyes swept the offices of Sharrow & Co.; at a glance he appraised the self-conscious typists, surmised possibilities in a blond one; then, as a woman entered from the street, he rested his gaze upon her. And he kept it there.

Even when Sharrow came out of his private office with the slip of paper, Angelo Puma’s eyes still remained fastened upon the young girl who had

spoken to a clerk and then seated herself in a chair beside the desk of James Shotwell, Jr.

“The man’s name,” repeated Sharrow patiently, “is Elmer Skidder. His address is Shadow Hill, Connecticut.”

Puma turned to him as though confused, thanked him effusively, took the slip of paper, pulled on his gloves in a preoccupied way, and very slowly walked toward the street door, his eyes fixed on the girl who was now in animated conversation with young Shotwell.

As he passed her she was laughing at something the young man had just said, and Puma deliberately turned and looked at her again—looked her full in the face.

She was aware of him and of his bold scrutiny, of course—noticed his brilliant eyes, no doubt—but paid no heed to him—was otherwise preoccupied with this young man beside her, whom she had neither seen nor thought about since the day she had landed in New York from the rusty little Danish steamer *Elsinore*.

And now, although he had meant nothing at all to her except an episode already forgotten, to meet him again had instantly meant something to her.

For this man now represented to her a link with the exciting past—this young soldier who had been fresh from the furnace when she had met him on deck as the *Elsinore* passed in between the forts in the grey of early morning.

The encounter was exciting her a little, too, over-emphasising its importance.

“Fancy!” she repeated, “my encountering you here and in civilian dress! Were you dreadfully disappointed by the armistice?”

“I’m ashamed to say I took it hard,” he admitted.

“So did I. I had hoped so to go to France. And you—oh, I *am* sorry for you. You were so disgusted at being detailed from the fighting line to Camp Upton! And now the war is over. What a void!”

“You’re very frank,” he said. “We’re supposed to rejoice, you know.”

“Oh, of course. I really do rejoice——”

They both laughed.

“I mean it,” she insisted. “In my sober senses I am glad the war is over. I’d be a monster if I were not glad. But—*what* is going to take its place? Because we must have something, you know. One can’t endure a perfect void, can one?”

Again they laughed.

“It was such a tremendous thing,” she explained. “I did want to be part of it before it ended. But of course peace is a tremendous thing, too——”

And they both laughed once more.

“Anybody overhearing us,” she confided to him, “would think us mere beasts. Of course you are glad the war is ended: that’s why you fought. And I’m glad, too. And I’m going to rent a house in New York and find something to occupy this void I speak of. But isn’t it nice that I should come to you about it?”

“Jolly,” he said. “And now at last I’m going to learn your name.”

“Oh. Don’t you know it?”

“I wanted to ask you, but there seemed to be no proper opportunity——”

“Of course. I remember. There seemed to be no reason.”

“I was sorry afterward,” he ventured.

That amused her. “You weren’t really sorry, were you?”

“I really was. I thought of you——”

“Do you mean to say you remembered me after the ship docked?”

“Yes. But I’m very sure you instantly forgot me.”

“I certainly did!” she admitted, still much amused at the idea. “One doesn’t remember everybody one sees, you know,” she went on frankly,“—particularly after a horrid voyage and when one’s head is full of exciting plans. Alas! those wonderful plans of mine!—the stuff that dreams are made of. And here I am asking you kindly to find me a modest house with a modest rental.... And by the way,” she added demurely, “my name is Palla Dumont.”

“Thank you,” he said smilingly. “Do you care to know mine?”

“I know it. When I came in and told the clerk what I wanted, he said I should see Mr. Shotwell.”

“James Shotwell, Jr.,” he said gravely.

“That *is* amiable. You don’t treasure malice, do you? I might merely have known you as *Mr.* Shotwell. And you generously reveal all from James to Junior.”

They were laughing again. Mr. Sharrow noticed them from his private office and congratulated himself on having Shotwell in his employment.

“When may I see a house?” inquired Palla, settling her black-gloved hands in her black fox muff.

“Immediately, if you like.”

“How wonderful!”

He took out his note-book, glanced through several pages, asked her carelessly what rent she cared to pay, made a note of it, and resumed his study of the note-book.

“The East Side?” he inquired, glancing at her with curiosity not entirely professional.

“I prefer it.”

From his note-book he read to her the descriptions and situations of several twenty-foot houses in the zone between Fifth and Third Avenues.

“Shall we go to see some of them, Mr. Shotwell? Have you, perhaps, time this morning?”

“I’m delighted,” he said. Which, far from straining truth, perhaps restrained it.

So he got his hat and overcoat, and they went out together into the winter sunshine.

Angelo Puma, seated in a taxi across the street, observed them. He wore a gardenia in his lapel. He might have followed Palla had she emerged alone from the offices of Sharrow & Co.

Shotwell Junior had a jolly morning of it. And, if the routine proved a trifle monotonous, Palla, too, appeared to amuse herself.

She inspected various types of houses, expensive and inexpensive, modern and out of date, well built and well kept and “jerry-built” and dirty.

Prices and rents painfully surprised her, and she gave up any idea of renting a furnished house, and so informed Shotwell.

So they restricted their inspection to three-story unfurnished and untenanted houses, where the neighbourhood was less pretentious and there was a better light in the rear.

But they all were dirty, neglected, out of repair, destitute of decent plumbing and electricity.

On the second floor of one of these Palla stood, discouraged, perplexed, gazing absently out, across a filthy back yard full of seedling ailanthus trees and rubbish, at the rear fire escapes on the tenements beyond.

Shotwell, exploring the closely written pages of his note-book, could discover

nothing desirable within the terms she was willing to make.

“There’s one house on our books,” he said at last, “which came in only yesterday. I haven’t had time to look at it. I don’t even know where the keys are. But if you’re not too tired——”

Palla gave him one of her characteristic direct looks:

“I’m not too tired, but I’m starved. I could go after lunch.”

“Fine!” he said. “I’m hungry, too! Shall we go to Delmonico’s?”

The girl seemed a trifle nonplussed. She had not supposed that luncheon with clients was included in a real estate transaction.

She was not embarrassed, nor did the suggestion seem impertinent. But she said:

“I had expected to lunch at the hotel.”

He reddened a little. Guilt shows its colors.

“Had you rather?” he asked.

“Why, no. I’d rather lunch with you at Delmonico’s and talk houses.” And, a little amused at this young man’s transparent guile, she added: “I think it would be very agreeable for us to lunch together.”

She came from the dressing-room fresh and flushed as a slightly chilled rose, rejoining him in the lobby, and presently they were seated in the palm room with a discreet and hidden orchestra playing, “Oh! How I Hate To Get Up in the Morning,” and rather busy with a golden Casaba melon between them.

“Isn’t this jolly!” he said, expanding easily, as do all young men in the warmth of the informal.

“Very. What an agreeable business yours seems to be, Mr. Shotwell.”

“In what way?” he asked innocently.

“Why, part of it is lunching with feminine clients, isn’t it?”

His close-set ears burned. She glanced up with mischief brilliant in her brown eyes. But he was busy with his melon. And, not looking at her:

“Don’t you want to know me?” he asked so clumsily that she hesitated to snub so defenceless a male.

“I don’t know whether I wish to,” she replied, smiling slightly. “I hadn’t aspired to it; I hadn’t really considered it. I was thinking about renting a house.”

He said nothing, but, as the painful colour remained in his face, the girl decided to be a little kinder.

“Anyway,” she said, “I’m enjoying myself. And I hope you are.”

He said he was. But his voice and manner were so subdued that she laughed.

“Fancy asking a girl such a question,” she said. “You shouldn’t ask a woman whether she doesn’t want to know you. It would be irregular enough, under the circumstances, to say that you wanted to know her.”

“That’s what I meant,” he replied, wincing. “Would you consider it?”

She could not disguise her amusement.

“Yes; I’ll consider it, Mr. Shotwell. I’ll give it my careful attention. I owe you something, anyway.”

“What?” he asked uncertainly, prepared for further squelching.

“I don’t know exactly what. But when a man remembers a woman, and the woman forgets the man, isn’t something due him?”

“I think there is,” he said so naïvely that Palla was unable to restrain her gaiety.

“This is a silly conversation,” she said, “—as silly as though I had accepted the cocktail you so thoughtfully suggested. We’re both enjoying each other and we know it.”

“Really!” he exclaimed, brightening.

His boyish relief—everything that this young man said to her—seemed to excite the girl to mirth. Perhaps she had been starved for laughter longer than is good for anybody. Besides, her heart was naturally responsive—opened easily—was easily engaged.

“Of course I’m inclined to like you,” she said, “or I wouldn’t be here lunching with you and talking nonsense instead of houses——”

“We’ll talk houses!”

“No; we’ll *look* at them—later.... Do you know it’s a long, long time since I have laughed with a really untroubled heart?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yes, it isn’t good for a girl. Sadness is a sickness—a physical disorganisation that infects the mind. It makes a strange emotion of love, too, perverting it to that mysticism we call religion—and wasting it.... I suppose you’re rather shocked,” she said smilingly.

“No.... But have you no religion?”

“Have you?”

“Well—yes.”

“Which?”

“Protestant.... Are you Catholic?”

The girl rested her cheek on her hand and dabbed absently at her orange ice.

“I was once,” she said. “I was very religious—in the accepted sense of the term.... It came rather suddenly;—it seemed to be born as part of a sudden and close friendship with a girl—began with that friendship, I think.... And died with it.”

She sat quite silent for a while, then a tremulous smile edged her lips:

“I had meant to take the veil,” she said. “I did begin my novitiate.”

“Here?”

“No, in Russia. There are a few foreign cloistered orders there.... But I had a tragic awakening....” She bent her head and quoted softly, “‘For the former things have passed away.’”

The orange ice was melting; she stirred it idly, watching it dissolve.

“No,” she said, “I had utterly misunderstood the scheme of things. Divinity is not a sad, a solemn, a solitary autocrat demanding selfish tribute, blind allegiance, inexorable self-abasement. It is not an insecure tyrant offering bribery for the cringing, frightened servitude demanded.”

She looked up smilingly at the man: “Nor, within us, is there any soul in the accepted meaning,—no satellite released at death to revolve around or merge into some super-divinity. No!

“For I believe,—I *know*—that the body—every one’s body—is inhabited by a complete god, immortal, retaining its divine entity, beholden to no other deity save only itself, and destined to encounter in a divine democracy and through endless futures, unnumbered brother gods—the countless divinities which have possessed and shall possess those tenements of mankind which we call our bodies.... You do not, of course, subscribe to such a faith,” she added, meeting his gaze.

“Well——” He hesitated. She said:

“Autocracy in heaven is as unthinkable, as unbelievable, and as obnoxious to me as is autocracy on earth. There is no such thing as divine right, here or

elsewhere,—no divine prerogatives for tyranny, for punishment, for cruelty."

"How did you happen to embrace such a faith?" he asked, bewildered.

"I was sick of the scheme of things. Suffering, cruelty, death outraged my common sense. It is not in me to say, 'Thy will be done,' to any autocrat, heavenly or earthly. It is not in me to fawn on the hand that strikes me—or that strikes any helpless thing! No! And the scheme of things sickened me, and I nearly died of it——"

She clenched her hand where it rested on the table, and he saw her face flushed and altered by the fire within. Then she smiled and leaned back in her chair.

"In you," she said gaily, "dwells a god. In me a goddess,—a joyous one,—a divine thing that laughs,—a complete and free divinity that is gay and tender, that is incapable of tyranny, that loves all things both, great and small, that exists to serve—freely, not for reward—that owes allegiance and obedience only to the divine and eternal law within its own godhead. And that law is the law of love.... And that is my substitute for the scheme of things. Could you subscribe?"

After a silence he quoted: "*Could you and I with Him conspire——*"

She nodded: "'*To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire——*' But there is no '*Him*.' It's you and I.... Both divine.... Suppose we grasp it and '*shatter it to bits*.' Shall we?"

"'*And then remould it nearer to the heart's desire?*'"

"Remould it nearer to the logic of common sense."

Neither spoke for a few moments. Then she drew a swift, smiling breath.

"We're getting on rather rapidly, aren't we?" she said. "Did you expect to lunch with such a friendly, human girl? And will you now take her to inspect this modest house which you hope may suit her, and which, she most devoutly hopes may suit her, too?"

"This has been a perfectly delightful day," he said as they rose.

"Do you want me to corroborate you?"

"Could you?"

"I've had a wonderful time," she said lightly.

CHAPTER VI

John Estridge, out of a job—as were a million odd others now arriving from France by every transport—met James Shotwell, Junior, one wintry day as the latter was leaving the real estate offices of Sharrow & Co.

“The devil,” exclaimed Estridge; “I supposed you, at least, were safe in the service, Jim! Isn’t your regiment in Germany?”

“It is,” replied Shotwell wrathfully, shaking hands. “Where do you come from, Jack?”

“From hell—via Copenhagen. In milder but misleading metaphor, I come from Holy Russia.”

“Did the Red Cross fire you?”

“No, but they told me to run along home like a good boy and get my degree. I’m not an M.D., you know. And there’s a shortage. So I had to come.”

“Same here; I had to come.” And Shotwell, for Estridge’s enlightenment, held a post-mortem over the premature decease of his promising military career.

“Too bad,” commented the latter. “It sure was exciting while it lasted—our mixing it in the great game. There’s pandemonium to pay in Russia, now;—I rather hated to leave.... But it was either leave or be shot up. The Bolsheviki are impossible.... Are you walking up town?”

They fell into step together.

“You’ll go back to the P. & S., I suppose,” ventured Shotwell.

“Yes. And you?”

“Oh, I’m already nailed down to the old oaken desk. Sharrow’s my boss, if you remember?”

“It must seem dull,” said Estridge sympathetically.

“Rotten dull.”

“You don’t mean business too, do you?”

“Yes, that’s also on the bum.... I did contrive to sell a small house the other day—and blew myself to this overcoat.”

“Is that so unusual?” asked Estridge, smiling,“—to sell a house in town?”

“Yes, it’s a miracle in these days. Tell me, Jack, how did you get on in Russia?”

“Too many Reds. We couldn’t do much. They’ve got it in for everybody

except themselves.”

“The socialists?”

“Not the social revolutionists. I’m talking about the Reds.”

“Didn’t they make the revolution?”

“They did not.”

“Well, who are the Reds, and what is it they want?”

“They want to set the world on fire. Then they want to murder and rob everybody with any education. Then they plan to start things from the stone age again. They want loot and blood. That’s really all they want. Their object is to annihilate civilisation by exterminating the civilised. They desire to start all over from first principles—without possessing any—and turn the murderous survivors of the human massacre into one vast, international pack of wolves. And they’re beginning to do it in Russia.”

“A pleasant programme,” remarked Shotwell. “No wonder you beat it, Jack. I recently met a woman who had just arrived from Russia. They murdered her best friend—one of the little Grand Duchesses. She simply can’t talk about it.”

“That was a beastly business,” nodded Estridge. “I happen to know a little about it.”

“Were *you* in that district?”

“Well, no,—not when that thing happened. But some little time before the Bolsheviki murdered the Imperial family I had occasion to escort an American girl to the convent where they were held under detention.... An exceedingly pretty girl,” he added absently. “She was once companion to one of the murdered Imperial children.”

Shotwell glanced up quickly: “Her name, by any chance, doesn’t happen to be Palla Dumont?”

“Why, yes. Do you know her?”

“I sold her that house I was telling you about. Do you know her well, Jack?”

Estridge smiled. “Yes and no. Perhaps I know her better than she suspects.”

Shotwell laughed, recollecting his friend’s inclination for analysing character and his belief in his ability to do so.

“Same old scientific vivisectionist!” he said. “So you’ve been dissecting Palla Dumont, have you?”

“Certainly. She’s a type.”

“A charming one,” added Shotwell.

“Oh, very.”

“But you don’t know her well—outside of having mentally vivisected her?”

Estridge laughed: “Palla Dumont and I have been through some rather hair-raising scrapes together. And I’ll admit right now that she possesses all kinds of courage—perhaps too many kinds.”

“How do you mean?”

“She has the courage of her convictions and her convictions, sometimes, don’t amount to much.”

“Go on and cut her up,” said Shotwell, sarcastically.

“That’s the only fault I find with Palla Dumont,” explained the other.

“I thought you said she was a type?”

“She is,—the type of unmarried woman who continually develops too much pep for her brain to properly take care of.”

“You mean you consider Palla Dumont neurotic?”

“No. Nothing abnormal. Perhaps super-normal—pathologically speaking. Bodily health is fine. But over-secretion of ardent energy sometimes disturbs one’s mental equilibrium. The result, in a crisis, is likely to result in extravagant behavior. Martyrs are made of such stuff, for example.”

“You think her a visionary?”

“Well, her reason and her emotions sometimes become rather badly entangled, I fancy.”

“Don’t everybody’s?”

“At intervals. Then the thing to do is to keep perfectly cool till the fit is over.”

“So you think her impulsive?”

“Well, I should say so!” smiled Estridge. “Of course I mean nicely impulsive—even nobly impulsive.... But that won’t help her. Impulse never helped anybody. It’s a spoke in the wheel—a stumbling block—a stick to trip anybody.... Particularly a girl.... And Palla Dumont mistakes impulse for logic. She honestly thinks that she reasons.” He smiled to himself: “A disturbingly pretty girl,” he murmured, “with a tender heart ... which seems to do all her thinking for her.... How well do you know her, Jim?”

“Not well. But I’m going to, I hope.”

Estridge glanced up interrogatively, suddenly remembering all the uncontradicted gossip concerning a tacit understanding between Shotwell, Jr., and Elorn Sharrow. It is true that no engagement had been announced; but none had been denied, either. And Miss Sharrow had inherited her mother's fortune. And Shotwell, Jr., made only a young man's living.

"You ought to be rather careful with such a girl," he remarked carelessly.

"How, careful?"

"Well, she's rather perilously attractive, isn't she?" insisted Estridge smilingly.

"She's extremely interesting."

"She certainly is. She's rather an amazing girl in her way. More amazing than perhaps you imagine."

"Amazing?"

"Yes, even astounding."

"For example?"

"I'll give you an example. When the Reds invaded that convent and seized the Czarina and her children, Palla Dumont, then a novice of six weeks, attempted martyrdom by pretending that she herself was the little Grand Duchess Marie. And when the Reds refused to believe her, she demanded the privilege of dying beside her little friend. She even insulted the Reds, defied them, taunted them until they swore to return and cut her throat as soon as they finished with the Imperial family. And then this same Palla Dumont, to whom you sold a house in New York the other day, flew into an ungovernable passion; tried to batter her way into the cellar; shattered half a dozen chapel chairs against the oak door of the crypt behind which preparations for the assassination were taking place; then, helpless, called on God to interfere and put a stop to it. And, when deity, as usual, didn't interfere with the scheme of things, this girl tore the white veil from her face and the habit from her body and denounced as nonexistent any alleged deity that permitted such things to be."

Shotwell gazed at Estridge in blank astonishment.

"Where on earth did you hear all that dope?" he demanded incredulously.

Estridge smiled: "It's all quite true, Jim. And Palla Dumont escaped having her slender throat slit open only because a sotnia of Kaladines' Cossacks cantered up, discovered what the Reds were up to in the cellar, and beat it with Palla and another girl just in the nick of time."

"Who handed you this cinema stuff?"

"*The other girl.*"

“You believe her?”

“You can judge for yourself. This other girl was a young Swedish soldier who had served in the Battalion of Death. It’s really cinema stuff, as you say. But Russia, to-day, is just one hell after another in an endless and bloody drama. Such picturesque incidents,—the wildest episodes, the craziest coincidences—are occurring by thousands every day of the year in Russia.... And, Jim, it was due to one of those daily and crazy coincidences that my sleigh, in which I was beating it for Helsingfors, was held up by that same sotnia of the Wild Division on a bitter day, near the borders of a pine forest.

“And that’s where I encountered Palla Dumont again. And that’s where I heard—not from her, but from her soldier comrade, Ilse Westgard—the story I have just told you.”

For a while they continued to walk up and down in silence.

Finally Estridge said: “*There* was a girl for you!”

“Palla Dumont!” nodded Shotwell, still too astonished to talk.

“No, the other.... An amazing girl.... Nearly six feet; physically perfect;—what the human girl ought to be and seldom is;—symmetrical, flawless, healthy—a super-girl ... like some young daughter of the northern gods!... Ilse Westgard.”

“One of those women soldiers, you say?” inquired Shotwell, mildly curious.

“Yes. There were all kinds of women in that Death Battalion. We saw them,—your friend Palla Dumont and I,—saw them halted and standing at ease in a birch wood; saw them marching into fire.... And there were all sorts of women, Jim; peasant, bourgeoise and aristocrat;—there were dressmakers, telephone operators, servant-girls, students, Red Cross nurses, actresses from the Marinsky, Jewesses from the Pale, sisters of the Yellow Ticket, Japanese girls, Chinese, Cossack, English, Finnish, French.... And they went over the top cheering for Russia!... They went over to shame the army which had begun to run from the hun.... Pretty fine, wasn’t it?”

“Fine!”

“You bet!... After this war—after what women have done the world over—I wonder whether there are any asses left who desire to restrict woman to a ‘sphere’?... I’d like to see Ilse Westgard again,” he added absently.

“Was she a peasant girl?”

“No. A daughter of well-to-do people. Quite the better sort, I should say. And she was more thoroughly educated than the average girl of our own sort.... A brave and cheerful soldier in the Battalion of Death.... Ilse Westgard.... Amazing, isn’t it?”

After another brief silence Shotwell ventured: “I suppose you’d find it agreeable to meet Palla Dumont again, wouldn’t you?”

“Why, yes, of course,” replied the other pleasantly.

“Then, if you like, she’ll ask us to tea some day—after her new house is in shape.”

“You seem to be very sure about what Palla Dumont is likely to do,” said Estridge, smiling.

“Indeed, I’m not!” retorted Shotwell, with emphasis. “Palla Dumont has a mind of her own,—although you don’t seem to think so,——”

“I think she has a *will* of her own,” interrupted the other, amused.

“Glad you concede her *some* mental attribute.”

“I do indeed! I never intimated that she is weak-willed. She isn’t. Other and stronger wills don’t dominate hers. Perhaps it would be better if they did sometimes....

“But no; Palla Dumont arrives headlong at her own red-hot decisions. It is not the will of others that influences her; it is their indecision, their lack of willpower, their very weakness that seems to stimulate and vitally influence such a character as Palla Dumont’s—”

“—Such a *character*?” repeated Shotwell. “What sort of character do you suppose hers to be, anyway? Between you and your psychological and pathological surmises you don’t seem to leave her any character at all.”

“I’m telling you,” said Estridge, “that the girl is influenced not by the will or desire of others, but by their necessities, their distress, their needs.... Or what she believes to be their needs.... And you may decide for yourself how valuable are the conclusions of an impulsive, wilful, fearless, generous girl whose heart regulates her thinking apparatus.”

“According to you, then, she is practically mindless,” remarked Shotwell, ironically. “You medically minded gentlemen are wonders!—all of you.”

“You don’t get me. The girl is clever and intelligent when her accumulated emotions let her brain alone. When they interfere, her logic goes to smash and she does exaggerated things—like trying to sacrifice herself for her friend in the convent there—like tearing off the white garments of her novitiate and denouncing deity!—like embracing an extravagant pantheistic religion of her own manufacture and proclaiming that the Law of Love is the only law!

“I’ve heard the young lady on the subject, Jim. And, medically minded or not, I’m medically on to her.”

They walked on together in silence for nearly a whole block; then Estridge said bluntly:

“She’d be better balanced if she were married and had a few children. Such types usually are.”

Shotwell made no comment. Presently the other spoke again:

“The Law of Love! What rot! That’s sheer hysteria. Follow that law and you become a saint, perhaps, perhaps a devil. Love sacred, love profane—both, when exaggerated, arise from the same physical condition—too much pep for the mind to distribute.

“What happens? Exaggerations. Extravagances. Hallucinations. Mysticisms.

“What results? Nuns. Hermits. Yogis. Exhorters. Fanatics. Cranks. *Sometimes.* For, from the same chrysalis, Jim, may emerge either a vestal, or one of those tragic characters who, swayed by this same remarkable Law of Love, may give ... and burn on—slowly—from the first lover to the next. And so, into darkness.”

He added, smiling: “The only law of love subscribed to by sane people is framed by a balanced brain and interpreted by common sense. Those who obey any other code go a-glimmering, saint and sinner, novice and Magdalene alike.... This is your street, I believe.”

They shook hands cordially.

After dining *en famille*, Shotwell Junior considered the various diversions offered to young business men after a day of labour.

There were theatres; there was the Club de Vingt and similar agreeable asylums; there was also a telephone to ring, and unpremeditated suggestions to make to friends, either masculine or feminine.

Or he could read and improve his mind. Or go to Carnegie Hall with his father and mother and listen to music of sorts.... Or—he could call up Elorn Sharrow.

He couldn’t decide; and his parents presently derided him and departed music-ward without him. He read an evening paper, discarded it, poked the fire, stood before it, jingled a few coins and keys in his pocket, still undecided, still rather disinclined to any exertion, even as far as the club.

“I wonder,” he thought, “what that girl is doing now. I’ve a mind to call her up.”

He seemed to know whom he meant by “that girl.” Also, it was evident that he did not mean Elorn Sharrow; for it was not her number he called and presently got.

“Miss Dumont?”

“Yes? Who is it?”

“It’s a mere nobody. It’s only your broker——”

“*What!!*”

“Your real-estate broker——”

“Mr. Shotwell! How absurd of you!”

“Why absurd?”

“Because I don’t think of you merely as a real-estate broker.”

“Then you *do* sometimes think of me?”

“What power of deduction! What logic! You seem to be in a particularly frivolous frame of mind. Are you?”

“No; I’m in a bad one.”

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t a bally thing to do this evening.”

“That’s silly!—with the entire town outside.... I’m glad you called me up, anyway. I’m tired and bored and exceedingly cross.”

“What are you doing, Miss Dumont?”

“Absolutely and idiotically nothing. I’m merely sitting here on the only chair in this scantily furnished house, and trying to plan what sort of carpets, draperies and furniture to buy. Can you imagine the scene?”

“I thought you had some things.”

“I haven’t anything! Not even a decent mirror. I stand on the slippery edge of a bath tub to get a complete view of myself. And then it’s only by sections.”

“That’s tragic. Have you a cook?”

“I have. But no dining room table. I eat from a tray on a packing case.”

“Have you a waitress?”

“Yes, and a maid. They’re comfortable. I bought their furniture immediately and also the batterie-de-cuisine. It’s only I who slink about like a perplexed cat, from one empty room to another, in search of familiar comforts.... But I bought a sofa to-day.

“It’s a wonderful sofa. It’s here, now. It’s an antique. But I can’t make up my mind how to upholster it.”

“Would you care for a suggestion?”

“Please!”

“Well, I’d have to see it——”

“I thought you’d say that. Really, Mr. Shotwell, I’d like most awfully to see you, but this place is too uncomfortable. I told you I’d ask you to tea some day.”

“Won’t you let me come down for a few moments this evening——”

“No!”

“—And pay you a formal little call——”

“No.... Would you really like to?”

“I would.”

“You wouldn’t after you got here. There’s nothing for you to sit on.”

“What about the floor?”

“It’s dusty.”

“What about that antique sofa?”

“It’s not upholstered.”

“What do I care! May I come?”

“Do you really wish to?”

“I do.”

“How soon?”

“As fast as I can get there.”

He heard her laughing. Then: “I’ll be perfectly delighted to see you,” she said. “I was actually thinking of taking to my bed out of sheer boredom. Are you coming in a taxi?”

“Why?”

He heard her laughing again.

“Nothing,” she answered, “—only I thought that might be the quickest way—” Her laughter interrupted her, “—to bring me the evening papers. I haven’t a thing to read.”

“*That’s* why you want me to take a taxi!”

“It is. News is a necessity to me, and I’m famishing.... What other reason could there be for a taxi? Did you suppose I was in a hurry to see you?”

He listened to her laughter for a moment:

“All right,” he said, “I’ll take a taxi and bring a book for myself.”

“And please don’t forget my evening papers or I shall have to requisition your book.... Or possibly share it with you on the upholstered sofa.... And I read very rapidly and don’t like being kept waiting for slower people to turn the page.... Mr. Shotwell?”

“Yes.”

“This is a wonderful floor. Could you bring some roller skates?”

“No,” he said, “but I’ll bring a music box and we’ll dance.”

“You’re not serious——”

“I am. Wait and see.”

“Don’t do such a thing. My servants would think me crazy. I’m mortally afraid of them, too.”

He found a toy-shop on Third Avenue still open, and purchased a solemn little music-box that played ting-a-ling tunes.

Then, in his taxi, he veered over to Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street, where he bought roses and a spray of orchids. Then, adding to his purchases a huge box of bon-bons, he set his course for the three story and basement house which he had sold to Palla Dumont.

CHAPTER VII

Shotwell Senior and his wife were dining out that evening.

Shotwell Junior had no plans—or admitted none, even to himself. He got into a bath and later into a dinner jacket, in an absent-minded way, and finally sauntered into the library wearing a vague scowl.

The weather had turned colder, and there was an open fire there, and a convenient armchair and the evening papers.

Perhaps the young gentleman had read them down town, for he shoved them aside. Then he dropped an elbow on the table, rested his chin against his knuckles, and gazed fiercely at the inoffensive *Evening Post*.

Before any open fire any young man ought to be able to make up whatever mind he chances to possess. Yet, what to do with a winter evening all his own seemed to him a problem unfathomable.

Perhaps his difficulty lay only in selection—there are so many agreeable things for a young man to do in Gotham Town on a winter's evening.

But, oddly enough, young Shotwell was trying to persuade himself that he had no choice of occupation for the evening; that he really didn't care. Yet, always two intrusive alternatives continually presented themselves. The one was to change his coat for a spike-tail, his black tie for a white one, and go to the Metropolitan Opera. The other and more attractive alternative was *not* to go.

Elorn Sharrow would be at the opera. To appear, now and then, in the Sharrow family's box was expected of him. He hadn't done it recently.

He dropped one lean leg over the other and gazed gravely at the fire. He was still trying to convince himself that he had no particular plan for the evening—that it was quite likely he might go to the opera or to the club—or, in fact, almost anywhere his fancy suggested.

In his effort to believe himself the scowl came back, denting his eyebrows. Presently he forced a yawn, unsuccessfully.

Yes, he thought he'd better go to the opera, after all. He ought to go.... It seemed to be rather expected of him.

Besides, he had nothing else to do—that is, nothing in particular—unless, of course——

But *that* would scarcely do. He'd been *there* so often recently.... No, *that* wouldn't do.... Besides it was becoming almost a habit with him. He'd been drifting there so frequently of late!... In fact, he'd scarcely been anywhere at all, recently, except—except where he certainly was not going that evening. And that settled it!... So he might as well go to the opera.

His mother, in scarf and evening wrap, passing the library door on her way down, paused in the hall and looked intently at her only son.

Recently she had been observing him rather closely and with a vague uneasiness born of that inexplicable sixth sense inherent in mothers.

Perhaps what her son had faced in France accounted for the change in him;—for it was being said that no man could come back from such scenes unchanged;—none could ever again be the same. And it was being said, too, that old beliefs and ideals had altered; that everything familiar was ending;—and that the former things had already passed away under the glimmering dawn of a new heaven and a new earth.

Perhaps all this was so—though she doubted it. Perhaps this son she had borne in agony might become to her somebody less familiar than the baby she had nursed at her own breast.

But so far, to her, he continued to remain the same familiar baby she had always known—the same and utterly vital part of her soul and body. No sudden fulfilment of an apocalypse had yet wrought any occult metamorphosis in this boy of hers.

And if he now seemed changed it was from that simple and familiar cause instinctively understood by mothers,—trouble!—the most ancient plague of all and the only malady which none escapes.

She was a rather startlingly pretty woman, with the delicate features and colour and the snow-white hair of an th century belle. She stood, now, drawing on her gloves and watching her son out of dark-fringed deep blue eyes, until he glanced around uneasily. Then he rose at once, looking at her with fire-dazzled eyes.

“Don’t rise, dear,” she said; “the car is here and your father is fussing and fuming in the drawing-room, and I’ve got to run.... Have you any plans for the evening?”

“None, mother.”

“You’re dining at home?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you go to the opera to-night? It’s the Sharrows’ night.”

He came toward her irresolutely. “Perhaps I shall,” he said. And instantly she knew he did not intend to go.

“I had tea at the Sharrows’,” she said, carelessly, still buttoning her gloves. “Elorn told me that she hadn’t laid eyes on you for ages.”

“It’s happened so.... I’ve had a lot of things to do——”

“You and she still agree, don’t you, Jim?”

“Why, yes—as usual. We always get on together.”

Helen Shotwell’s ermine wrap slipped; he caught it and fastened it for her, and she took hold of both his hands and drew his arms tightly around her pretty shoulders.

“What troubles you, darling?” she asked smilingly.

“Why, nothing, mother——”

“Tell me!”

“Really, there is nothing, dear——”

“Tell me when you are ready, then,” she laughed and released him.

“But there isn’t anything,” he insisted.

“Yes, Jim, there is. Do you suppose I don’t know you after all these years?”

She considered him with clear, amused eyes: “Don’t forget,” she added, “that I was only seventeen when you arrived, my son; and I have grown up with you ever since——”

“For heaven’s sake, Helen!—” protested Sharrow Senior plaintively from the front hall below. “Can’t you gossip with Jim some other time?”

“I’m on my way, James,” she announced calmly. “Put your overcoat on.” And, to her son: “Go to the opera. Elorn will cheer you up. Isn’t that a good idea?”

“That’s—certainly—an idea.... I’ll think it over.... And, mother, if I seem solemn at times, please try to remember how rotten every fellow feels about being out of the service——”

Her gay, derisive laughter checked him, warning him that he was not imposing on her credulity. She said smilingly:

“You have neglected Elorn Sharrow, and you know it, and it’s on your conscience—whatever else may be on it, too. And that’s partly why you feel blue. So keep out of mischief, darling, and stop neglecting Elorn—that is, if you ever really expect to marry her——”

“I’ve told you that I have never asked her; and I never intend to ask her until I am making a decent living,” he said impatiently.

“Isn’t there an understanding between you?”

“Why—I don’t think so. There couldn’t be. We’ve never spoken of that sort of thing in our lives!”

“I think she expects you to ask her some day. Everybody else does, anyway.”

“Well, that is the one thing I *won’t* do,” he said, “—go about with the seat out of my pants and ask an heiress to sew on the patch for me——”

“Darling! You *can* be so common when you try!”

“Well, it amounts to that—doesn’t it, mother? I don’t care what busy gossips say or idle people expect me to do! There’s no engagement, no understanding between Elorn and me. And I don’t care a hang what anybody——”

His mother framed his slightly flushed face between her gloved hands and inspected him humorously.

“Very well, dear,” she said; “but you need not be so emphatically excited about it——”

“I’m not excited—but it irritates me to be expected to do anything because it’s expected of me—” He shrugged his shoulders:

“After all,” he added, “if I ever should fall in love with anybody it’s my own business. And whatever I choose to do about it will be my own affair. And I shall keep my own counsel in any event.”

His mother stepped forward, letting both her hands fall into his.

“Wouldn’t you tell me about it, Jim?”

“I’d tell you before I’d tell anybody else—if it ever became serious.”

“If *what* became serious?”

“Well—anything of that sort,” he replied. But a bright colour stained his features and made him wince under her intent scrutiny.

She was worried, now, though her pretty, humorous smile still challenged him with its raillery.

But it was becoming very evident to her that if this boy of hers were growing sentimental over any woman the woman was not Elorn Sharrow.

So far she had held her son’s confidence. She must do nothing to disturb it. Yet, as she looked at him with the amused smile still edging her lips, she began for the first time in her life to be afraid.

They kissed each other in silence.

In the limousine, seated beside her husband, she said presently: “I wish Jim would marry Elorn Sharrow.”

“He’s likely to some day, isn’t he?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, there’s no hurry,” remarked her husband. “He ought not to marry anybody until he’s thirty, and he’s only twenty-four. I’m glad enough to have him remain at home with us.”

“But that’s what worries me; he *doesn’t*!”

“Doesn’t what?”

“Doesn’t remain at home.”

Her husband laughed: “Well, I meant it merely in a figurative sense. Of course Jim goes out——”

“Where?”

“Why, everywhere, I suppose,” said her husband, a little surprised at her tone.

She said calmly: “I hear things—pick up bits of gossip—as all women do.... And at a tea the other day a man asked me why Jim never goes to his clubs any more. So you see he doesn’t go to any of his clubs when he goes ‘out’ in the evenings.... And he’s been to no dances—judging from what is said to me.... And he doesn’t go to see Elorn Sharrow any more. She told me that herself. So—where does he go?”

“Well, but——”

“Where *does* he go—every evening?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t answer——”

“Every evening!” she repeated absently.

“Good heavens, Helen——”

“And what is on that boy’s mind? There’s something on it.”

“His business, let us hope——”

She shook her head: “I know my son,” she remarked.

“So do I. What is particularly troubling you, dear? There’s something you haven’t told me.”

“I’m merely wondering who that girl was who lunched with him at Delmonico’s—*three times*—last week,” mused his wife.

“Why—she’s probably all right, Helen. A man doesn’t take the other sort there.”

“So I’ve heard,” she said drily.

“Well, then?”

“Nothing.... She’s very pretty, I understand.... And wears mourning.”

“What of it?” he asked, amused. She smiled at him, but there was a trace of annoyance in her voice.

“Don’t you think it very natural that I should wonder who any girl is who lunches with my son three times in one week?... And is remarkably pretty, besides?”

The girl in question looked remarkably pretty at that very moment, where she sat at her desk, the telephone transmitter tilted toward her, the receiver at her ear, and her dark eyes full of gayest malice.

“Miss Dumont, please?” came a distant and familiar voice over the wire. The girl laughed aloud; and he heard her.

“You *said* you were not going to call me up.”

“Is it *you*, Palla?”

“How subtle of you!”

He said anxiously. “Are you doing anything this evening—by any unhappy chance——”

“I am.”

“Oh, hang it! What *are* you doing?”

“How impertinent!”

“You know I don’t mean it that way——”

“I’m not sure. However, I’ll be kind enough to tell you what I’m doing. I’m sitting here at my desk, listening to an irritable young man——”

“That’s wonderful luck!” he exclaimed joyously.

“Wonderful luck for a girl to sit at a desk and listen to an irritable young man?”

“If you’ll stop talking bally nonsense for a moment——”

“If you bully me, I shall stop talking altogether!”

“For heaven’s sake——”

“I hear you, kind sir; you need not shout!”

He said humbly: “Palla, would you let me drop in——”

“Drop into what? Into poetry? Please do!”

“For the love of——”

“Jim! You told me last evening that you expected to be at the opera to-night.”

“I’m not going.”

“—So I didn’t expect you to call me!”

“Can’t I see you?” he asked.

“I’m sorry——”

“The deuce!”

“I’m expecting some people, Jim. It’s your own fault; I didn’t expect a tête-à-tête with you this evening.”

“Is it a party you’re giving?”

“Two or three people. But my place is full of flowers and as pretty as a garden. Too bad you can’t see it.”

“Couldn’t I come to your garden-party?” he asked humbly.

“You mean just to see my garden for a moment?”

“Yes; let me come around for a moment, anyway—if you’re dressed. Are you?”

“Certainly I’m dressed. Did you think it was to be a garden-of-Eden party?”

Her gay, mischievous laughter came distinctly to him over the wire. Then her mood changed abruptly:

“You funny boy,” she said, “don’t you understand that I want you to come?”

“You enchanting girl!” he exclaimed. “Do you really mean it?”

“Of course! And if you come at once we’ll have nearly an hour together before anybody arrives.”

She had that sweet, unguarded way with her at moments, and it always sent a faint shock of surprise and delight through him.

Her smiling maid admitted him and took his hat, coat and stick as though accustomed to these particular articles.

Palla was alone in the living-room when he was announced, and as soon as the maid disappeared she gave him both hands in swift welcome—an impulsive, unconsidered greeting entirely new to them both.

“You didn’t mind my tormenting you. Did you, Jim? I was so happy that you did call me up, after all. Because you know you *did* tell me yesterday that you were going to the opera to-night. But all the same, when the ’phone rang, somehow I knew it was you—I knew it—somehow——”

She loosened one hand from his and swung him with the other toward the piano: “Do you like my flower garden? Isn’t the room attractive?”

“Charming,” he said. “And you are distractingly pretty to-night!”

“In this dull, black gown? But, *merci*, anyway! See how effective your roses

are!—the ones you sent yesterday and the day before! They're all opening. And I went out and bought a lot more, and all that fluffy green camouflage——"

She withdrew her other hand from his without embarrassment and went over to rearrange a sheaf of deep red carnations, spreading the clustered stems to wider circumference.

"What is this party you're giving, anyway?" he asked, following her across the room and leaning beside her on the piano, where she still remained very busily engaged with her decorations.

"An impromptu party," she exclaimed. "I was shopping this morning—in fact I was buying pots and pans for the cook—when somebody spoke to me. And I recognised a university student whom I had known in Petrograd after the first revolution—Marya Lanois, her name is——"

She moved aside and began to fuss with a huge bowl of crimson roses, loosening the blossoms, freeing the foliage, and talking happily all the while:

"Marya Lanois," she repeated, "—an interesting girl. And with her was a man I had met—a pianist—Vanya Tchernov. They told me that another friend of mine—a girl named Ilse Westgard—is now living in New York. They couldn't dine with me, but they're coming to supper. So I also called up Ilse Westgard, she's coming, too;—and I also asked your friend, Mr. Estridge. So you see, Monsieur, we shall have a little music and much valuable conversation, and then I shall give them some supper——"

She stepped back from the piano, surveyed her handiwork critically, then looked around at him for his opinion.

"Fine," he said. "How jolly your new house is"—glancing about the room at the few well chosen pieces of antique furniture, the harmonious hangings and comfortably upholstered modern pieces.

"It really is beginning to be livable; isn't it, Jim?" she ventured. "Of course there are many things yet to buy——"

They leisurely made the tour of the white-panelled room, looking with approval at the delicate Georgian furniture; the mezzotints; the damask curtains of that beautiful red which has rose-tints in it, too; the charming old French clock and its lovely gilded garniture; the deep-toned ash-grey carpet under foot.

Before the mantel, with its wood fire blazing, they paused.

"It's so enchantingly homelike," she exclaimed. "I already love it all. When I come in from shopping I just stand here with my hat and furs on, and gaze about and adore everything!"

“Do you adore me, too?” he asked, laughing at her warmth. “You see I’m becoming one of your fixtures here, also.”

In her brown eyes the familiar irresponsible gaiety began to glimmer:

“I do adore you,” she said, “but I’ve no business to.”

“Why not?”

She seated herself on the sofa and cast a veiled glance at him, enchantingly malicious.

“Do you think you know me well enough to adore me?” she inquired with misleading gravity.

“Indeed I do——”

“Am I as easy to know as that? Jim, you humiliate me.”

“I didn’t say that you are easy to know——”

“You meant it!” she insisted reproachfully. “You think so, too—just because I let myself be picked up—by a perfectly strange man——”

“Good heavens, Palla—” he began nervously; but caught the glimmer in her lowered eyes—saw her child’s mouth tremulous with mirth controlled.

“Oh, Jim!” she said, still laughing, “do you think I care how we met? How absurd of you to let me torment you. You’re altogether too boyish, too self-conscious. You’re loaded down with all the silly traditions which I’ve thrown away. I don’t care how we met. I’m glad we know each other.”

She opened a silver box on a little table at her elbow, chose a cigarette, lighted it, and offered it to him.

“I rather like the taste of them now,” she remarked, making room for him on the sofa beside her.

When he was seated, she reached up to a jar of flowers on the piano, selected a white carnation, broke it short, and then drew the stem through his lapel, patting the blossom daintily into a pom-pon.

“Now,” she said gaily, “if you’ll let me, I’ll straighten your tie. Shall I?”

He turned toward her; she accomplished that deftly, then glanced across at the clock.

“We’ve only half an hour longer to ourselves,” she exclaimed, with that unconscious candour which always thrilled him. Then, turning to him, she said laughingly: “Does it really matter how two people meet when time races with us like that?”

“And do you realise,” he said in a low, tense voice, “that since I met you every racing minute has been sweeping me headlong toward you?”

She was so totally unprepared for the deeper emotion in his voice and bearing—so utterly surprised—that she merely gazed at him.

“Haven’t you been aware of it, Palla?” he said, looking her in the eyes.

“Jim!” she protested, “you are disconcerting! You never before have taken such a tone toward me.”

She rose, walked over to the clock, examined it minutely for a few moments. Then she turned, cast a swift, perplexed glance at him, and came slowly back to resume her place on the sofa.

“Men should be very, very careful what they say to me.” As she lifted her eyes he saw them beginning to glimmer again with that irresponsible humour he knew so well.

“Be careful,” she said, her brown gaze gay with warning; “—I’m godless and quite lawless, and I’m a very dangerous companion for any well-behaved and orthodox young man who ventures to tell me that I’m adorable. Why, you might as safely venture to adore Diana of the Ephesians! And you know what she did to her admirers.”

“She was really Aphrodite, wasn’t she?” he said, laughing.

“Aphrodite, Venus, Isis, Lada—and the Ephesian Diana—I’m afraid they all were hussies. But I’m a hussy, too, Jim! If you doubt it, ask any well brought up girl you know and tell her how we met and how we’ve behaved ever since, and what obnoxious ideas I entertain toward all things conventional and orthodox!”

“Palla, are you really serious?—I’m never entirely sure what is under your badinage.”

“Why, of course I am serious. I don’t believe in any of the things that you believe in. I’ve often told you so, though you don’t believe me——”

“Nonsense!”

“I don’t, I tell you. I did once. But I’m awake. No ‘threats of hell or hopes of any sugary paradise’ influence me. Nor does custom and convention. Nor do the laws and teachings of our present civilisation matter one straw to me. I’d break every law if it suited me.”

He laughed and lifted her hand from her lap: “You funny child,” he said, “you wouldn’t steal, for example—would you?”

“I don’t desire to.”

“Would you commit perjury?”

“No!”

“Murder?”

“I have a law of my own, kind sir. It doesn’t happen to permit murder, arson, forgery, piracy, smuggling——”

Their irresponsible laughter interrupted her.

“What else wouldn’t you do?” he managed to ask.

“I wouldn’t do anything mean, deceitful, dishonest, cruel. But it’s not your antiquated laws—it’s my own and original law that governs my conduct.”

“You always conform to it?”

“I do. But you don’t conform to yours. So I’ll try to help you remember the petty but always sacred conventions of our own accepted code——”

And, with unfeigned malice, she began to disengage her hand from his—loosened the slim fingers one by one, all the while watching him sideways with prim lips pursed and lifted eyebrows.

“Try always to remember,” she said, “that, according to your code, any demonstration of affection toward a comparative stranger is exceedingly bad form.”

However, he picked up her hand again, which she had carelessly left lying on the sofa near his, and again she freed it, leisurely.

They conversed animatedly, as always, discussing matters of common interest, yet faintly in her ears sounded the unfamiliar echo of passion.

It haunted her mind, too—an indefinable undertone delicately persistent—until at last she sat mute, absent-minded, while he continued speaking.

Her stillness—her remote gaze, perhaps—presently silenced him. And after a little while she turned her charming head and looked at him with that unintentional provocation born of virginal curiosity.

What had moved him so unexpectedly to deeper emotion? Had she? Had she, then, that power? And without effort?—For she had been conscious of none.... But—if she tried.... Had she the power to move him again?

Naïve instinct—the emotionless curiosity of total inexperience—everything embryonic and innocently ruthless in her was now in the ascendant.

She lifted her eyes and considered him with the speculative candour of a child.

She wished to hear once more that unfamiliar *something* in his voice—see it in his features——

And she did not know how to evoke it.

“Of what are you thinking, Palla?”

“Of you,” she answered candidly, without other intention than the truth. And saw, instantly, the indefinable *something* born again into his eyes.

Calm curiosity, faintly amused, possessed her—left him possessed of her hand presently.

“Are you attempting to be sentimental?” she asked.

Very leisurely she began once more to disengage her hand—loosening the fingers one by one—and watching him all the while with a slight smile edging her lips. Then, as his clasp tightened:

“Please,” she said, “may I not have my freedom?”

“Do you want it?”

“You never did this before—touched me—unnecessarily.”

As he made no answer, she fell silent, her dark eyes vaguely interrogative as though questioning herself as well as him concerning this unaccustomed contact.

His head had been bent a little. Now he lifted it. Neither was smiling.

Suddenly she rose to her feet and stood with her head partly averted. He rose, too. Neither spoke. But after a moment she turned and looked straight at him, the virginal curiosity clear in her eyes. And he took her into his arms.

Her arms had fallen to her side. She endured his lips gravely, then turned her head and looked at the roses beside her.

“I was afraid,” she said, “that we would do this. Now let me go, Jim.”

He released her in silence. She walked slowly to the mantel and set one slim foot on the fender.

Without looking around at him she said: “Does this spoil me for you, Jim?”

“You darling——”

“Tell me frankly. Does it?”

“What on earth do you mean, Palla! Does it spoil *me* for you?”

“I’ve been thinking.... No, it doesn’t. But I wondered about you.”

He came over to where she stood.

“Dear,” he said unsteadily, “don’t you know I’m very desperately in love with you?”

At that she turned her enchanting little head toward him.

“If you are,” she said, “there need be nothing desperate about it.”

“Do you mean you care enough to marry me, you darling?” he asked impetuously. “Will you, Palla?”

“Why, no,” she said candidly. “I didn’t mean that. I meant that I care for you quite as much as you care for me. So you need not be desperate. But I really don’t think we are in love—I mean sufficiently—for anything serious.”

“Why don’t you think so!” he demanded impatiently.

“Do you wish me to be quite frank?”

“Of course!”

“Very well.” She lifted her head and let her clear eyes rest on his. “I like you,” she said. “I even like—what we did. I like you far better than any man I ever knew. But I do not care for you enough to give up my freedom of mind and of conduct for your asking. I do not care enough for you to subscribe to your religion and your laws. And that’s the tragic truth.”

“But what on earth has all that to do with it? I haven’t asked you to believe as I believe or to subscribe to any law——”

Her enchanting laughter filled the room: “Yes, you have! You asked me to marry you, didn’t you?”

“Of course!”

“Well, I can’t, Jim, because I don’t believe in the law of marriage, civil or religious. If I loved you I’d live with you unmarried. But I’m afraid to try it. And so are you. Which proves that I’m not really in love with you, or you with me——”

The door bell rang.

“But I do care for you,” she whispered, bending swiftly toward him. Her lips rested lightly on his a moment, then she turned and walked out into the centre of the room.

The maid announced: “Mr. Estridge!”

CHAPTER VIII

Young Shotwell, still too incredulous to be either hurt or angry, stood watching Palla welcoming her guests, who arrived within a few minutes of each other.

First came Estridge,—handsome, athletic, standing over six feet, and already possessed of that winning and reassuring manner which means success for a physician.

“It’s nice of you to ask me, Palla,” he said. “And is Miss Westgard really coming to-night?”

“But here she is now!” exclaimed Palla, as the maid announced her. “—Ilse! You astonishing girl! How long have you been in New York?”

And Shotwell beheld the six-foot goddess for the first time—gazed with pleasurable awe upon this young super-creature with the sea-blue eyes and golden hair and a skin of roses and cream.

“Fancy, Palla!” she said, “I came immediately back from Stockholm, but you had sailed on the *Elsinore*, and I was obliged to wait!—Oh!—” catching sight of Estridge as he advanced—“I am so very happy to see you again!”—giving him her big, exquisitely sculptured hand. “Except for Mr. Brisson, we are quite complete in our little company of death!” She laughed her healthy, undisturbed defiance of that human enemy as she named him, gazed rapturously at Palla, acknowledged Shotwell’s presentation in her hearty, engaging way, then turned laughingly to Estridge:

“The world whirls like a wheel in a squirrel cage which we all tread:—only to find ourselves together after travelling many, many miles at top speed!... Are you well, John Estridge?”

“Fairly,” he laughed, “but nobody except the immortals could ever be as well as you, Ilse Westgard!”

She laughed in sheer exuberance of her own physical vigour: “Only that old and toothless nemesis of Loki can slay me, John Estridge!” And, to Palla: “I had some slight trouble in Stockholm. Fancy!—a little shrimp of a man approached me on the street one evening when there chanced to be nobody near.

“And the first I knew he was mouthing and grinning and saying to me in Russian: ‘I know you, hired mercenary of the aristocrats!—I know you!—big white battle horse that carried the bloody war-god!’

“I was too astonished, my dear; I merely gazed upon this small and agitated

toad, who continued to run alongside and grimace and pull funny faces at me. He appeared to be furious, and he said some very vile things to me.

“I was disgusted and walked faster, and he had to run. And all the while he was squealing at me: ‘I know you! You keep out of America, do you hear? If you sail on that steamer, we follow you and kill you! You hear it what I say? We kill! Kill! Kill!——’”

She threw up her superb head and laughed:

“Can you see him—this insect—Palla!—so small and hairy, with crazy eyes like little sparks among the furry whiskers!—and running, running at heel, underfoot, one side and then the other, and squealing ‘Kill! Kill? Kill’——”

She had made them see the picture and they all laughed.

“But all the same,” she added, turning to Estridge, “from that evening I became conscious that people were watching me.

“It was the same in Copenhagen and in Christiania—always I felt that somebody was watching me.”

“Did you have any trouble?” asked Estridge.

“Well—there seemed to be so many unaccountable delays, obstacles in securing proper papers, trouble about luggage and steamer accommodations—petty annoyances,” she added. “And also I am sure that letters to me were opened, and others which I should have received never arrived.”

“You believe it was due to the Reds?” asked Palla. “Have they emissaries in Scandinavia?”

“My dear, their agents and spies swarm everywhere over the world!” said Ilse calmly.

“Not here,” remarked Shotwell, smiling.

“Oh,” rejoined Ilse quickly, “I ask your pardon, but America, also, is badly infested by these people. As their Black Plague spreads out over the entire world, so spread out the Bolsheviki to infect all with the red sickness that slays whole nations!”

“We have a few local Reds,” he said, unconvinced, “but I had scarcely supposed——”

The bell rang: Miss Lanois and Mr. Tchernov were announced, greeted warmly by Palla, and presented.

Both spoke the beautiful English of educated Russians; Vanya Tchernov, a wonderfully handsome youth, saluted Palla’s hand in Continental fashion, and

met the men with engaging formality.

Shotwell found himself seated beside Marya Lanois, a lithe, warm, golden creature with greenish golden eyes that slanted, and the strawberry complexion that goes with reddish hair.

“You are happy,” she said, “with all your streets full of bright flags and your victorious soldiers arriving home by every troopship. Ah!—but Russia is the most unhappy of all countries to-day, Mr. Shotwell.”

“It’s terribly sad,” he said sympathetically. “We Americans don’t seem to know whether to send an army to help you, or merely to stand aside and let Russia find herself.”

“You should send troops!” she said. “Is it not so, Ilse?”

“Sane people should unite,” replied the girl, her beautiful face becoming serious. “It will arrive at that the world over—the sane against the insane.”

“And it is only the bourgeoisie that is sane,” said Vanya Tchernov, in his beautifully modulated voice. “The extremes are both abnormal—aristocrats and Bolsheviki alike.”

“We social revolutionists,” said Marya Lanois, “were called extremists yesterday and are called reactionists to-day. But we are the world’s balance. This war was fought for our ideals; your American soldiers marched for them: the hun failed because of them.”

“And there remains only one more war,” said Ilse Westgard,—“the war against those outlaws we call Capital and Labour—two names for two robbers that have disturbed the world’s peace long enough!”

“Two tyrants,” said Marya, “who trample us to war upon each other—who outrage us, crush us, cripple us with their ferocious feuds. What are the Bolsheviki? ‘Those who want more.’ Then the name belongs as well to the capitalists. They, also, are Bolsheviki—‘men who always want more!’ And these are the two quarrelling Bolsheviki giants who trample us—Lord Labour, Lord Capital—the devil of envy against the devil of greed!—war to the death! And, to the survivor, the bones!”

Shotwell, a little astonished to hear from the red lips of this warm young creature the bitter cynicisms of the proletariat, asked her to define more clearly where the Bolsheviki stood, and for what they stood.

“Why,” she said, lying back on the sofa and adjusting her lithe body to a more luxurious position among the pillows, “it amounts to this, Mr. Shotwell, that a new doctrine is promulgated in the world—the cult of the under-dog.

“And in all dog-fights, if the under-dog ever gets on top, then he, also, will try

to kill the ci-devant who has now become the under-dog." And she laughed at him out of her green eyes that slanted so enchantingly.

"You mean that there always will be an under-dog in the battle between capital and labour?"

"Surely. Their snarling, biting, and endless battle is a nuisance." She smiled again: "We should knock them both on the head."

"You know," explained Ilse, "that when we speak of the two outlaws as Capital and Labour, we don't mean legitimate capital and genuine labour."

"They never fight," added Tchernov, smiling, "because they are one and the same."

"Of course," remarked Marya, "even the united suffer occasionally from internal pains."

"The remedy," added Vanya, "is to consult a physician. That is—arbitration."

Ilse said: "Force is good! But one uses it legitimately only against rabid things." She turned affectionately to Palla and took her hands: "Your wonderful Law of Love solves all phenomena except insanity. With rabies it can not deal. Only force remains to solve that problem."

"And yet," said Palla, "so much insanity can be controlled by kind treatment."

Estridge agreed, but remarked that strait-jackets and padded cells would always be necessary in the world.

"As for the Bolsheviki," said Marya, turning her warm young face to Shotwell with a lissome movement of the shoulders, almost caressing, "in the beginning we social revolutionists agreed with them and believed in them. Why not? Kerensky was an incapable dreamer—so sensitive that if you spoke rudely to him he shrank away wounded to the soul.

"That is not a leader! And the Cadets were plotting, and the Cossacks loomed like a tempest on the horizon. And then came Korniloff! And the end."

"The peace of Brest," explained Vanya, in his gentle voice, "awoke us to what the Red Soviets stood for. We saw Christ crucified again. And understood."

Marya sat up straight on the sofa, running her dazzling white fingers over her hair—hair that seemed tiger-red, and very vaguely scented.

"For thirty pieces of silver," she said, "Judas sold the world. What Lenine and Trotsky sold was paid for in yellow metal, and there were more pieces."

Ilse said: "Babushka is dying of it. That is enough for me."

Vanya replied: "Where the source is infected, drinkers die at the river's mouth.

Little Marie Spiridonova perished. Countess Panina succumbed. Alexandria Kolontar will die from its poison. And, as these died, so shall Ivan and Vera die also, unless that polluted source be cleansed."

Marya rested her tawny young head on the cushions again and smiled at Shotwell:

"It's confusing even to Russians," she said, "—like a crazy Bakst spectacle at the Marinsky. I wonder what you must think of us."

But on her expressive mouth the word "us" might almost have meant "me," and he paid her the easy compliment which came naturally to him, while she looked at him out of lazy and very lovely eyes as green as beryls.

"*Tiche*," she murmured, smiling, "*ce n'est pas moi l'état, monsieur*." And laughed while her indolent glance slanted sideways on Vanya, and lingered there as though in leisurely but amiable appraisal.

The girl was evidently very young, but there seemed to be an indefinable something about her that hinted of experience beyond her years.

Palla had been looking at her—from Shotwell to her—and Marya's sixth sense was already aware of it and asking why.

For between two females of the human species the constant occult interplay is like steady lighting. With invisible antennæ they touch one another incessantly, delicately exploring inside that grosser aura which is all that the male perceives.

And finally Marya looked back at Palla.

"May Mr. Tchernov play for us?" asked Palla, smiling, as though some vague authority in the matter were vested in this young girl with the tiger-hair.

Her eyes closed indolently, and opened again as though digesting the subtlety: then, disdainfully accepting the assumption: "Oh, Vanya," she called out carelessly, "play a little for us."

The handsome youth bowed in his absent, courteous way. There was about him a simplicity entirely winning as he seated himself at the piano.

But his playing revealed a maturity and nobility of mind scarcely expected of such gentleness and youth.

Never had Palla heard Beethoven until that moment.

He did not drift. There was no caprice to offend when he turned with courtly logic from one great master to another.

Only when Estridge asked for something "typically Russian" did the charming

dignity of the sequence break. Vanya laughed and looked at Marya Lanois:

“That means you must sing,” he said.

She sang, resting where she was among the silken cushions;—the song, one of those epics of ancient Moscow, lauded Ivan IV. and the taking of Kazan.

The music was bizarre; the girl’s voice bewitching; and though the song was of the *Beliny*, it had been made into brief couplets, and it ended very quickly.

Laughing at the applause, she sang a song of the *Skomorokhi*; then a cradle song, infinitely tender and strange, built upon the Chinese scale; and another—a Cossack song—built, also, upon the pentatonic scale.

Discussions intruded then; the diversion ended the music.

Palla presently rose, spoke to Vanya and Estridge, and came over to where Jim Shotwell sat beside Marya.

Interrupted, they both looked up, and Jim rose as Estridge also presented himself to Marya.

Palla said: “If you will take me out, Jim, we can show everybody the way.” And to Marya: “Just a little supper, you know—but the dining room is below.”

Her pretty drawing-room was only partly furnished—an expensive but genuine set of old Aubusson being her limit for the time.

But beyond, in the rear, the little glass doors opened on a charming dining-room, the old Georgian mahogany of which was faded to a golden hue. Curtains, too, were golden shot with palest mauve; and two Imperial Chinese panels of ancient silk, miraculously embroidered and set with rainbow Ho-ho birds, were the only hangings on the walls. And they seemed to illuminate the room like sunshine.

Shotwell, who knew nothing about such things but envisaged them with reverence, seated Palla and presently took his place beside her.

His neighbour on his left was Marya, again—an arrangement which Palla might have altered had it occurred to her upstairs.

Estridge, very animated, and apparently happy, recalled to Palla their last dinner together, and their dance.

Palla laughed: “You said I drank too much champagne, John Estridge! Do you remember?”

“You bet I do. You had a cunning little bunn, Palla—–”

“I did not! I merely asked you and Mr. Brisson what it felt like to be intoxicated.”

“You did your best to be a sport,” he insisted, “but you almost passed away over your first cigarette!”

“Darling!” cried Ilse, “don’t let them tease you!”

Palla, rather pink, laughingly denied any aspirations toward sportdom; and she presently ventured a glance at Shotwell, to see how he took all this.

But already Marya had engaged him in half smiling, low-voiced conversation; and Palla looked at her golden-green eyes and warm, rich colouring, cooled by a skin of snow. Tiger-golden, the *rousse* ensemble; the supple movement of limb and body fascinated her; but most of all the lovely, slanting eyes with their glint of beryl amid melting gold.

Estridge spoke to Marya; as the girl turned slightly, Palla said to Shotwell:

“Do you find them interesting—my guests?”

He turned instantly to her, but it seemed to her as though there were a slight haze in his eyes—a fixedness—which cleared, however, as he spoke.

“They are delightful—all of them,” he said. “Your blond goddess yonder is rather overpowering, but beautiful to gaze upon.”

“And Vanya?”

“Charming; astonishing.”

“Lovable,” she said.

“He seems so.”

“And—Marya?”

“Rather bewildering,” he replied. “Fascinating, I should say. Is she very learned?”

“I don’t know.”

“She’s been in the universities.”

“Yes.... I don’t know how learned she is.”

“She is very young,” he remarked.

It was on the tip of Palla’s tongue to say something; and she remained silent—lest this man misinterpret her motive—and, perhaps, lest her own conscience misinterpret it, too.

Ilse said it to Estridge, however, frankly insouciant:

“You know Marya and Vanya are married—that is, they live together.”

And Shotwell heard her.

“Is that true?” he said in a low voice to Palla.

“Why, yes.”

He remained silent so long that she added: “The tie is not looser than the old-fashioned one. More rigid, perhaps, because they are on their honour.”

“And if they tire of each other?”

“You, also, have divorce,” said the girl, smiling.

“Do you?”

“It is beastly to live together where love does not exist. People who believe as they do—as I do—merely separate.”

“And contract another alliance if they wish?”

“Do not your divorcees remarry if they wish?”

“What becomes of the children?” he demanded sullenly.

“What becomes of them when your courts divorce their parents?”

“I see. It’s all a parody on lawful regularity.”

“I’m sorry you speak of it that way——”

The girl’s face flushed and she extended her hand toward her wine glass.

“I didn’t intend to hurt you, Palla,” he said.

She drew a quick breath, looked up, smiled: “You didn’t mean to,” she said. Then into her brown eyes came the delicious glimmer:

“May I whisper to you, Jim? Is it too rude?”

He inclined his head and felt the thrill of her breath:

“Shall we drink one glass together—to each other alone?”

“Yes.”

“To a dear comradeship, and close!... And not too desperate!” she added, as her glance flashed into hidden laughter.

They drank, not daring to look toward each other. And Palla’s careless gaze, slowly sweeping the circle, finally met Marya’s—as she knew it must. Both smiled, touching each other at once with invisible antennæ—always searching, exploring under the glimmering aura what no male ever discovered or comprehended.

There was, in the living room above, a little more music—a song or two before the guests departed.

Marya, a little apart, turned to Shotwell:

“You find our Russian folk-song amusing?”

“Wonderful!”

“If, by any chance, you should remember that I am at home on Thursdays, there is a song I think that might interest you.” She let her eyes rest on him with a curious stillness in their depths:

“The song is called *Lada*,” she said in a voice so low that he just heard her. The next moment she was taking leave of Palla; kissed her. Vanya enveloped her in her wrap.

Estridge called up a taxi; and presently went away with Ilse.

Very slowly Palla came back to the centre of the room, where Shotwell stood. The scent of flowers was in his nostrils, his throat; the girl herself seemed saturated with their perfume as he took her into his arms.

“So you didn’t like my friends, Jim,” she ventured.

“Yes, I did.”

“I was afraid they might have shocked you.”

He said drily: “It isn’t a case of being shocked. It’s more like being bored.”

“Oh. My friends bore you?”

“Their morals do.... Is Ilse that sort, too?”

“That sort?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I suppose she is.”

“Not inclined to bother herself with the formalities of marriage?”

“I suppose not.”

“It’s a mischievous, ridiculous, immoral business!” he said hotly. “Why, to look at you—at Ilse—at Miss Lanois—–”

“We don’t look like very immoral people, do we?” she said, laughingly.

The light raillery in her laughter angered him, and he released her and began to pace the room nervously.

“See here, Palla,” he said roughly, “suppose I accept you at your own valuation!”

“I value myself very highly, Jim.”

“So do I. That’s why I ask you to marry me.”

“And I tell you I don’t believe in marriage,” she rejoined coolly.

“A magistrate can marry us——”

“It makes no difference. A ceremony, civil or religious, is entirely out of the question.”

“You mean,” he said, incensed, “that you refuse to be married by any law at all?”

“My own law is sufficient.”

“Well—well, then,” he stammered; “—what—what sort of procedure——”

“None.”

“You’re crazy,” he said; “*you* wouldn’t do that!”

“If I were in love with you I’d not be afraid.”

Her calm candour infuriated him:

“Do you imagine that you and I could ever get away with a situation like that!” he blazed out.

“Why do you become so irritable and excited, Jim? We’re not going to try——”

“Damnation! I should think not!” he retorted, so violently that her mouth quivered. But she kept her head averted until the swift emotion was under control.

Then she said in a low voice: “If you really think me immoral, Jim, I can understand your manner toward me. Otherwise——”

“Palla, dear! Forgive me! I’m just worried sick——”

“You funny boy,” she said with her quick, frank smile, “I didn’t mean to worry you. Listen! It’s all quite simple. I care for you very much indeed. I don’t mind your—caressing—me—sometimes. But I’m not in love. I just care a lot for you.... But not nearly enough to love you.”

“Palla, you’re hopeless!”

“Why? Because I am so respectful toward love? Of course I am. A girl who believes as I do can’t afford to make a mistake.”

“Exactly,” he said eagerly, “but under the law, if a mistake is made every woman has her remedy——”

“Her *remedy*! What do you mean? You can’t pass one of those roses through the flame of that fire and still have your rose, can you?”

He was silent.

“And that’s what happens under *your* laws, as well as outside of them. No! I don’t love you. Under your law I’d be afraid to marry you. Under mine I’m deathly afraid.... Because—I know—that where love is there can be no fear.”

“Is that your answer, Palla?”

“Yes, Jim.”

CHAPTER IX

He had called her up the following morning from the office, and had told her that he thought he had better not see her for a while.

And she had answered with soft concern that he must do what he thought best without considering her.

What other answer he expected is uncertain; but her gentle acquiescence in his decision irritated him and he ended the conversation in a tone of boyish resentment.

To occupy his mind there was, that day, not only the usual office routine, but some extra business most annoying to Sharrow. For Angelo Puma had turned up again, as shiny and bland as ever, flashing his superb smile over clerk and stenographer impartially.

So Sharrow shunted him to Mr. Brooke, that sort of property being his specialty; and Brooke called in Shotwell.

“Go up town with that preposterous wop and settle this business one way or another, once for all,” he whispered. “A crook named Skidder owns the property; but we can’t do anything with him. The office is heartily sick of both Skidder and Puma; and Sharrow desires to be rid of them.”

Then, very cordially, he introduced Puma to young Shotwell; and they took Puma’s handsome car and went up town to see what could be done with the slippery owner of the property in question, who was now permanently located in New York.

On the way, Puma, smelling oppressively aromatic and looking conspicuously glossy as to hair, hat, and boots, also became effusively voluble. For he had instantly recognised Shotwell as the young man with whom that disturbingly pretty girl had been in consultation in Sharrow's offices; and his mind was now occupied with a new possibility as well as with the property which he so persistently desired to acquire.

"With me," he said in his animated, exotic way, and all creased with smiles, "my cinema business is not business alone! No! It is Art! It is the art hunger that ever urges me onward, not the desire for commercial gain. For me, beauty is ever first; the box-office last! You understand, Mr. Shotwell? With me, art is supreme! Yes. And afterward my crust of bread."

"Well, then," said Jim, "I can't see why you don't pay this man Skidder what he asks for the property."

"I tell you why. I make it clear to you. For argument—Skidder he has ever the air of one who does not care to sell. It is an attitude! I know! But he has that air. Well! I say to him, 'Mr. Skidder, I offer you—we say for argument, one dollar! Yes?' Well, he do not say yes or no. He do not say, 'I take a dollar and also one quarter. Or a dollar and a half. Or two dollars.' No. He squint and answer: 'I am not anxious to sell!' My God! What can one say? What can one do?"

"Perhaps," suggested Jim, "he really doesn't want to sell."

"Ah! That is not so. No. He is sly, Mr. Skidder, like there never has been in my experience a man more sly. What is it he desires? I ask. I do not know. But all the time he inquire about my business if it pays, and is there much money in it. Also, I hear, by channels, that he makes everywhere inquiries if the film business shall pay."

"Maybe he wants to try it himself."

"Also, that has occurred to me. But to him I say nothing. No. He is too sly. Me, I am all art and all heart. Me, I am frank like there never was a man in my business! But Skidder, he squint at me. My God, those eye! And I do not know what is in his thought."

"Well, Mr. Puma, what do you wish me to do? As I understand it, you are our client, and if I buy for you this Skidder property I shall look to you, of course, for my commission. Is that what you understand?"

"My God! Why should he not pay that commission if you are sufficiently obliging to buy from him his property?"

"It isn't done that way," explained Jim drily.

"You suppose you can buy me this property? Yes?"

“I don’t know. Of course, I can buy anything for you if you’ll pay enough.”

“My God! I do not enjoy commercial business. No. I enjoy art. I enjoy qualities of the heart. I—–” He looked at Jim out of his magnificent black eyes, touched his full lips with a perfumed handkerchief.

“Yes, sir,” he said, flashing a brilliant smile, “I am all heart. But my heart is for art alone! I dedicate it to the film, to the moving picture, to beauty! It is my constant preoccupation. It is my only thought. Art, beauty, the picture, the world made happier, better, for the beauty which I offer in my pictures. It is my only thought. It is my life.”

Jim politely suppressed a yawn and said that a life devoted purely to art was a laudable sacrifice.

“As example!” explained Puma, all animation and childlike frankness; “I pay my artists what they ask. What is money when it is a question of art? I must have quality; I must have beauty—” He shrugged: “I must pay. Yes?”

“One usually pays for pulchritude.”

“Ah! As example! I watch always on the streets as I pass by. I see a face. It has beauty. It has quality. I follow. I speak. I am frank like there never was a man. I say, ‘Mademoiselle, you shall not be offended. No. Art has no frontiers. It is my art, not I who address you. I am Angelo Puma. The Ultra-Film Company is mine. In you I perceive possibilities. This is my card. If it interests you to have a test, come! Who knows? It may be your life’s destiny. The projection room should tell. Adieu!’”

“Is that the way you pick stars?” asked Jim curiously.

“Stars? Bah! I care nothing for stars. No. I should go bankrupt. Why? Beauty alone is my star. Upon it I drape the mantle of Art!”

He kissed his fat finger-tips and gazed triumphantly at Jim.

“You see? Out of the crowd of passersby I pick the perfect and unconscious rosebud. In my temple it opens into perfect bloom. And Art is born! And I am content. You comprehend?”

Jim said that he thought he did.

“As example,” exclaimed Puma vivaciously, “while in conversation once with Mr. Sharrow, I beheld entering your office a young lady in mourning. Hah! Instantly I was all art!” Again he kissed his gloved fingers. “A face for a picture! A form for the screen! I perceive. I am convinced.... You recall the event, perhaps, Mr. Shotwell?”

“No.”

“A young lady in mourning, seated beside your desk? I believe she was buying from you a house.”

“Oh.”

“Her name—Miss Dumont—I believe.”

Jim glanced at him. “Miss Dumont is not likely to do anything of that sort,” he said.

“And why?”

“You mean go into the movies?” He laughed. “She wouldn’t bother.”

“But—my God! It is Art! What you call movies, and, within, this young lady may hide genius. And genius belongs to Art. And Art belongs to the world!”

The unthinkable idea of Palla on the screen was peculiarly distasteful to him.

“Miss Dumont has no inclination for the movies,” he said.

“Perhaps, Mr. Shotwell,” purred Puma, “if your amiable influence could induce the young lady to have a test made——”

“There isn’t a chance of it,” said Jim bluntly. Their limousine stopped just then. They got out before one of those new apartment houses on the upper West Side.

Mr. Skidder, it appeared, was in and would receive them.

A negro servant opened the door and ushered them into a parlour where Mr. Elmer Skidder, sprawling over the débris of breakfast, laid aside newspaper and coffee cup and got up to receive them in bath robe and slippers.

And when they were all seated: “Now, Mr. Skidder,” said Jim, with his engaging frankness, “the simplest way is the quickest. My client, Mr. Puma, wants to purchase your property; and he is, I understand, prepared to pay considerably more than it is worth. We all have a very fair idea of its actual value. Our appraiser, yours, and other appraisers from other companies and corporations seem, for a wonder, to agree in their appraisal of this particular property.

“Now, how much more than it is worth do you expect us to offer you?”

Skidder had never before been dealt with in just this way. He squinted at Jim, trying to appraise him. But within his business experience in a country town no similar young man had he encountered.

“Well,” he said, “I ain’t asking you to buy, am I?”

“We understand that,” rejoined Jim, good humouredly; “*we* are asking *you* to

sell.”

“You seem to want it pretty bad.”

“We do,” said the young fellow, laughing.

“All right. Make your offer.”

Jim named the sum.

“No, sir!” snapped Skidder, picking up his newspaper.

“Then,” remarked Jim, looking: frankly at Puma, “that definitely lets us out.” And, to Skidder: “Many thanks for permitting us to interrupt your breakfast. No need to bother you again, Mr. Skidder.” And he offered his hand in smiling finality.

“Look here,” said Skidder, “the property is worth all I ask.”

“If it’s worth that to you,” said Jim pleasantly, “you should keep it.” And he turned away toward the door, wondering why Puma did not follow.

“Are you two gentlemen in a rush?” demanded Skidder.

“I have other business, of course,” said Jim.

“Sit down. Hell! Will you have a drink?”

When they were again seated, Skidder squinted sideways at Angelo Puma.

“Want a partner?” he inquired.

“Please?” replied Puma, as though mystified.

“Want more capital to put into your fillum concern?” demanded Skidder.

Puma, innocently perplexed, asked mutely for an explanation out of his magnificent dark eyes.

“I got money,” asserted Skidder.

Puma’s dazzling smile congratulated him upon the accumulation of a fabulous fortune.

“I had you looked up,” continued Skidder. “It listened good. And—I got money, too. And I got that property in my vest pocket. See. And there’s a certain busted fillum corporation can be bought for a postage stamp—all ’ncorporated ’n everything. You get me?”

No; Mr. Puma, who was all art and heart, could not comprehend what Mr. Skidder was driving at.

“This here busted fillum company is called the *Super-Picture Fillums*,” said Skidder. “What’s the matter with you and me buying it? Don’t you ever do a little tradin’?”

Jim rose, utterly disgusted, but immensely amused at himself, and realising, now, how entirely right Sharrow had been in desiring to be rid of this man Skidder, and of Puma and the property in question.

He said, still smiling, but rather grimly: “I see, now, that this is no place for a broker who lives by his commissions.” And he bade them adieu with perfect good humour.

“Have a seegar?” inquired Skidder blandly.

“Why do you go, sir?” asked Puma innocently. No doubt, being all heart and art, he did not comprehend that brokers can not exist on cigars alone.

His commission had gone glimmering. Sharrow, evidently foreseeing something of that sort, had sent him out with Puma to meet Skidder and rid the office of the dubious affair.

This Jim understood, and yet he was not particularly pleased to be exploited by this bland pair who had come suddenly to an understanding under his very nose—the understanding of two petty, dickering, crossroad traders, which coolly excluded any possibility both of his services and of his commission.

“No; only a kike lawyer is required now,” he said to himself, as he crossed the street and entered Central Park. “I’ve been properly trimmed by a perfumed wop and a squinting yap,” he thought with intense amusement. “But we’re well clear of them for good.”

The park was wintry and unattractive. Few pedestrians were abroad, but motors sparkled along distant drives in the sunshine.

Presently his way ran parallel to one of these drives. And he had been walking only a little while when a limousine veered in, slowing down abreast of him, and he saw a white-gloved hand tapping the pane.

He felt himself turning red as he went up, hat in hand, to open the door and speak to the girl inside.

“What on earth are you doing?” she demanded, laughingly, “—walking all by your wild lone in the park on a wintry day!”

He explained. She made room for him and he got in.

“We rather hoped you’d be at the opera last night,” she said, but without any reproach in her voice.

“I meant to go, Elorn—but something came up to prevent it,” he added, flushing again. “Were they singing anything new?”

“Yes, but you missed nothing,” she reassured him lightly. “Where on earth have you kept yourself these last weeks? One sees you no more among the haunts of men.”

He said, in the deplorable argot of the hour: “Oh, I’m off all that social stuff.”

“But I’m not social stuff, am I?”

“No. I’ve meant to call you up. Something always seems to happen—I don’t know, Elorn, but ever since I came back from France I haven’t been up to seeing people.”

She glanced at him curiously.

He sat gazing out of the window, where there was nothing to see except leafless trees and faded grass and starlings and dingy sparrows.

The girl was more worth his attention—one of those New York examples, built on lean, rangy, thoroughbred lines—long limbed, small of hand and foot and head, with cinder-blond hair, greyish eyes, a sweet but too generous mouth, and several noticeable freckles.

Minute grooming and a sure taste gave her that ultra-smart appearance which does everything for a type that is less attractive in a dinner gown, and still less in negligée. And which, after marriage, usually lets a straight strand of hair sprawl across one ear.

But now, coiffeur, milliner, modiste, and her own maiden cleverness kept her immaculate—the true Gotham model found nowhere else.

They chatted of parties already past, where he had failed to materialise, and of parties to come, where she hoped he would appear. And he said he would.

They chatted about their friends and the gossip concerning them.

Traffic on Fifth Avenue was rather worse than usual. The competent police did their best, but motors and omnibuses, packed solidly, moved only by short spurts before being checked again.

“It’s after one o’clock,” she said, glancing at her tiny platinum wrist-watch. “Here’s Delmonico’s, Jim. Shall we lunch together?”

He experienced a second’s odd hesitation, then: “Certainly,” he said. And she signalled the chauffeur.

The place was beginning to be crowded, but there was a table on the Fifth Avenue side.

As they crossed the crowded room toward it, women looked up at Elorn Sharrow, instantly aware that they saw perfection in hat, gown and fur, and a face and figure not to be mistaken for any imitation of the Gotham type.

She wore silver fox—just a stole and muff. Every feminine eye realised their worth.

When they were seated:

“I want,” she said gaily, “some consommé and a salad. You, of course, require the usual nourishment of the carnivora.”

But it seemed not. However, he ordered a high-ball, feeling curiously depressed. Then he addressed himself to making the hour agreeable, conscious, probably, that reparation was overdue.

Friends from youthful dancing-class days, these two had plenty to gossip about; and gradually he found himself drifting back into the lively, refreshing, piquant intimacy of yesterday. And realised that it was very welcome.

For, about this girl, always a clean breeze seemed to be blowing; and the atmosphere invariably braced him up.

And she was always responsive, whether or not agreeing with his views; and he was usually conscious of being at his best with her. Which means much to any man.

So she dissected her pear-salad, and he enjoyed his whitebait, and they chatted away on the old footing, quite oblivious of people around them.

Elorn was having a very happy time of it. People thought her captivating now—freckles, mouth and all—and every man there envied the fortunate young fellow who was receiving such undivided attention from a girl like this.

But whether in Elorn’s heart there really existed all the gaiety that laughed at him out of her grey eyes, is a question. Because it seemed to her that, at moments, a recurrent shadow fell across his face. And there were, now and then, seconds suggesting preoccupation on his part, when it seemed to her that his gaze grew remote and his smile a trifle absent-minded.

She was drawing on her gloves; he had scribbled his signature across the back of the check. Then, as he lifted his head to look for their waiter, he found himself staring into the brown eyes of Palla Dumont.

The heavy flush burnt his face—burnt into it, so it seemed to him.

She was only two tables distant. When he bowed, her smile was the slightest; her nod coolly self-possessed. She was wearing orchids. There seemed to be a girl with her whom he did not know.

Why the sudden encounter should have upset him so—why the quiet glance Elorn bestowed upon Palla should have made him more uncomfortable still, he could not understand.

He lighted a cigarette.

“A wonderfully pretty girl,” said Elorn serenely. “I mean the girl you bowed to.”

“Yes, she is very charming.”

“Who is she, Jim?”

“I met her on the steamer coming back. She is a Miss Dumont.”

Elorn’s smile was a careless dismissal of further interest. But in her heart perplexity and curiosity contended with concern. For she had seen Jim’s face. And had wondered.

He laid away his half-consumed cigarette. She was quite ready to go. She rose, and he laid the stole around her shoulders. She picked up her muff.

As she passed through the narrow aisle, she permitted herself a casual side-glance at this girl in black; and Palla looked up at her, kept her quietly in range of her brown eyes to the limit of breeding, then her glance dropped as Jim passed; and he heard her speaking serenely to the girl beside her.

At the revolving doors, Elorn said: “Shall I drop you at the office, Jim?”

“Thanks—if you don’t mind.”

In the car he talked continually, not very entertainingly, but there was more vivacity about him than there had been.

“Are you doing anything to-night?” he inquired.

She was, of course. Yet, she felt oddly relieved that he had asked her.... But the memory of the strange expression in his face persisted in her mind.

Who was this girl with whom he had crossed the ocean? And why should he lose his self-possession on unexpectedly encountering her?

Had there been anything about Palla—the faintest hint of inferiority of any sort—Elorn Sharrow could have dismissed the episode with proud, if troubled, philosophy. For many among her girl friends had cub brothers. And the girl had learned that men are men—sometimes even the nicest—although she could not understand it.

But this brown-eyed girl in black was evidently her own sort—Jim’s sort. And that preoccupied her; and she lent only an inattentive ear to the animated monologue of the man beside her.

Before the offices of Sharrow & Co. her car stopped.

“I’m sorry, Jim,” she said, “that I’m so busy this week. But we ought to meet at many places, unless you continue to play the recluse. Don’t you really go anywhere any more?”

“No. But I’m going,” he said bluntly.

“Please do. And call me up sometimes. Take a sporting chance whenever you’re free. We ought to get in an hour together now and then. You’re coming to my dance of course, are you not?”

“Of course I am.”

The girl smiled in her sweet, generous way and gave him her hand again.

And he went into the office feeling rather miserable and beginning to realise why.

For in spite of what he had said to Palla about the wisdom of absenting himself, the mere sight of her had instantly set him afire.

And now he wanted to see her—needed to see her. A day was too long to pass without seeing her. An evening without her—and another—and others, appalled him.

And all the afternoon he thought of her, his mind scarcely on his business at all.

His parents were dining at home. He was very gay that evening—very amusing in describing his misadventures with Messrs. Puma and Skidder. But his mother appeared to be more interested in the description of his encounter with Elorn.

“She’s such a dear,” she said. “If you go to the Speedwells’ dinner on Thursday you’ll see her again. You haven’t declined, I hope; have you, Jim?”

It appeared that he had.

“If you drop out of things this way nobody will bother to ask you anywhere after a while. Don’t you know that, dear?” she said. “This town forgets overnight.”

“I suppose so, mother. I’ll keep up.”

His father remarked that it was part of his business to know the sort of people who bought houses.

Jim agreed with him. “I’ll surely kick in again,” he promised cheerfully.... “I think I’ll go to the club this evening.”

His mother smiled. It was a healthy sign. Also, thank goodness, there were no girls in black at the club.

At the club he resolutely passed the telephone booths and even got as far as the cloak room before he hesitated.

Then, very slowly, he retraced his steps; went into the nearest booth, and called a number that seemed burnt into his brain. Palla answered.

“Are you doing anything, dear?” he asked—his usual salutation.

“Oh. It’s you!” she said calmly.

“It is. Who else calls you dear? May I come around for a little while?”

“Have you forgotten what you——”

“No! May I come?”

“Not if you speak to me so curtly, Jim.”

“I’m sorry.”

She deliberated so long that her silence irritated him.

“If you don’t want me,” he said, “please say so.”

“I certainly don’t want you if you are likely to be ill-tempered, Jim.”

“I’m not ill-tempered.... I’ll tell you what’s the trouble if I may come. May I?”

“Is anything troubling you?”

“Of course.”

“I’m so sorry!”

“Am I to come?”

“Yes.”

She herself admitted him. He laid his hat and coat on a chair in the hall and followed her upstairs to the living-room.

When she had seated herself she looked up at him interrogatively, awaiting his pleasure. He stood a moment with his back to the fire, his hands twisting nervously behind him. Then:

“My trouble,” he explained naïvely, “is that I am restless and unhappy when I remain away from you.”

The girl laughed. “But, Jim, you seemed to be having a perfectly good time at Delmonico’s this noon.”

He reddened and gave her a disconcerted look.

“I don’t see,” she added, “why any man shouldn’t have a good time with such an attractive girl. May I ask who she is?”

“Elorn Sharrow,” he replied bluntly.

Palla’s glance had sometimes wandered over social columns in the papers and periodicals, and she was not ignorant concerning the identity and local importance of Miss Sharrow.

She looked up curiously at Jim. He was so very good to look at! Better, even, to know. And Miss Sharrow was his kind. They had seemed to belong together. And it came to Palla, hazily, and for the first time, that she herself seemed to belong nowhere in particular in the scheme of things.

But that was quite all right. She had now established for herself a habitation. She had some friends—would undoubtedly make others. She had her interests, her peace of mind, and her independence. And behind her she had the dear and tragic past—a passionate memory of a dead girl; a terrible remembrance of a dead God.

The heart of the world alone could make up to her these losses. For now she was already preparing to seek it in her own way, under her own Law of Love.

“Jim,” she said almost timidly, “I have not intended to make you unhappy. Don’t you understand that?”

He seated himself: she lighted a cigarette for him.

“I suppose you can’t help doing it,” he said glumly.

“I really can’t, it seems. I don’t love you. I wish I did.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course I do.... I wish I were in love with you.”

After a moment she said: “I told you how much I care for you. But—if you think it is easier for you—not to see me——”

“I can’t seem to stay away.”

“I’m glad you can’t—for my sake; but I’m troubled on your account. I do so adore to be with you! But—but if——”

“Hang it all!” he exclaimed, forcing a wry smile. “I act like an unbaked fool! You’ve gone to my head, Palla, and I behave like a drunken kid.... I’ll buck up. I’ve got to. I’m not the blithering, balmy, moon-eyed, melancholy ass you think me——”

Her quick laughter rang clear, and his echoed it, rather uncertainly.

“You poor dear,” she said, “you’re nearest my heart of anybody. I told you so. It’s only that one thing I don’t dare do.”

He nodded.

“Can’t you really understand that I’m afraid?”

“Afraid!” he repeated. “I should think you might be, considering your astonishing point of view. I should think you’d be properly scared to death!”

“I am. No girl, afraid, should ever take such a chance. Love and Fear cannot exist together. The one always slays the other.”

He looked at her curiously, remembering what Estridge had told him about her—how, on that terrible day in the convent chapel, this girl’s love had truly slain the fear within her as she faced the Red assassins and offered to lay down her life for her friend. Than which, it is said, there is no greater love....

“Of what are you thinking?” she asked, watching his expression.

“Of you—you strange, generous, fearless, wilful girl!” Then he squared his shoulders and shook them as though freeing himself of something oppressive.

“What you *may* need is a spanking!” he suggested coolly.

“Good heavens, Jim!——”

“But I’m afraid you’re not likely to get it. And what is going to happen to you—and to me—I don’t know—I don’t know, Palla.”

“May I prophesy?”

“Go to it, Miriam.”

“Behold, then: I shall never care for any man more than I care now for you; I shall never care more for you than I do now.... And if you are sweet-tempered and sensible, we shall be very happy with each other.... Even after you marry.... Unless your wife misunderstands——”

“My wife!” he repeated derisively.

“Miss Sharrow, for instance.”

He turned a dull red; the girl’s heart missed a beat, then hurried a little before it calmed again under her cool recognition and instant disdain of the first twinge of jealousy she could remember since childhood.

The absurdity of it, too! After all, it was this man’s destiny to marry. And, if it chanced to be that girl——

“You know,” he said in a detached, musing way, “it is well for you to remember that I shall never marry unless I marry you.... Life is long. There are other women.... I may forget you—at intervals.... But I shall never marry except with you, Palla.”

Her smile forced the gravity from her lips and eyes:

“If you behave like a veiled prophet you’ll end by scaring me,” she said.

But he merely gathered her into his arms and kissed her—laid back her head and looked down into her face and kissed her lips, without haste, as though she belonged to him.

Her head rested quite motionless on his shoulder. Perhaps she was still too taken aback to do anything about the matter. Her heart had hurried a little—not much—stimulated, possibly, by the rather agreeable curiosity which invaded her—charmingly expressive, now, in her wide brown eyes.

“So that’s the way of it,” he concluded, still looking down at her. “There are other women in the world. And life is long. But I marry you or nobody. And it’s my opinion that I shall not die unmarried.”

She smiled defiantly.

“You don’t seem to think much of my opinions,” she said.

“Are you more friendly to mine?”

“Certain opinions of yours,” he retorted, “originated in the diseased bean of some crazy Russian—never in your mind! So of course I hold them in contempt.”

She saw his face darken, watched it a moment, then impulsively drew his head down against hers.

“I do care for your opinions,” she said, her cheek, delicately warm, beside his. “So, even if you can not comprehend mine, be generous to them. I’m sincere. I try to be honest. If you differ from me, do it kindly, not contemptuously. For there is no such thing as ‘noble contempt!’ There is respectability in anger and nobility in tolerance. But none in disdain, for they are contradictions.”

“I tell you,” he said, “I despise and hate this loose socialistic philosophy that makes a bonfire of everything the world believes in!”

“Don’t hate other creeds; merely conform to your own, Jim. It will keep you very, very busy. And give others a chance to live up to their beliefs.”

He felt the smile on her lips and cheek:

“I can’t live up to my belief if I marry you,” she said. “So let us care for each other peacefully—accepting each other as we are. Life is long, as you say.... And there are other women.... And ultimately you will marry one of them. But until then——”

He felt her lips very lightly against his—cool young lips, still and fragrant and sweet.

After a moment she asked him to release her; and she rose and walked across the room to the mirror.

Still busy with her hair, she turned partly toward him:

“Apropos of nothing,” she said, “a man was exceedingly impudent to me on the street this evening. A Russian, too. I was so annoyed!”

“What do you mean?”

“It happened just as I started to ascend the steps.... There was a man there, loitering. I supposed he meant to beg. So I felt for my purse, but he jumped back and began to curse me roundly for an aristocrat and a social parasite!”

“What did he say?”

“I was so amazed—quite stupefied. And all the while he was swearing at me in Russian and in English, and he warned me to keep away from Marya and Vanya and Ilse and mind my own damned business. And he said, also, that if I didn’t there were people in New York who knew how to deal with any friend of the Russian aristocracy.”

She patted a curly strand of hair into place, and came toward him in her leisurely, lissome way.

“Fancy the impertinence of that wretched Red! And I understand that both Vanya and Marya have received horribly insulting letters. And Ilse, also. Isn’t it most annoying?”

She seated herself at the piano and absently began the Adagio of the famous sonata.

CHAPTER X

There was still, for Palla, much shopping to do. The drawing room she decided to leave, for the present, caring as she did only for a few genuine and beautiful pieces to furnish the pretty little French grey room.

The purchase of these ought to be deferred, but she could look about, and she

did, wandering into antique shops of every class along Fifth and Madison Avenues and the inviting cross streets.

But her chiefest quest was still for pots and pans and china; for napery, bed linen, and hangings; also for her own and more intimate personal attire.

To her the city was enchanting and not at all as she remembered it before she had gone abroad.

New York, under its canopy of tossing flags and ablaze with brilliant posters, swarmed with unfamiliar people. Every other pedestrian seemed to be a soldier; every other vehicle contained a uniform.

There were innumerable varieties of military dress in the thronged streets; there was the universal note of khaki and olive drab, terminating in leather vizored barrack cap or jaunty overseas service cap, and in spiral puttees, leather ones, or spurred boots.

Silver wings of aviators glimmered on athletic chests; chevrons, wound stripes, service stripes, an endless variety of insignia.

Here the grey-green and oxidised metal of the marines predominated; there, the conspicuous sage-green and gold of naval aviators. On campaign hats were every hue of hat cord; the rich gilt and blue of naval officers and the blue and white of their jackies were everywhere to be encountered.

And then everywhere, also, the brighter hue and exotic cut of foreign uniforms was apparent—splashes of gayer tints amid khaki and sober civilian garb—the beautiful *garance* and horizon-blue of French officers; the familiar “brass hat” of the British; the grey-blue and maroon of Italians. And there were stranger uniforms in varieties inexhaustible—the schapska-shaped head-gear of Polish officers, the beret of Czecho-Slovaks. And everywhere, too, the gay and well-known red pom-pon bobbed on the caps of French blue-jackets, and British marines stalked in pairs, looking every inch the soldier with their swagger sticks and their vizorless forage-caps.

Always, it seemed to Palla, there was military music to be heard above the roar of traffic—sometimes the drums and bugles of foreign detachments, arrived in aid of “drives” and loans of various sorts.

Ambulances painted grey and bright blue, and driven by smartly uniformed young women, were everywhere.

And to women’s uniforms there seemed no end, ranging all the way from the sober blue of the army nurse and the pretty white of the Red Cross, to bizarre but smart effects carried smartly by well set up girls representing scores of service corps, some invaluable, some of doubtful utility.

Eagle huts, canteens, soldiers’ rest houses, Red Cross quarters, clubs,

temporary barracks, peppered the city. Everywhere the service flags were visible, also, telling their proud stories in five-pointed symbols—sometimes tragic, where gold stars glittered.

Never had New York seemed to contain so many people; never had the overflow so congested avenue and street, circle and square, and the wretchedly inadequate and dirty street-car and subway service.

And into the heart of it all went Palla, engulfed in the great tides of Fifth Avenue, drifting into quieter back-waters to east and west, and sometimes caught and tossed about in the glittering maelstrom of Broadway when she ventured into the theatre district.

Opera, comedy, musical show and cinema interested her; restaurant and cabaret she had evaded, so far, but what most excited and fascinated her was the people themselves—these eager, restless moving millions swarming through the city day and night, always in motion under blue skies or falling rain, perpetually in quest of what the world eternally offered, eternally concealed—that indefinite, glimmering thing called “heart’s desire.”

To discover, to comprehend, to help, to guide their myriad aspirations in the interminable and headlong hunt for happiness, was, to Palla, the most vital problem in the world.

For her there existed only one solution of this problem: the Law of Love.

And in this world-wide Hunt for Happiness, where scrambling millions followed the trail of Heart’s Desire, she saw the mad huntsman, Folly, leading, and Black Care, the whipper-in; and, at the bitter end, only the bones of the world’s woe; and a Horseman seated on his Pale Horse.

But the problem that still remained was how to swerve the headlong hunt to the true trail toward the only goal where the world’s quarry, happiness, lies asleep.

How to make service the Universal Heart’s Desire? How to transfigure self-love into Love?

To preach her faith from the street corners—to cry it aloud in the wilderness where no ear heeded—violence, aggression, the campaign militant, had never appealed to the girl.

Like her nation, only when cornered did she blaze out and strike. But to harangue, threaten, demand of the world that it accept the Law of Service and of Love, seemed to her a mockery of the faith she had embraced, which, unless irrevocably in liaison with freedom, was no faith at all.

So, for Palla, the solution lay in loyalty to the faith she professed; in living it; in swaying ignorance by example; in overcoming incredulity by service,

scepticism by love.

Love and Service? Why, all around her among these teeming millions were examples—volunteers in khaki, their sisters in the garments of mercy! Why must the world stop there? This was the right scent. Why should the hunt swerve for the devil's herring drawn across the trail?

One for all; all for one! She had read it on one of the war-posters. Somebody had taken the splendid Guardsman's creed and had made it the slogan for this war against darkness.

And that was her creed—the true faith—the Law of Love. Then, was it good only in war? Why not make it the nation's creed? Why not emblazon it on the wall of every city on earth?—one for all; all for one; Love, Service, Freedom!

Before such a faith, autocracy and tyranny die. Under such a law every evil withers, every question is unravelled. There are no more problems of poverty and riches, none of greed and oppression.

The tyranny of convention, of observance, of taboo, of folkways, ends. And into the brain of all living beings will be born the perfect comprehension of their own indestructible divinity.

Part of this she ventured to say to Ilse Westgard one day, when they had met for luncheon in a modest tea-room on Forty-third Street.

But Ilse, always inclined toward militancy, did not entirely agree with Palla.

"To embody in one's daily life the principles of one's living faith is scarcely sufficient," she said. "Good is a force, not an inert condition. So is evil. And we should not sit still while evil moves."

"Example is not inertia," protested Palla.

"Example, alone, is sterile, I think," said the ex-girl-soldier of the Battalion of Death, buttering a crescent. She ate it with the delightful appetite of flawless health, and poured out more chocolate.

"For instance, dear," she went on, "the forces of evil—of degeneration, ignorance, envy, ferocity, are gathering like a tornado in Russia. Virtuous example, sucking its thumbs and minding its own business, will be torn to fragments when the storm breaks."

"The Bolsheviki?"

"The Reds. The Terrorists, I mean. You know as well as I do what they really are—merely looters skulking through the smoke of a world in flames—buzzards on the carcass of a civilisation dead. But, Palla, they do not sit still and suck their thumbs and say, 'I am a Terrorist. Behold me and be converted.' No, indeed! They are moving, always in motion, preoccupied by their hellish

designs.”

“In Russia, yes,” admitted Palla.

“Everywhere, dearest. Here, also.”

“I believe there are scarcely any in America,” insisted Palla.

“The country crawls with them,” retorted Ilse. “They work like moles, but already if you look about you can see the earth stirring above their tunnels. They are here, everywhere, active, scheming, plotting, whispering treason, stirring discontent, inciting envy, teaching treason.

“They are the Russians—Christians and Jews—who have filtered in here to do the nation mischief. They are the Germans who blew up factories, set fires, scuttled ships. They are foreigners who came here poisoned with envy; who have acquired nothing; whose greed and ferocity are whetted and ready for a universal conflagration by which they alone could profit.

“They are the labour leaders who break faith and incite to violence; they are the I. W. W.; they are the Black Hand, the Camorra; they are the penniless who would slay and rob; the landless who would kill and seize; the ignorant, nursing suspicion; the shiftless, brooding crimes to bring them riches quickly.

“And, Palla, your Law of Love and Service is good. But not for these.”

“What law for them, then?”

“Education. Maybe with machine guns.”

Palla shook her head. “Is that the way to educate defectives?”

“When they come at you *en masse*, yes!”

Palla laughed. “Dear,” she said, “there is no nation-wide Terrorist plot. These mental defectives are not in mass anywhere in America.”

“They are in dangerous groups everywhere. And every group is devoting its cunning to turning the working masses into a vast mob of the Black Hundred! They did it in Russia. They are working for it all over the world. You do not believe it?”

“No, I don’t, Ilse.”

“Very well. You shall come with me this evening. Are you busy?”

The thought of Jim glimmered in her mind. He might feel aggrieved. But he ought to begin to realise that he couldn’t be with her every evening.

“No, I haven’t any plans, Ilse,” she said, “no definite engagement, I mean. Will you dine at home with me?”

“Early, then. Because there is a meeting which you and I shall attend. It is an education.”

“An anarchist meeting?”

“Yes, Reds. I think we should go—perhaps take part——”

“What?”

“Why not? I shall not listen to lies and remain silent!” said Ilse, laughing. “The Revolution was good. But the Bolsheviki are nothing but greedy thieves and murderers. You and I know that. If anybody teaches people the contrary, I certainly shall have something to say.”

Palla desired to purchase silk for sofa pillows, having acquired a chaise-longue for her bedroom.

So she and Ilse went out into the sunshine and multi-coloured crowd; and all the afternoon they shopped very blissfully—which meant, also, lingering before store windows, drifting into picture-galleries, taking tea at Sherry’s, and finally setting out for home through a beflagged avenue jammed with traffic.

Dusk fell early but the drooping, orange-tinted globes which had replaced the white ones on the Fifth Avenue lamps were not yet lighted; and there still remained a touch of sunset in the sky when they left the bus.

At the corner of Palla’s street, there seemed to be an unusual congestion, and now, above the noise of traffic, they caught the sound of a band; and turned at the curb to see, supposing it to be a military music.

The band was a full one, not military, wearing a slatternly sort of uniform but playing well enough as they came up through the thickening dusk, marching close to the eastern curb of the avenue.

They were playing *The Marseillaise*. Four abreast, behind them, marched a dingy column of men and women, mostly of foreign aspect and squatty build, carrying a flag which seemed to be entirely red.

Palla, perplexed, incredulous, yet almost instantly suspecting the truth, stared at the rusty ranks, at the knots of red ribbon on every breast.

Other people were staring, too, as the unexpected procession came shuffling along—late shoppers, business men returning home, soldiers—all paused to gaze at this sullen visaged battalion clumping up the avenue.

“Surely,” said Palla to Ilse, “these people can’t be Reds!”

“Surely they are!” returned the tall, fair girl calmly. Her face had become flushed, and she stepped to the edge of the curb, her blue, wrathful eyes darkening like sapphires.

A soldier came up beside her. Others, sailors and soldiers, stopped to look. There was a red flag passing. Suddenly Ilse stepped from the sidewalk, wrenched the flag from the burly Jew who carried it, and, with the same movement, shattered the staff across her knee.

Men and women in the ranks closed in on her; a shrill roar rose from them, but the soldiers and sailors, cheering and laughing, broke into the enraged ranks, tearing off red rosettes, cuffing and kicking the infuriated Terrorists, seizing every seditious banner, flag, emblem and placard in sight.

Female Reds, shrieking with rage, clawed, kicked and bit at soldier, sailor and civilian. A gaunt man, with a greasy bunch of hair under a bowler, waved dirty hands above the mêlée and shouted that he had the Mayor's permission to parade.

Everywhere automobiles were stopping, crowds of people hurrying up, policemen running. The electric lights snapped alight, revealed a mob struggling there in the yellowish glare.

Ilse had calmly stepped to the sidewalk, the fragments of flag and staff in her white-gloved hands; and, as she saw the irresponsible soldiers and blue-jackets wading lustily into the Reds—saw the lively riot which her own action had started—an irresistible desire to laugh seized her.

Clear and gay above the yelling of Bolsheviki and the "Yip—yip!" of the soldiers, peeled her infectious laughter. But Palla, more gentle, stood with dark eyes dilated, fearful of real bloodshed in the furious scene raging in the avenue before her.

A little shrimp of a Terrorist, a huge red rosette streaming from his buttonhole, suddenly ran at Ilse and seized the broken staff and the rags of the red flag. And Palla, alarmed, caught him by the coat-collar and dragged him screeching and cursing away from her friend, rebuking him in a firm but excited voice.

Ilse came over, shouldering her superb figure through the crowd; looked at the human shrimp a moment; then her laughter pealed anew.

"That's the man who abused me in Denmark!" she said. "Oh, Palla, *look* at him! Do you really believe you could educate a thing like that!"

The man had wriggled free, and now he turned a flat, whiskered visage on Palla, menaced her with both soiled fists, inarticulate in his fury.

But police were everywhere, now, sweeping this miniature riot from the avenue, hustling the Reds uptown, checking the skylarking soldiery, sending amused or indignant citizens about their business.

A burly policeman said to Ilse with a grin: "I'll take what's left of that red flag, Miss;" and the girl handed it to him still laughing.

Soldiers wearing overseas caps cheered her and Palla. Everybody on the turbulent sidewalk was now laughing.

“D’yeh see that blond nab the red flag outer that big kike’s fists?” shouted one soldier to his sweating bunkie. “Some skirt!”

“God love the Bolsheviki she grabs by the slack o’ the pants!” cried a blue-jacket who had lost his cap. A roar followed.

“Only one flag in this little old town!” yelled a citizen nursing a cut cheek with reddened handkerchief.

“G’wan, now!” grumbled a policeman, trying to look severe; “it’s all over; they’s nothing to see. Av ye got homes——”

“Yip! Where do we go from here?” demanded a marine.

“Home!” repeated the policeman; “—that’s the answer. G’wan, now, peaceable—lave these ladies pass!——”

Ilse and Palla, still walled in by a grinning, admiring soldiery, took advantage of the opening and fled, followed by cheers as far as Palla’s door.

“Good heavens, Ilse,” she exclaimed in fresh dismay, as she began to realise the rather violent rôles they both had played, “—is that your idea of education for the masses?”

A servant answered the bell and they entered the house. And presently, seated on the chaise-longue in Palla’s bedroom, Ilse Westgard alternately gazed upon her ruined white gloves and leaned against the cane back, weak with laughter.

“How funny! How degrading! But how funny!” she kept repeating. “That large and enraged Jew with the red flag!—the wretched little Christian shrimp you carried wriggling away by the collar! Oh, Palla! Palla! Never shall I forget the expression on your face—like a bored housewife, who, between thumb and forefinger, carries a dead mouse by the tail——”

“He was trying to kick you, my dear,” explained Palla, beginning to remove the hairpins from her hair.

Ilse touched her eyes with her handkerchief.

“They might have thrown bombs,” she said. “It’s all very well to laugh, darling, but sometimes such affairs are not funny.”

Palla, seated at her dresser, shook down a mass of thick, bright-brown hair, and picked up her comb.

“I am wondering,” she said, turning partly toward Ilse, “what Jim Shotwell would think of me.”

“Fighting on the street!”—her laughter rang out uncontrolled. And Palla, too, was laughing rather uncertainly, for, as her recollection of the affair became more vivid, her doubts concerning the entire procedure increased.

“Of course,” she said, “that red flag was outrageous, and you were quite right in destroying it. One could hardly buttonhole such a procession and try to educate it.”

Ilse said: “One can usually educate a wild animal, but never a rabid one. You’ll see, to-night.”

“Where are we going, dear?”

“We are going to a place just west of Seventh Avenue, called the Red Flag Club.”

“Is it a club?”

“No. The Reds hire it several times a week and try to fill it with people. There is the menace to this city and to the nation, Palla—for these cunning fomenters of disorder deluge the poorer quarters of the town with their literature. That’s where they get their audiences. And that is where are being born the seeds of murder and destruction.”

Palla, combing out her hair, gazed absently into the mirror.

“Why should not we do the same thing?” she asked.

“Form a club, rent a room, and talk to people?”

“Yes; why not?” asked Palla.

“That is exactly why I wish you to come with me to-night—to realise how we should combat these criminal and insane agents of all that is most terrible in Europe.

“And you are right, Palla; that is the way to fight them. That is the way to neutralise the poison they are spreading. That is the way to educate the masses to that sane socialism in which we both believe. It can be done by education. It can be done by matching them with club for club, meeting for meeting, speech for speech. And when, in some local instances, it can not be done that way, then, if there be disorder, force!”

“It can be done entirely by education,” said Palla. “But remember!—Marx gave the forces of disorder their slogan—‘Unite!’ Only a rigid organisation of sane civilisation can meet that menace.”

“You are very right, darling, and a club to combat the Bolsheviki already exists. Vanya and Marya already have joined; there are workmen and working women, college professors and college graduates among its members. Some,

no doubt, will be among the audience at the Red Flag Club to-night.

“I shall join this club. I think you, also, will wish to enroll. It is called only ‘Number One.’ Other clubs are to be organised and numbered.

“And now you see that, in America, the fight against organised rascality and exploited insanity has really begun.”

Palla, her hair under discipline once more, donned a fresh but severe black gown. Ilse unpinned her hat, made a vigorous toilet, then lighted a cigarette and sauntered into the living room where the telephone was ringing persistently.

“Please answer,” said Palla, fastening her gown before the pier glass.

Presently Ilse called her: “It’s Mr. Shotwell, dear.”

Palla came into the room and picked up the receiver:

“Yes? Oh, good evening, Jim! Yes.... Yes, I am going out with Ilse.... Why, no, I had no engagement with you, Jim! I’m sorry, but I didn’t understand—No; I had no idea that you expected to see me—wait a moment, please!”—she put one hand over the transmitter, turned to Ilse with flushed cheeks and a shyly interrogative smile: “Shall I ask him to dine with us and go with us?”

“If you choose,” called Ilse, faintly amused.

Then Palla called him: “—Jim! Come to dinner at once. And wear your business clothes.... What?... Yes, your every day clothes.... What?... Why, because I ask you, Jim. Isn’t that a reason?... Thank you.... Yes, come immediately.... Good-bye, de——”

She coloured crimson, hung up the receiver, and picked up the evening paper, not daring to glance at Ilse.

CHAPTER XI

When Shotwell arrived, dinner had already been announced, and Palla and Ilse Westgard were in the unfurnished drawing-room, the former on a step-ladder, the latter holding that collapsible machine with one hand and Palla’s ankle with the other.

Palla waved a tape-measure in airy salute: “I’m trying to find out how many yards it takes for my curtains,” she explained. But she climbed down and gave him her hand; and they went immediately into the dining-room.

“What’s all this nonsense about the Red Flag Club?” he inquired, when they were seated. “Do you and Ilse really propose going to that dirty anarchist

joint?”

“How do you know it’s dirty?” demanded Palla, “—or do you mean it’s only morally dingy?”

Both she and Ilse appeared to be in unusually lively spirits, and they poked fun at him when he objected to their attending the meeting in question.

“Very well,” he said, “but there may be a free fight. There was a row on Fifth Avenue this evening, where some of those rats were parading with red flags.”

Palla laughed and cast a demure glance at Ilse.

“What is there to laugh at?” demanded Jim. “There was a small riot on Fifth Avenue! I met several men at the club who witnessed it.”

The sea-blue eyes of Ilse were full of mischief. He was aware of Palla’s subtle exhilaration, too.

“Why hunt for a free fight?” he asked.

“Why avoid one if it’s free?” retorted Ilse, gaily.

They all laughed.

“Is that your idea of liberty?” he asked Palla.

“What is all human progress but a free fight?” she retorted. “Of course,” she added, “Ilse means an intellectual battle. If they misbehave otherwise, I shall flee.”

“I don’t see why you want to go to hear a lot of Reds talk bosh,” he remarked. “It isn’t like you, Palla.”

“It *is* like me. You see you don’t really know me, Jim,” she added with smiling malice.

“The main thing,” said Ilse, “is for one to be one’s self. Palla and I are social revolutionists. Revolutionists revolt. A revolt is a row. There can be no row unless people fight.”

He smiled at their irresponsible gaiety, a little puzzled by it and a little uneasy.

“All right,” he said, as coffee was served; “but it’s just as well that I’m going with you.”

The ex-girl-soldier gave him an amused glance, lighted a cigarette, glanced at her wrist-watch, then rose lightly to her graceful, athletic height, saying that they ought to start.

So they went away to pin on their hats, and Jim called a taxi.

The hall was well filled when they arrived. There was a rostrum, on which two wooden benches faced a table and a chair in the centre. On the table stood a pitcher of drinking water, a soiled glass, and a jug full of red carnations.

A dozen men and women occupied the two benches. At the table a man sat writing. He held a lighted cigar in one hand; a red silk handkerchief trailed from his coat pocket.

As Ilse and Palla seated themselves on an empty bench and Shotwell found a place beside them, somebody on the next bench beyond leaned over and bade them good evening in a low voice.

“Mr. Brisson!” exclaimed Palla, giving him her hand in unfeigned pleasure.

Brisson shook hands, also, with Ilse, cordially, and then was introduced to Jim.

“What are you doing here?” he inquired humorously of Palla. “And, by the way,”—dropping his voice—“these Reds don’t exactly love me, so don’t use my name.”

Palla nodded and whispered to Jim: “He secured all that damning evidence at the Smolny for our Government.”

Brisson and Ilse were engaged in low-voiced conversation: Palla ventured to look about her.

The character of the gathering was foreign. There were few American features among the faces, but those few were immeasurably superior in type—here and there the intellectual, spectacled visage of some educated visionary, lured into the red tide and left there drifting;—here and there some pale girl, carelessly dressed, seated with folded hands, and intense gaze fixed on space.

But the majority of these people, men and women, were foreign in aspect—round, bushy heads with no backs to them were everywhere; muddy skins, unhealthy skins, loose mouths, shifty eyes!—everywhere around her Palla saw the stigma of degeneracy.

She said in a low voice to Jim: “These poor things need to be properly housed and fed before they’re taught. Education doesn’t interest empty stomachs. And when they’re given only poison to stop the pangs—what does civilisation expect?”

He said: “They’re a lot of bums. The only education they require is with a night-stick.”

“That’s cruel, Jim.”

“It’s law.”

“One of your laws which does not appeal to me,” she remarked, turning to Brisson, who was leaning over to speak to her.

“There are half a dozen plain-clothes men in the audience,” he said. “There are Government detectives here, too. I rather expect they’ll stop the proceedings before the programme calls for it.”

Jim turned to look back. A file of policemen entered and carelessly took up posts in the rear of the hall. Hundreds of flat-backed heads turned, too; hundreds of faces darkened; a low muttering arose from the benches.

Then the man at the table on the rostrum got up abruptly, and pulled out his red handkerchief as though to wipe his face.

At the sudden flourish of the red fabric, a burst of applause came from the benches. Orator and audience were *en rapport*; the former continued to wave the handkerchief, under pretence of swabbing his features, but the intention was so evident and the applause so enlightening that a police officer came part way down the aisle and held up a gilded sleeve.

“Hey!” he called in a bored voice, “Cut that out! See!”

“That man on the platform is Max Sondheim,” whispered Brisson. “He’ll skate on thin ice before he’s through.”

Sondheim had already begun to speak, ignoring the interruption from the police:

“The Mayor has got cold feet,” he said with a sneer. “He gave us a permit to parade, but when the soldiers attacked us his police clubbed us. That’s the kind of government we got.”

“Shame!” cried a white-faced girl in the audience.

“Shame?” repeated Sondheim ironically. “What’s shame to a cop? They got theirs all the same——”

“That’s enough!” shouted the police captain sharply. “Any more of that and I’ll run you in!”

Sondheim’s red-rimmed eyes measured the officer in silence for a moment.

“I have the privilege,” he said to his audience, “of introducing to you our comrade, Professor Le Vey.”

“Le Vey,” whispered Brisson in Palla’s ear. “He’s a crack-brained chemist, and they ought to nab him.”

The professor rose from one of the benches on the rostrum and came forward—a tall, black-bearded man, deathly pale, whose protruding, bluish eyes seemed almost stupid in their fixity.

“Words are by-products,” he said, “and of minor importance. Deeds educate. T. N. T., also, is a byproduct, and of no use in conversation unless employed as an argument—” A roar of applause drowned his voice: he gazed at the audience out of his stupid pop-eyes.

“Tyranny has kicked you into the gutter,” he went on. “Capital makes laws to keep you there and hires police and soldiers to enforce those laws. This is called civilisation. Is there anything for you to do except to pick yourselves out of the gutter and destroy what kicked you into it and what keeps you there?”

“No!” roared the audience.

“Only a clean sweep will do it,” said Le Vey. “If you have a single germ of plague in the world, it will multiply. If you leave a single trace of what is called civilisation in the world, it will hatch out more tyrants, more capitalists, more laws. So there is only one remedy. Destruction. Total annihilation. Nothing less can purify this rotten hell they call the world!”

Amid storms of applause he unrolled a manuscript and read without emphasis:

“Therefore, the Workers of the World, in council assembled, hereby proclaim at midnight to-night, throughout the entire world:

“. That all debts, public and private, are cancelled.

“. That all leases, contracts, indentures and similar instruments, products of capitalism, are null and void.

“. All statutes, ordinances and other enactments of capitalist government are repealed.

“. All public offices are declared vacant.

“. The military and naval organisations will immediately dissolve and reorganise themselves upon a democratic basis for speedy mobilisation.

“. All working classes and political prisoners will be immediately freed and all indictments quashed.

“. All vacant and unused land shall immediately revert to the people and remain common property until suitable regulations for its disposition can be made.

“. All telephones, telegraphs, cables, railroads, steamship lines and other means of communication and transportation shall be immediately taken over by the workers and treated henceforth as the property of the people.

“. As speedily as possible the workers in the various industries will proceed to take over these industries and organise them in the spirit of the new epoch now

beginning.

“. The flag of the new society shall be plain red, marking our unity and brotherhood with similar republics in Russia, Germany, Austria and elsewhere——”

“That’ll be about all from you, Professor,” interrupted the police captain, strolling down to the platform. “Come on, now. Kiss your friends good-night!”

A sullen roar rose from the audience; Le Vey lifted one hand:

“I told you how to argue,” he said in his emotionless voice. “Anybody can talk with their mouths.” And he turned on his heel and went back to his seat on the bench.

Sondheim stood up:

“Comrade Bromberg!” he shouted.

A small, shabby man arose from a bench and shambled forward. His hair grew so low that it left him practically no forehead. Whiskers blotted out the remainder of his features except two small and very bright eyes that snapped and sparkled, imbedded in the hairy ensemble.

“Comrades,” he growled, “it has come to a moment when the only law worth obeying is the law of force!——”

“You bet!” remarked the police captain, genially, and, turning his back, he walked away up the aisle toward the rear of the hall, while all around him from the audience came a savage muttering.

Bromberg’s growling voice grew harsher and deeper as he resumed: “I tell you that there is only one law left for proletariat and tyrant alike! It is the law of force!”

As the audience applauded fiercely, a man near them stood up and shouted for a hearing.

“Comrade Bromberg is right!” he cried, waving his arms excitedly. “There is only one real law in the world! The fit survive! The unfit die! The strong take what they desire! The weak perish. That is the law of life! That is the——”

An amazing interruption checked him—a clear, crystalline peal of laughter; and the astounded audience saw a tall, fresh, yellow-haired girl standing up midway down the hall. It was Ilse Westgard, unable to endure such nonsense, and quite regardless of Brisson’s detaining hand and Shotwell’s startled remonstrance.

“What that man says is absurd!” she cried, her fresh young voice still gay with laughter. “He looks like a Prussian, and if he is he ought to know where the

law of force has landed his nation."

In the ominous silence around her, Ilse turned and gaily surveyed the audience.

"The law of force is the law of robbers," she said. "That is why this war has been fought—to educate robbers. And if there remain any robbers they'll have to be educated. Don't let anybody tell you that the law of force is the law of life!——"

"Who are you?" interrupted Bromberg hoarsely.

"An ex-soldier of the Death Battalion, comrade," said Ilse cheerfully. "I used a rifle in behalf of the law of education. Sometimes bayonets educate, sometimes machine guns. But the sensible way is to have a meeting, and everybody drink tea and smoke cigarettes and discuss their troubles without reserve, and then take a vote as to what is best for everybody concerned."

And she seated herself with a smile just as the inevitable uproar began.

All around her now men and women were shouting at her; inflamed faces ringed her; gesticulating fists waved in the air.

"What are you—a spy for Kerensky?" yelled a man in Russian.

"The bourgeoisie has its agents here!" bawled a red-haired Jew. "I offer a solemn protest——"

"Agent provocateur!" cried many voices. "Pay no attention to her! Go on with the debate!"

An I. W. W.—a thin, mean-faced American—half arose and pointed an unwashed finger at Ilse.

"A Government spy," he said distinctly. "Keep your eye on her, comrades. There seems to be a bunch of them there——"

"Sit down and shut up!" said Shotwell, sharply. "Do you want to start a riot?"

"You bet I'll start something!" retorted the man, showing his teeth like a rat. "What the hell did you come here for——"

"Silence!" bawled Bromberg, hoarsely, from the platform. "That woman is recognised and known. Pay no attention to her, but listen to me. I tell you that your law is the law of hatred!——"

Palla attempted to rise. Jim tried to restrain her: she pushed his arm aside, but he managed to retain his grasp on her arm.

"Are you crazy?" he whispered.

“That man lies!” she said excitedly. “Don’t you hear him preaching hatred?”

“Well, it’s not your business——”

“It *is*! That man is lying to these ignorant people! He’s telling them a vile untruth! Let me go, Jim——”

“Better keep cool,” whispered Brisson, leaning over. “We’re all in dutch already.”

Palla said to him excitedly: “I’m afraid to stand up and speak, but I’m going to! I’d be a coward to sit here and let that man deceive these poor people——”

“Listen to Bromberg!” motioned Ilse, her blue eyes frosty and her cheeks deeply flushed.

The orator had come down into the aisle. Every venomous word he was uttering now he directed straight at the quartette.

“Russia is showing us the way,” he said in his growling voice. “Russia makes no distinctions but takes them all by the throat and wrings their necks—aristocrats, bourgeoisie, cadets, officers, land owners, intellectuals—all the vermin, all the parasites! And that is the law, I tell you! The unfit perish! The strong inherit the earth!——”

Palla sprang to her feet: “Liar!” she said hotly. “Did not Christ Himself tell us that the meek shall inherit the earth!”

“Christ?” thundered Bromberg. “Have you come here to insult us with legends and fairy-tales about a god?”

“Who mentioned God?” retorted Palla in a clear voice. “Unless we ourselves are gods there is none! But Christ did live! And He was as much a god as we are. And no more. But He was wiser! And what He told us is the truth! And I shall not sit silent while any man or woman teaches robbery and murder. That’s what you mean when you say that the law of the stronger is the only law! If it is, then the poor and ignorant are where they belong——”

“They won’t be when they learn the law of life!” roared Bromberg.

“There is only one law of life!” cried Palla, turning to look around her at the agitated audience. “The only law in the world worth obedience is the Law of Love and of Service! No other laws amount to anything. Under that law every problem you agitate here is already solved. There is no injustice that cannot be righted under it! There is no aspiration that cannot be realised!”

She turned on Bromberg, her hazel eyes very bright, her face surging with colour.

“You came here to pervert the exhortation of Karl Marx, and unite under the banner of envy and greed every unhappy heart!

“Very well. Others also can unite to combat you. A league of evil is not the only league that can be formed under this roof. Nor are the soldiers and police the only or the better weapons to use against you. What you agitators and mischief makers are really afraid of is that somebody may really educate your audiences. And that’s exactly what such people as I intend to do!”

A score or more of people had crowded around her while she was speaking. Shotwell and Brisson, too, had risen and stepped to her side. And the entire audience was on its feet, craning hundreds of necks and striving to hear and see.

Somewhere in the crowd a shrill American voice cried: “Throw them guys out! They got Wall Street cash in their pockets!”

Sondheim levelled a finger at Brisson:

“Look out for that man!” he said. “He published those lies about Lenine and Trotsky, and he’s here from Washington to lie about us in the newspapers!”

The I. W. W. lurched out of his seat and shoved against Shotwell.

“Get the hell out o’ here,” he snarled; “—go on! Beat it! And take your lady-friends, too.”

Brisson said: “No use talking to them. You’d better take the ladies out while the going is good.”

But as they moved there was an angry murmur: the I. W. W. gave Palla a violent shove that sent her reeling, and Shotwell knocked him unconscious across a bench.

Instantly the hall was in an uproar: there was a savage rush for Brisson, but he stopped it with levelled automatic.

“Get the ladies out!” he said coolly to Shotwell, forcing a path forward at his pistol’s point.

Plain clothes men were active, too, pushing the excited Bolsheviki this way and that and clearing a lane for Palla and Ilse.

Then, as they reached the rear of the hall, there came a wild howl from the audience, and Shotwell, looking back, saw Sondheim unfurl a big red flag.

Instantly the police started for the rostrum. The din became deafening as he threw one arm around Palla and forced her out into the street, where Ilse and Brisson immediately joined them.

Then, as they looked around for a taxi, a little shrimp of a man came out on

the steps of the hall and spat on the sidewalk and cursed them in Russian.

And, as Palla, recognising him, turned around, he shook his fists at her and at Ilse, promising that they should be attended to when the proper moment arrived.

Then he spat again, laughed a rather ghastly and distorted laugh, and backed into the doorway behind him.

They walked east—there being no taxi in sight. Ilse and Brisson led; Palla followed beside Jim.

“Well,” said the latter, his voice not yet under complete control, “don’t you think you’d better keep away from such places in the future?”

She was still very much excited: “It’s abominable,” she exclaimed, “that this country should permit such lies to be spread among the people and do nothing to counteract this campaign of falsehood! What is going to happen, Jim, unless educated people combine to educate the ignorant?”

“How?” he asked contemptuously.

“By example, first of all. By the purity and general decency of their own lives. I tell you, Jim, that the unscrupulous greed of the educated is as dangerous and vile as the murderous envy of the Bolsheviki. We’ve got to reform ourselves before we can educate others. And unless we begin by conforming to the Law of Love and Service, some day the Law of Hate and Violence will cut our throats for us.”

“Palla,” he said, “I never dreamed that you’d do such a thing as you did to-night.”

“I was afraid,” she said with a nervous tightening of her arm under his, “but I was still more afraid of being a coward.”

“You didn’t have to answer that crazy anarchist!”

“Somebody had to. He lied to those poor creatures. I—I couldn’t stand it!—” Her voice broke a little. “And if there is truly a god in me, as I believe, then I should show Christ’s courage ... lacking His wisdom,” she added so low that he scarcely heard her.

Ilse, walking ahead with Brisson, looked back over her shoulder at Palla laughing.

“Didn’t I tell you that there are some creatures you can’t educate? What do you think of your object lesson, darling?”

CHAPTER XII

On a foggy afternoon, toward midwinter, John Estridge strolled into the new Overseas Club, which, still being in process of incubation, occupied temporary quarters on Madison Avenue.

Officers fresh from abroad and still in uniform predominated; tunics were gay with service and wound chevrons, citation cords, stars, crosses, strips of striped ribbon.

There was every sort of head-gear to be seen there, too, from the jaunty overseas *bonnet de police*, piped in various colours, to the corded campaign hat and leather-visored barrack-cap.

Few cavalry officers were in evidence, but there were plenty of spurs glittering everywhere—to keep their owners' heels from slipping off the desks, as the pleasantry of the moment had it.

Estridge went directly to a telephone booth, and presently got his connection.

"It's John Estridge, as usual," he said in a bantering tone. "How are you, Ilse?"

"John! I'm so glad you called me! Thank you so much for the roses! They're exquisite!—matchless!——"

"Not at all!"

"What?"

"If you think they're matchless, just hold one up beside your cheek and take a slant at your mirror."

"I thought you were not going to say such things to me!"

"I thought I wasn't."

"Are you alone?" She laughed happily. "Where are you, Jack?"

"At the Overseas Club. I stopped on my way from the hospital."

"Y—es."

A considerable pause, and then Ilse laughed again——a confused, happy laugh.

"Did you think you'd—come over?" she inquired.

"Shall I?"

"What do *you* think about it, Jack?"

“I suppose,” he said in a humourous voice, “you’re afraid of that tendency which you say I’m beginning to exhibit.”

“The tendency to drift?”

“Yes;—toward those perilous rocks you warned me of.”

“They *are* perilous!” she insisted.

“You ought to know,” he rejoined; “you’re sitting on top of ’em like a bally Lorelei!”

“If that’s your opinion, hadn’t you better steer for the open sea, John?”

“Certainly I’d better. But you look so sweet up there, with your classical golden hair, that I think I’ll risk the rocks.”

“Please don’t! There’s a deadly whirlpool under them. I’m looking down at it now.”

“What do you see at the bottom, Ilse? Human bones?”

“I can’t see the bottom. It’s all surface, like a shining mirror.”

“I’ll come over and take a look at it with you.”

“I think you’ll only see our own faces reflected.... I think you’d better not come.”

“I’ll be there in about half an hour,” he said gaily.

He sauntered out and on into the body of the club, exchanging with friends a few words here, a smiling handclasp there; and presently he seated himself near a window.

For a while he rested his chin on his clenched hand, staring into space, until a waiter arrived with his order.

He signed the check, drained his glass, and leaned forward again with both elbows on his knees, twirling his silver-headed stick between nervous hands.

“After all,” he said under his breath, “it’s too late, now.... I’m going to see this thing through.”

As he rose to go he caught sight of Jim Shotwell, seated alone by another window and attempting to read an evening paper by the foggy light from outside. He walked over to him, fastening his overcoat on the way. Jim laid aside his paper and gave him a dull glance.

“How are things with you?” inquired Estridge, carelessly.

“All right. Are you walking up town?”

“No.”

Jim’s sombre eyes rested on the discarded paper, but he did not pick it up. “It’s rotten weather,” he said listlessly.

“Have you seen Palla lately?” inquired Estridge, looking down at him with a certain curiosity.

“No, not lately.”

“She’s a very busy girl, I hear.”

“So I hear.”

Estridge seated himself on the arm of a leather chair and began to pull on his gloves. He said:

“I understand Palla is doing Red Cross and canteen work, besides organising her celebrated club;—what is it she calls it?—Combat Club No. ?”

“I believe so.”

“And you haven’t seen her lately?”

Shotwell glanced at the fog and shrugged his shoulders: “She’s rather busy—as you say. No, I haven’t seen her. Besides, I’m rather out of my element among the people one runs into at her house. So I simply don’t go any more.”

“Palla’s parties are always amusing,” ventured Estridge.

“Very,” said the other, “but her guests keep you guessing.”

Estridge smiled: “Because they don’t conform to the established scheme of things?”

“Perhaps. The scheme of things, as it is, suits me.”

“But it’s interesting to hear other people’s views.”

“I’m fed up on queer views—and on queer people,” said Jim, with sudden and irritable emphasis. “Why, hang it all, Jack, when a fellow goes out among apparently well bred, decent people he takes it for granted that ordinary, matter of course social conventions prevail. But nobody can guess what notions are seething in the bean of any girl you talk to at Palla’s house!”

Estridge laughed: “What do you care, Jim?”

“Well, I wouldn’t care if they all didn’t seem so exactly like one’s own sort. Why, to look at them, talk to them, you’d never suppose them queer! The young girl you take in to dinner usually looks as though butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. And the chances are that she’s all for socialism, self-

determination, trial marriages and free love!

“Hell’s bells! I’m no prude. I like to overstep conventions, too. But this wholesale wrecking of the social structure would be ruinous for a girl like Palla.”

“But Palla doesn’t believe in free love.”

“She hears it talked about by cracked illuminati.”

“Rain on a duck’s back, Jim!”

“Rain drowns young ducks.”

“You mean all this spouting will end in a deluge?”

“I do. And then look for dead ducks.”

“You’re not very respectful toward modernism,” remarked Estridge, smiling.

Then Jim broke loose:

“Modernism? You yourself said that all these crazy social notions—crazy notions in art, literature, music—arise from some sort of physical degeneration, or from the perversion or checking of normal physical functions.”

“Usually they do——”

“Well,” continued Shotwell, “it’s mostly due to perversion, in my opinion. Women have had too much of a hell of a run for their money during this war. They’ve broken down all the fences and they’re loose and running all over the world.

“If they’d only kept their fool heads! But no. Every germ in the wind lodged in their silly brains! Biff. They want sex equality and a pair of riding breeches! Bang! They kick over the cradle and wreck the pantry.

“Wifehood? Played out! Motherhood? In the discards! Domestic partnership?—each sex to its own sphere? Ha-ha! That was all very well yesterday. But woman as a human incubator and brooder is an obsolete machine. Why the devil should free and untramelled womanhood hatch out young?

“If they choose to, casually, all right. But it’s purely a matter for self-determination. If a girl cares to take off her Sam Brown belt and her puttees long enough to nurse a baby, it’s a matter that concerns her, not humanity at large. Because the social revolution has settled all such details as personal independence and the same standard for both sexes. So, *a bas* Madame Grundy! *A la lanterne* with the old régime! No—hang it all, I’m through!”

“Don’t you like Palla any more?” inquired Estridge, still laughing.

Jim gave him a singular look: “Yes.... Do you like Ilse Westgard?”

Estridge said coolly: “I am accepting her as she is. I like her that much.”

“Oh. Is that very much?” sneered the other.

“Enough to marry her if she’d have me,” replied Estridge pleasantly.

“And she won’t do that, I suppose?”

“Not so far.”

Jim eyed him sullenly: “Well, I don’t accept Palla as she is—or thinks she is.”

“She’s sincere.”

“I understand that. But no girl can get away with such notions. Where is it all going to land her? What will she be?”

Estridge quoted: “‘It hath not yet appeared what we shall be.’”

Shotwell rose impatiently, and picked up his overcoat: “All I know is that when two healthy people care for each other it’s their business—their *business*, I repeat—to get together legally and do the decent thing by the human race.”

“Breed?”

“Certainly! Breed legally the finest, healthiest, best of specimens;—and as many as they can feed and clothe! For if they don’t—if we don’t—I mean our own sort—the land will be crawling with the robust get of all these millions of foreigners, who already have nearly submerged us in America; and whose spawn will, one day, smother us to death.

“Hang it all, aren’t they breeding like vermin now? All yellow dogs do—all the unfit produce big litters. That’s the only thing they ever do—accumulate progeny.

“And what are we doing?—our sort, I mean? I’ll tell you! Our sisters are having such a good time that they won’t marry, if they can avoid it, until they’re too mature to get the best results in children. Our wives, if they condescend to have any offspring at all, limit the output to one. Because more than one *might* damage their beauty. Hell! If the educated classes are going to practise race suicide and the Bolsheviki are going to breed like lice, you can figure out the answer for yourself.”

They walked to the foggy street together. Shotwell said bitterly:

“I do care for Palla. I like Ilse. All the women one encounters at Palla’s parties

are gay, accomplished, clever, piquant. The men also are more or less amusing. The conversation is never dull. Everybody seems to be well bred, sincere, friendly and agreeable. But there's something lacking. One feels it even before one is enlightened concerning the ultra-modernism of these admittedly interesting people. And I'll tell you what it is. Actually, deep in their souls, they don't believe in themselves.

"Take Palla. She says there is no God—no divinity except in herself. And I tell you she may think she believes it, but she doesn't.

"And her school-girl creed—Love and Service! Fine. Only there's a prior law—self-preservation; and another—race preservation! By God, how are you going to love and serve if girls stop having babies?

"And as for this silly condemnation of the marriage ceremony, merely because some sanctified Uncle Foozle once inserted the word 'obey' in it—just because, under the marriage laws, tyranny and cruelty have been practised—what callow rot!

"Laws can be changed; divorce made simple and non-scandalous as it should be; all rights safeguarded for the woman; and still have something legal and recognised by one of those necessary conventions which make civilisation possible.

"But this irresponsible idea of procedure through mere inclination—this sauntering through life under no law to safeguard and govern, except the law of personal preference—that's anarchy! That code spells demoralisation, degeneracy and disaster!... And the whole damned thing to begin again—a slow development of the human race, once more, out of the chaos of utter barbarism."

Estridge, standing there on the sidewalk in the fog, smiled:

"You're very eloquent, Jim. Why don't you say all this to Palla?"

"I did. I told her, too, that the root of the whole thing was selfishness. And it is. It's a refusal to play the game according to rule. There are only two sexes and one of 'em is fashioned to bear young, and the other is fashioned to hustle for mother and kid. You can't alter that, whether it's fair or not. It's the game as we found it. The rules were already provided for playing it. The legal father and mother are supposed to look out for their own legal progeny. And any alteration of this rule, with a view to irresponsible mating and turning the offspring over to the community to take care of, would create an unhuman race, unconscious of the highest form of love—the love for parents.

"A fine lot we'd be as an incubated race!"

Estridge laughed: "I've got to go," he said, "And, if you care for Palla as you say you do, you oughtn't to leave her entirely alone with her circle of

modernist friends. Stick around! It may make you mad, but if she likes you, at least she won't commit an indiscretion with anybody else."

"I wish I could find my own sort as amusing," said Jim, naïvely. "I've been going about recently—dances, dinners, theatres—but I can't seem to keep my mind off Palla."

Estridge said: "If you'd give your sense of humour half a chance you'd be all right. You take yourself too solemnly. You let Palla scare you. That's not the way. The thing to do is to have a jolly time with her, with them all. Accept her as she thinks she is. There's no damage done yet. Time enough to throw fits if she takes the bit and bolts——"

He extended his hand, cordially but impatiently:

"You remember I once said that girl ought to be married and have children? If you do the marrying part she's likely to do the rest very handsomely. And it will be the making of her."

Jim held on to his hand:

"Tell me what to do, Jack. She isn't in love with me. And she wouldn't submit to a legal ceremony if she were. You invoke my sense of humour. I'm willing to give it an airing, only I can't see anything funny in this business."

"It *is* funny! Palla's funny, but doesn't know it. You're funny! They're all funny—unintentionally. But their motives are tragically immaculate. So stick around and have a good time with Palla until there's really something to scare you."

"And then?"

"How the devil do I know? It's up to you, of course, what you do about it."

He laughed and strode away through the fog.

It had seemed to Jim a long time since he had seen Palla. It wasn't very long. And in all that interminable time he had not once called her up on the telephone—had not even written her a single line. Nor had she written to him.

He had gone about his social business in his own circle, much to his mother's content. He had seen quite a good deal of Elorn Sharrow; was comfortably back on the old, agreeable footing; tried desperately to enjoy it; pretended that he did.

But the days were long in the office; the evenings longer, wherever he happened to be; and the nights, alas! were becoming interminable, now, because he slept badly, and the grey winter daylight found him unrefreshed.

Which, recently, had given him a slightly battered appearance, commented on jestingly by young rakes and old sports at the Patroon's Club, and also observed by his mother with gentle concern.

"Don't overdo it, Jim," she cautioned him, meaning dances that ended with breakfasts and that sort of thing. But her real concern was vaguer than that—deeper, perhaps. And sometimes she remembered the girl in black.

Lately, however, that anxiety had been almost entirely allayed. And her comparative peace of mind had come about in an unexpected manner.

For, one morning, entering the local Red Cross quarters, where for several hours she was accustomed to sew, she encountered Mrs. Speedwell and her lively daughter, Connie—her gossiping informants concerning her son's appearance at Delmonico's with the mysterious girl in black.

"Well, what do you suppose, Helen?" said Mrs. Speedwell, mischievously. "Jim's pretty mystery in black is here!"

"Here?" repeated Mrs. Shotwell, flushing and looking around her at the rows of prophylactic ladies, all sewing madly side by side.

"Yes, and she's prettier even than I thought her in Delmonico's," remarked Connie. "Her name is Palla Dumont, and she's a friend of Leila Vance."

During the morning, Mrs. Shotwell found it convenient to speak to Leila Vance; and they exchanged a pleasant word or two—merely the amiable civilities of two women who recognise each other socially as well as personally.

And it happened in that way, a few days later, that Helen Shotwell met this pretty friend of Leila Vance—Palla Dumont—the girl in black.

And Palla had looked up from her work with her engaging smile, saying: "I know your son, Mrs. Shotwell. Is he quite well? I haven't seen him for such a long time."

And instantly the invisible antennæ of these two women became busy exploring, probing, searching, and recognising in each other all that remains forever incomprehensible to man.

For Palla somehow understood that Jim had never spoken of her to his mother; and yet that his mother had heard of her friendship with her son.

And Helen knew that Palla was quietly aware of this, and that the girl's equanimity remained undisturbed.

Only people quite sure of themselves preserved serenity under the merciless exploration of the invisible feminine antennæ. And it was evident that the girl

in black had nothing to conceal from her in regard to her only son—whatever that same son might think he ought to make an effort to conceal from his mother.

To herself Helen thought: “Jim has had his wings singed, and has fled the candle.”

To Palla she said: “Mrs. Vance tells me such interesting stories of your experiences in Russia. Really, it’s like a charming romance—your friendship for the poor little Grand Duchess.”

“A tragic one,” said Palla in a voice so even that Helen presently lifted her eyes from her sewing to read in her expression something more than the mere words that this young girl had uttered. And saw a still, pale face, sensitive and very lovely; and the needle flying over a bandage no whiter than the hand that held it.

“It was a great shock to you—her death,” said Helen.

“Yes.”

“And—you were there at the time! How dreadful!”

Palla lifted her brown eyes: “I can’t talk about it yet,” she said so simply that Helen’s sixth sense, always alert for information from the busy, invisible antennæ, suddenly became convinced that there were no more hidden depths to explore—no motives to suspect, no pretense to expose.

Day after day she chose to seat herself between Palla and Leila Vance; and the girl began to fascinate her.

There was no effort to please on Palla’s part, other than that natural one born of sweet-tempered consideration for everybody. There seemed to be no pretence, no pose.

Such untroubled frankness, such unconscious candour were rather difficult to believe in, yet Helen was now convinced that in Palla these phenomena were quite genuine. And she began to understand more clearly, as the week wore on, why her son might have had a hard time of it with Palla Dumont before he returned to more familiar pastures, where camouflage and not candour was the rule in the gay and endless game of blind-man’s buff.

“This girl,” thought Helen Shotwell to herself, “could easily have taken Jim away from Elorn Sharrow had she chosen to do so. There is no doubt about her charm and her goodness. She certainly is a most unusual girl.”

But she did not say this to her only son. She did not even tell him that she had met his girl in black. And Palla had not informed him; she knew that; because the girl herself had told her that she had not seen Jim for “a long, long time.” It

really was not nearly as long as Palla seemed to consider it.

Helen lunched with Leila Vance one day. The former spoke pleasantly of Palla.

“She’s such a darling,” said Mrs. Vance, “but the child worries me.”

“Why?”

“Well, she’s absorbed some ultra-modern Russian notions—socialistic ones—rather shockingly radical. Can you imagine it in a girl who began her novitiate as a Carmelite nun?”

Helen said: “She does not seem to have a tendency toward extremes.”

“She has. That awful affair in Russia seemed to shock her from one extreme to another. It’s a long way from the cloister to the radical rostrum.”

“She spoke of this new Combat Club.”

“She organised it,” said Leila. “They have a hall where they invite public discussion of social questions three nights a week. The other three nights, a rival and very red club rents the hall and howls for anarchy and blood.”

“Isn’t it strange?” said Helen. “One can not imagine such a girl devoting herself to radical propaganda.”

“Too radical,” said Leila. “I’m keeping an uneasy eye on that very wilful and wrong-headed child. Why, my dear, she has the most fastidious, the sweetest, the most chaste mind, and yet the things she calmly discusses would make your hair curl.”

“For example?” inquired Helen, astonished.

“Well, for example, they’ve all concluded that it’s time to strip poor old civilisation of her tinsel customs, thread-worn conventions, polite legends, and pleasant falsehoods.

“All laws are silly. Everybody is to do as they please, conforming only to the universal law of Love and Service. Do you see where that would lead some of those pretty hot-heads?”

“Good heavens, I should think so!”

“Of course. But they can’t seem to understand that the unscrupulous are certain to exploit them—that the most honest motives—the purest—invite that certain disaster consequent on social irregularities.

“Palla, so far, is all hot-headed enthusiast—hot-hearted theorist. But I remember that she did take the white veil once. And, as I tell you, I shall try to

keep her within range of my uneasy vision. Because," she added, "she's really a perfect darling."

"She is a most attractive girl," said Helen slowly; "but I think she'd be more attractive still if she were happily married."

"And had children."

Their eyes met, unsmilingly, yet in silent accord.

Their respective cars awaited them at the Ritz and took them in different directions. But all the afternoon Helen Shotwell's mind was occupied with what she now knew of Palla Dumont. And she realised that she wished the girl were back in Russia in spite of all her charm and fascination—yes, on account of it.

Because this lovely, burning asteroid might easily cross the narrow orbit through which her own social world spun peacefully in its orderly progress amid that metropolitan galaxy called Society.

Leila Vance was part of that galaxy. So was her own and only son. Wandering meteors that burnt so prettily might yet do damage.

For Helen, having known this girl, found it not any too easy to believe that her son could have relinquished her completely in so disturbingly brief a time.

Had she been a young man she knew that she would not have done so. And, knowing it, she was troubled.

Meanwhile, her only son was troubled, too, as he walked slowly homeward through the winter fog.

And by the time he was climbing his front steps he had concluded to accept this girl as she was—or thought she was—to pull no more long faces or sour faces, but to go back to her, resolutely determined to enjoy her friendship and her friends too; and give his long incarcerated sense of humour an airing, even if he suffered acutely while it revelled.

CHAPTER XIII

Palla's activities seemed to exhilarate her physically and mentally. Body and brain were now fully occupied; and, if the profit to her soul were dubious, nevertheless the restless spirit of the girl now had an outlet; and at home and in the Combat Club she planned and discussed and investigated the world's woes to her ardent heart's content.

Physically, too, Red Cross and canteen work gave her much needed

occupation; and she went everywhere on foot, never using bus, tram or taxicab. The result was, in spite of late and sometimes festive hours, that Palla had become something more than an unusually pretty girl, for there was much of real beauty in her full and charming face and in her enchantingly rounded yet lithe and lissome figure.

About the girl, also, there seemed to be a new freshness like fragrance—a virginal sweetness—that indefinable perfume of something young and vigorous that is already in bud.

That morning she went over to the dingy row of buildings to sign the lease of the hall for three evenings a week, as quarters for Combat Club No. .

The stuffy place where the Red Flag Club had met the night before was still reeking with stale smoke and the effluvia of the unwashed; but the windows were open and a negro was sweeping up a litter of defunct cigars.

“Yaas’m, Mr. Puma’s office is next do’,” he replied to Palla’s inquiry; “—Sooperfillum Co’poration. Yaas’m.”

Next door had been a stable and auction ring, and odours characteristic still remained, although now the ring had been partitioned, boarded over and floored, and Mr. Hewitt’s glass rods full of blinding light were suspended above the studio ceilings of the Super-Picture Corporation.

Palla entered the brick archway. An office on the right bore the name of Angelo Puma; and that large, richly coloured gentleman hastily got out of his desk chair and flashed a pair of magnificent as well as astonished eyes upon Palla as she opened the door and walked in.

When she had seated herself and stated her business, Puma, with a single gesture, swept from the office several men and a stenographer, and turned to Palla.

“Is it you, then, who are this Combat Club which would rent from me the hall next door!” he exclaimed, showing every faultless tooth in his head.

Palla smiled: “I am empowered by the club to sign a lease.”

“That is sufficient!” exclaimed Puma, with a superb gesture. “So! It is signed! Your desire is enough. The matter is accomplished when you express the wish!”

Palla blushed a little but smilingly affixed her signature to the papers elaborately presented by Angelo Puma.

“A lease?” he remarked, with a flourish of his large, sanguine, and jewelled hand. “A detail merely for your security, Miss Dumont. For me, I require only the expression of your slightest wish. That, to me, is a command more binding

than the seal of the notary!”

And he flashed his dazzling smile on Palla, who was tucking her copy of the agreement into her muff.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Puma,” she said, almost inclined to laugh at his extravagances. And she laid down a certified check to cover the first month’s rental.

Mr. Puma bowed; his large, heavily lashed black eyes were very brilliant; his mouth much too red under the silky black moustache.

“For me,” he said impulsively, “art alone matters. What is money? What is rent? What are all the annoying details of commerce? Interruptions to the soul-flow! Checks to the fountain jet of inspiration! Art only is important. Have you ever seen a cinema studio, Miss Dumont?”

Palla never had.

“Would it interest you, perhaps?”

“Thank you—some time——”

“It is but a step! They are working. A peep will take but a moment—if you please—a thousand excuses that I proceed to show you the way!——”

She stepped through a door. From a narrow anteroom she saw the set-scene in a ghastly light, where men in soiled shirt-sleeves dragged batteries of electric lights about, each underbred face as livid as the visage of a corpse too long unburied.

There were women there, too, looking a little more human in their makeups under the horrible bluish glare. Camera men were busy; a cadaverous and profane director, with his shabby coat-collar turned up, was talking loudly in a Broadway voice and jargon to a bewildered girl wearing a ball gown.

As Puma led Palla through the corridor from partition to partition, disclosing each set with its own scene and people—the whole studio full of blatant noise and ghastly faces or painted ones, Palla thought she had never before beheld such a concentration of every type of commonness in her entire existence. Faces, shapes, voices, language, all were essentially the properties of congenital vulgarity. The language, too, had to be sharply rebuked by Puma once or twice amid the wrangling of director, camera man and petty subordinates.

“So intense are the emotions evoked by a fanatic devotion to art,” he explained to Palla, “that, at moments, the old, direct and vigorous Anglo-Saxon tongue is heard here, unashamed. What will you? It is art! It is the fervour that forgets itself in blind devotion—in rapturous self-dedication to the god of Truth and

Beauty!”

As she turned away, she heard from a neighbouring partition the hoarse expostulations of one of Art’s blind acolytes: “Say, f’r Christ’s sake, Delmour, what the hell’s loose in your bean! Yeh done it wrong an’ yeh know damn well yeh done it wrong——”

Puma opened another door: “One of our projection rooms, Miss Dumont. If it is your pleasure to see a few reels run off——”

“Thank you, but I really must go——”

The office door stood open and she went out that way. Mr. Puma confronted her, moistly brilliant of eye:

“For me, Miss Dumont, I am frank like there never was a child in arms! Yes. I am all art; all heart. For me, beauty is God!—” he kissed his fat fingers and wafted the caress toward the dirty ceiling.

“Please excuse,” he said with his powerful smile, “but have you ever, perhaps, thought, Miss Dumont, of the screen as a career?”

“I?” asked Palla, surprised and amused. “No, Mr. Puma, I haven’t.”

“A test! Possibly, in you, latent, sleeps the exquisite apotheosis of Art incarnate! Who can tell? You have youth, beauty, a mind! Yes. Who knows if, also, happily, genius slumbers within? Yes?”

“I’m very sure it doesn’t,” replied Palla, laughing.

“Ah! Who can be sure of anything—even of heaven!” cried Puma.

“Very true,” said Palla, trying to speak seriously, “But the career of a moving picture actress does not attract me.”

“The emoluments are enormous!”

“Thank you, no——”

“A test! We try! It would be amusing for you to see yourself upon the screen as you are, Miss Dumont? As you *are*—young, beautiful, vivacious——”

He still blocked her way, so she said, laying her gloved hand on the knob:

“Thank you very much. Some day, perhaps. But I really must go——”

He immediately bowed, opened the glass door, and went with her to the brick arch.

“I do not think you know,” he said, “that I have entered partnership with a friend of yours?”

“A friend of mine?”

“Mr. Elmer Skidder.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, smilingly, “I hope the partnership will be a fortunate one. Will you kindly inform Mr. Skidder of my congratulations and best wishes for his prosperity? And you may say that I shall be glad to hear from him about his new enterprise.”

To Mr. Puma’s elaborate leave-taking she vouchsafed a quick, amused nod, then hurried away eastward to keep her appointment at the Canteen.

About five o’clock she experienced a healthy inclination for tea and wavered between the Plaza and home. Ilse and Marya were with her, but an indefinable something caused her to hesitate, and finally to let them go to the Plaza without her.

What might be the reason of this sudden whim for an unpremeditated cup of tea at home she scarcely took the trouble to analyse. Yet, she was becoming conscious of a subtle and increasing exhilaration as she approached her house and mounted the steps.

Suddenly, as she fitted the latch-key, her heart leaped and she knew why she had come home.

For a moment her fast pulse almost suffocated her. Was she mad to return here on the wildest chance that Jim might have come—might be inside, waiting? And what in the world made her suppose so?—for she had neither seen him nor heard from him in many days.

“I’m certainly a little crazy,” she thought as she opened the door. At the same moment her eyes fell on his overcoat and hat and stick.

Her skirt was rather tight, but her limbs were supple and her feet light, and she ran upstairs to the living room.

As he rose from an armchair she flung her arms out with a joyous little cry and wrapped them tightly around his neck, muff, reticule and all.

“You darling,” he was saying over and over in a happy but rather stupid voice, and crushing her narrow hands between his; “—you adorable child, you wonderful girl——”

“Oh, I’m so glad, Jim! Shall we have tea?... You dear fellow! I’m so very happy that you came! Wait a moment—” she leaned wide from him and touched an electric bell. “Now you’ll have to behave properly,” she said with delightful malice.

He released her; she spoke to the maid and then went over with him to the sofa, flinging muff, stole and purse on a chair.

“Pure premonition,” she explained, stripping the gloves from her hands. “Ilse and Marya were all for the Plaza, but something sent me homeward! Isn’t it really very strange, Jim? Why, I almost had an inclination to run when I turned into our street—not even knowing why, of course——”

“You’re so sweet and generous!” he blurted out. “Why don’t you raise hell with me?”

“You know,” she said demurely, “I don’t raise hell, dear.”

“But I’ve behaved so rottenly——”

“It really wasn’t friendly to neglect me so entirely.”

He looked down—laid one hand on hers in silence.

“I understand, Jim,” she said sweetly. “Is it all right now?”

“It’s all right.... Of course I haven’t changed.”

“Oh.”

“But it’s all right.”

“Really?”

“Yes.... What is there for me to do but to accept things as they are?”

“You mean, ‘accept *me* as I am!’ Oh, Jim, it’s so dear of you. And you know well enough that I care for no other man as I do for you——”

The waitress with the tea-tray cut short that sort of conversation. Palla’s appetite was a healthy one. She unpinned her hat and flung it on the piano. Then she nestled down sideways on the sofa, one leg tucked under the other knee, her hair in enough disorder to worry any other girl—and began to tuck away tea and cakes. Sometimes, in animated conversation, she gesticulated with a buttered bun—once she waved her cup to emphasise her point:

“The main idea, of course, is to teach the eternal law of Love and Service,” she explained. “But, Jim, I have become recently, and in a measure, militant.”

“You’re going to love the unwashed with a club?”

“You very impudent boy! We’re going to combat this new and terrible menace—this sinister flood that threatens the world—the crimson tide of anarchy!”

“Good work, darling! I enlist for a machine gun uni——”

“Listen! The battle is to be entirely verbal. Our Combat Club No. , the first to be established—is open to anybody and everybody. All are at liberty to enter into the discussions. We who believe in the Law of Love and Service shall have our say every evening that the club is open——”

“The Reds may come and take a crack at you.”

“The Reds are welcome. We wish to face them across the rostrum, not across a barricade!”

“Well, you dear girl, I can’t see how any Red is going to resist you. And if any does, I’ll knock his bally block off——”

“Oh, Jim, you’re so vernacularly inclined! And you’re very flippant, too——”

“I’m not really,” he said in a lower voice. “Whatever you care about could not fail to appeal to me.”

She gave him a quick, sweet glance, then searched the tea-tray to reward him.

As she gave him another triangle of cinnamon toast, she remembered something else. It was on the tip of her tongue, now; and she checked herself.

He had not spoken of it. Had his mother mentioned meeting her at the Red Cross? If not—was it merely a natural forgetfulness on his mother’s part? Was her silence significant?

Nibbling pensively at her cinnamon toast, Palla pondered this. But the girl’s mind worked too directly for concealment to come easy.

“I’m wondering,” she said, “whether your mother mentioned our meeting at the Red Cross.” And she knew immediately by his expression that he heard it for the first time.

“I was introduced at our headquarters by Leila Vance,” said Palla, in her even voice; “and your mother and she are acquaintances. That is how it happened, Jim.”

He was still somewhat flushed but he forced a smile: “Did you find my mother agreeable, Palla?”

“Yes. And she is so beautiful with her young face and pretty white hair. She always sits between Leila and me while we sew.”

“Did you say you knew me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Of course,” he repeated, reddening again.

No man ever has successfully divined any motive which any woman desires to

conceal.

Why his mother had not spoken of Palla to him he did not know. He was aware, of course, that nobody within the circle into which he had been born would tolerate Palla's social convictions. Had she casually and candidly revealed a few of them to his mother in the course of the morning's conversation over their sewing?

He gave Palla a quick look, encountered her slightly amused eyes, and turned redder than ever.

"You dear boy," she said, smiling, "I don't think your very charming mother would be interested in knowing me. The informality of ultra-modern people could not appeal to her generation."

"Did you—talk to her about——"

"No. But it might happen. You know, Jim, I have nothing to conceal."

The old troubled look had come back into his face. She noticed it and led the conversation to lighter themes.

"We danced last night after dinner," she said. "There were some amusing people here for dinner. Then we went to see such a charming play—*Tea for Three*—and then we had supper at the Biltmore and danced.... Will you dine with me to-morrow?"

"Of course."

"Do you think you'd enjoy it?—a lot of people who entertain the same shocking beliefs that I do?"

"All right!" he said with emphasis. "I'm through playing the rôle of death's-head at the feast. I told you that I'm going to take you as you are and enjoy you and our friends—and quit making an ass of myself——"

"Dear, you never did!"

"Oh, yes, I did. And maybe I'm a predestined ass. But every ass has a pair of heels and I'm going to flourish mine very gaily from now on!"

She protested laughingly at his self-characterisation, and bent toward him a little, caressing his sleeve in appeal, or shaking it in protest as he denounced himself and promised to take the world more gaily in the future.

"You'll see," he remarked, rising to take his leave: "I may even call the bluff of some of your fluffy ultra-modern friends and try a few trial marriages with each of 'em——"

"Oh, Jim, you're absolutely horrid! As if my friends believed in such disgusting ideas!"

“They do—some of ’em.”

“They don’t!”

“Well, then, I do!” he announced so gravely that she had to look at him closely in the rather dim lamplight to see whether he was jesting.

She walked to the top of the staircase with him; let him take her into his arms; submitted to his kiss. Always a little confused by his demonstrations, nevertheless her hand retained his for a second longer, as though shyly reluctant to let him go.

“I am so glad you came,” she said. “Don’t neglect me any more.”

And so he went his way.

His mother discovered him in the library, dressed for dinner. Something, as he rose—his manner of looking at her, perhaps—warned her that they were not perfectly *en rapport*. Then the subtle, invisible antennæ, exploring caressingly what is so palpable in the heart of man, told her that once more she was to deal with the girl in black.

When his mother was seated, he said: “I didn’t know you had met Palla Dumont, mother.”

Helen hesitated: “Mrs. Vance’s friend? Oh, yes; she comes to the Red Cross with Leila Vance.”

“Do you like her?”

In her son’s eyes she was aware of that subtle and unconscious appeal which all mothers of boys are, some day, fated to see and understand.

Sometimes the appeal is disguised, sometimes it is so subtle that only mothers are able to perceive it.

But what to do about it is the perennial problem. For between lack of sympathy and response there are many nuances; and opposition is always to be avoided.

Helen said, pleasantly, that the girl appeared to be amiable and interesting.

“I know her merely in that way,” she continued. “We sit there sewing slings, pads, compresses, and bandages, and we gossip at random with our neighbours.”

“I like her very much,” said Jim.

“She does seem to be an attractive girl,” said his mother carelessly.... “Are you going to Yama Farms for the week end?”

“No.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. The Speedwells’ party is likely to be such a jolly affair, and I hear there’s lots of snow up there.”

“I haven’t met Mrs. Vance,” said her son. “Is she nice?”

“Leila Vance? Why, of course.”

“Who is she?”

“She married an embassy attaché, Captain Vance. He was in the old army—killed at Mons four years ago.”

“She and Palla are intimate?”

“I believe they are good friends,” remarked his mother, deciding not to attempt to turn the current of conversation for the moment.

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear.”

“I am quite sure I never met a girl I like as well.”

Helen laughed: “That is a trifle extravagant, isn’t it?”

“No.... I asked her to marry me.”

Helen’s heart stood still, then a bright flush stained her face.

“She refused me,” said the boy.

His mother said very quietly: “Of course this is news to us, Jim.”

“Yes, I didn’t tell you. I couldn’t, somehow. But I’ve told you now.”

“Dearest,” she said, dropping her hand over his, “don’t think me unsympathetic if I say that it really is better that she refused you.”

“I understand, mother.”

“I hope you do.”

“Oh, yes. But I don’t think you do. Because I am still in love with her.”

“You poor dear!”

“It’s rotten luck, isn’t it?”

“Time heals—” She checked herself, turned and kissed him.

“After all,” she said, “a soldier learns how to take things.”

And presently: “I do wish you’d go up to Yama Farms.”

“That,” he said, “would be the obvious thing to do. Anything to keep going and keep your mind ticking away until you’re safely wound up again.... But I’m not going, dear.”

Helen looked at him in silence, not wondering what he might be going to do with his week-end instead, because she already guessed.

Before she said anything more his father came in; and a moment later dinner was announced.

Jim slept soundly for the first night in a long time. His mother scarcely closed her eyes at all.

CHAPTER XIV

There had been a row at the Red Flag Club—a matter of differing opinions between members—nothing sufficient to attract the police, but enough to break several heads, benches and windows. And it was evident that some gentleman’s damaged nose had bled all over the linoleum in the lobby.

Elmer Skidder, arriving at the studio next morning in his brand new limousine, heard about the shindy and went into the club to inspect the wreckage. Then, mad all through, he started out to find Puma. But a Sister Art had got the best of Angelo Puma in a questionable cabaret the night before, and he had not yet arrived at the studio of the Super-Picture Corporation.

Skidder, thrifty by every instinct, and now smarting under his wrongs at the hands—and feet—of the Red Flag Club, went away in his gorgeous limousine to find Sondheim, who paid the rental and who lived in the Bronx.

It was a long way; every mile and every gallon of gasoline made Skidder madder; and when at length he arrived at the brand new, jerry-built apartment house inhabited by Max Sondheim, he had concluded that the Red Flag Club was an undesirable tenant and that it must be summarily kicked out.

Sondheim was still in bed, but a short-haired and pallid young woman, with assorted spots on her complexion, bade Skidder enter, and opened the chamber door for him.

The bedroom, which smelled of sour fish, was very cold, very dirty, and very blue with cigar smoke. The remains of a delicatessen breakfast stood on a table near the only window, which was tightly shut, and under the sill of which a radiator emitted explosive symptoms of steam to come.

Sondheim sprawled under the bed-covers, smoking; two other men sat on the

edge of the bed—Karl Kastner and Nathan Bromberg. Both were smoking porcelain pipes. Three slopping quarts of beer decorated the wash stand.

Skidder, who had halted in the doorway as the full aroma of the place smote him, now entered at the curt suggestion of Sondheim, but refused a chair.

“Say, Sondheim,” he began, “I been to the club this morning, and I’ve seen what you’ve done to the place.”

“Well?” demanded Sondheim, in a growling voice, “what haf we done?”

“Oh, nothing;—smashed the furniture f’r instance. That’s all. But it don’t go with me. See?”

Kastner got up and gave him a sinister, near-sighted look: “If ve done damach ve pay,” he remarked.

“Sure you’ll pay!” blustered Skidder. “And that’s all right, too. But no more for yours truly. I’m through. Here’s where your bunch quits the hall for keeps. Get me?”

“Please?” inquired Kastner, turning a brick red.

“I say I’m through!” blustered Skidder. “You gotta get other quarters. It don’t pay us to keep on buying benches and mending windows, even if you cough up for ’em. It don’t pay us to rent the hall to your club and get all this here notoriety, what with your red flags and the *po*-lice hanging around and nosin’ into everything——”

“Ach wass!” snapped Kastner, “of vat are you speaking? Iss it for you to concern yourself mit our club und vat iss it ve do?”

“Say, who d’yeh think you’re talkin’ to?” retorted Skidder, his eyes snapping furiously. “Grab this from me, old scout?—I’m half owner of that hall and I’m telling you to get out! Is that plain?”

“So?” Kastner sneered at him and nudged Sondheim, who immediately sat up in bed and levelled an unwashed hand at Skidder.

“You think you fire us?” he shouted, his eyes inflamed and his dirty fingers crisping to a talon. “You go home and tell Puma what you say to us. Then you learn something maybe, what you don’t know already!”

“I’ll learn *you* something!” retorted Skidder. “Just wait till I show Puma the wreckage——”

“Let him look at it and be damned!” roared Bromberg. “Go home and show it to him! And see if he talks about firing us!”

“Say,” demanded Skidder, astonished, “do you fellows think you got any drag with Angy Puma?”

“Go back and ask him!” growled Bromberg. “And don’t try to come around here and get fresh again. Listen! You go buy what benches you say we broke and send the bill to me, and keep your mouth shut and mind your fool business!”

“I’ll mind my own and yours too!” screamed Skidder, seized by an ungovernable access of fury. “Say, you poor nut!—you sick mink!—you stale hunk of cheese!—if you come down my way again I’ll kick your shirttail for you! Get that?” And he slammed the door and strode out in a flaming rage.

But when, still furiously excited, he arrived once more at the office,—and when Puma, who had just entered, had listened in sullen consternation to his story, he received another amazing and most unpleasant shock. For Puma told him flatly that the tenancy of the Red Flag Club suited him; that no lease could be broken, except by mutual consent of partners; and that he, Skidder, had had no business to go to Sondheim with any such threat of eviction unless he had first consulted his partner’s wishes.

“Well, what—what—” stammered Skidder—“what the hell drag have those guys got with you?”

“Why is it you talk foolish?” retorted Puma sharply. “Drag? Did Sondheim say——”

“No! *I* say it. I ask you what have those crazy nuts got on you that you stand for all this rumpus?”

Puma’s lustrous eyes, battered but still magnificent, fixed themselves on Skidder.

“Go out,” he said briefly to his stenographer. Then, when the girl had gone, and the glass door closed behind her, he turned heavily and gazed at Skidder some more. And, after a few moments’ silence: “Go on,” he said. “What did Sondheim say about me?”

Skidder’s small, shifty eyes were blinking furiously and his essentially suspicious mind was also operating at full speed. When he had calculated what to say he took the chance, and said:

“Sondheim gave me to understand that he’s got such a hell of a pull with you that I can’t kick him out of my property. What do you know about that, Angelo?”

“Go on,” said Puma impatiently, “what else did he say about me?”

“Ain’t I telling you?”

“Tell more.”

Skidder had no more to tell, so he manufactured more.

“Well,” he continued craftily, “I didn’t exactly get what that kike said.” But his grin and his manner gave his words the lie, as he intended they should. “Something about your being in dutch—” He checked himself as Puma’s black eyes lighted with a momentary glare.

“What? He tells you I am in with Germans!”

“Naw;—in dutch!”

Puma’s sanguinary skin reddened; his puffy fingers fished for a cigar in the pocket of his fancy waistcoat; he found one and lighted it, not looking at his partner. Then he picked up the morning paper.

Skidder shrugged; stood up, pretending to yawn; started to open the door.

“Elmer?”

“Yeh? What y’want?”

“I want to know exactly what Max Sondheim said to you about me.”

“Well, you better go ask Sondheim.”

“No. I ask you—my friend—my associate in business——”

“A fine associate!—when I can’t kick in when I want to kick out a bunch of nuts that’s wrecking the hall, just because they got a drag with you——”

“Listen. I am frank like there never was a——”

“Sure. Go on!”

“I say it! Yes! I am frank like hell. From my friend and partner I conceal nothing——”

“Not even the books,” grinned Skidder.

“Elmer. You pain me. I who am all heart! Elmer, I ask it of you if you will so kindly tell me what it is that Sondheim has said to you about this ‘drag.’”

“He said,” replied the other viciously, “that he had you cinched. He said you’d hand me the ha-ha when I saw you. And you’ve done it.”

“Pardon. I did not say to you a ha-ha, Elmer. I was surprised when you have told me how you have gone to Sondheim so roughly, without one word to me——”

“You was soused to the gills last night. I didn’t know when you’d show up at the studio——”

“It was not just to me that you go to Sondheim in this so surprising manner, without informing me.” He looked at his cigar; the wrapper was broken and he licked the place with a fat tongue. “Elmer?”

“That’s me,” replied the other, who had been slyly watching him. “Spit it out, Angy. What’s on your mind?”

“I tell you, Elmer!”

Puma’s face became suddenly wreathed in guileless smiles: “Me, I am frank like there never—but no matter,” he added; “listen attentively to what I shall say to you secretly, that I also desire to be rid of this Red Flag Club.”

“Well, then——”

“A moment! I am embarrass. Yes. You ask why? I shall tell you. It is this. Formerly I have reside in Mexico. My business has been in Mexico City. I have there a little cinema theatre. In I arrive in New York. You ask me why I came? And I am frank like—” his full smile burst on Skidder—“like a heaven angel! But it is God’s truth I came here to make of the cinema a monument to Art.”

“And make your little pile too, eh, Angy?”

“As you please. But this I affirm to you, Elmer; of politics I am innocent like there never was a cherubim! Yes! And yet your Government has question me. Why? you ask so naturally. My God! I know no one in New York. I arrive. I repair to a recommended hotel. I make acquaintance—unhappily—with people who are under a suspicion of German sympathy!”

“What the devil did you do that for?” demanded Skidder.

Puma spread his jewelled fingers helplessly.

“How am I to know? I encounter people. I seek capital for my art. Me, I am all heart: I suspect nobody. I say: ‘Gentlemen, my art is my life. Without it I cease to exist. I desire capital; I desire sympathy; I desire intelligent recognition and practical aid.’ Yes. In time some gentlemen evince confidence. I am offered funds. I produce, with joy, my first picture. Ha! The success is extravagant! But—alas!”

“What tripped you?”

“Alas,” repeated Puma, “your Government arrests some gentlemen who have lend to me much funds. Why? Imagine my grief, my mortification! They are suspect of German propaganda! Oh, my God!”

“How is it they didn’t pinch *you*?” asked Skidder coldly, and beginning to feel very uneasy.

“Me? No! They investigate. They discover only Art!”

Skidder squinted at him nervously. If he had heard anything of that sort in connection with Puma he never would have flirted with him financially.

“Well, then, what’s this drag they got with you?—Sondheim and the other nuts?”

“I tell you. Letters quite innocent but polite they have in possession——”

“Blackmail, by heck!”

“I must be considerate of Sondheim.”

“Or he’ll squeal on you. Is that it?”

Puma’s black eyes were flaring up again; the heavy colour stained his face.

“Me, I am——”

“All right. Sondheim’s got something on you, then. Has he?”

“It is nothing. Yet, it has embarrass me——”

“That ratty kike! I get you, Angy. You were played. Or maybe you did some playing too. Aw! wait!”—as Puma protested—“I’m getting you, by gobs. Sure. And you’re rich, now, and business is pretty good, and you wish Sondheim would let you alone.”

“Yes, surely.”

“How much hush-cash d’yeh pay him?”

“I?”

“Yaas, you! Come on, now, Angy. What does he stick you up for per month?”

Puma’s face became empurpled: “He is a scoundrel,” he said thickly. “Me—I wish to God and Jesus Christ I saw the last of him!” He got up, and his step was lithe as a leopard’s as he paced the room, ranging the four walls as though caged. And, for the first time, then Skidder realised that this velvet-eyed, velvet-footed man might possibly be rather dangerous—dangerous to antagonise, dangerous to be associated with in business.

“Say,” he blurted out, “what else did you let me in for when I put my money into your business? Think I’m going to be held up by any game like that? Think I’m going to stand for any shake-down from that gang? Watch me.”

Puma stopped and looked at him stealthily: “What is it you would do, Elmer?”

But Skidder offered no suggestion. He remained, however, extremely uneasy. For it was plain enough that Puma had been involved in dealings sufficiently

suspicious to warrant Government surveillance.

All Skidder's money and real estate were now invested in Super-Pictures. No wonder he was anxious. No wonder Puma, also, seemed worried.

For, whatever he might have done in the past of a shady nature, now he had become prosperous and financially respectable and, if let alone, would doubtless continue to make a great deal of money for Skidder as well as for himself. And Skidder, profoundly troubled, wondered whether his partner had ever been guiltily involved in German propaganda, and had escaped Government detection only to fall a victim, in his dawning prosperity, to blackmailing associates of earlier days.

"That mutt Sondheim looks like a bad one to me, and the other guy—Kastner," he observed gloomily.

"It is better that we should not offend them."

"Just as you say, brother."

"I say it. Yes. We shall be wise to turn to them a pleasing face."

"Sure. The best thing to do for a while is to stall along," nodded Skidder, "—but always be ready for a chance to hand it to them. That's safest; wait till we get the goods on them. Then slam it to 'em plenty!"

"If they annoy me too much," purred Puma, displaying every dazzling tooth, "it may not be so agreeable for them. I am bad man to crowd.... Meanwhile——"

"Sure; we'll stall along, Angy!"

They opened the glass door and went out into the studio. And Puma began again on his favourite theme, the acquiring of Broadway property and the erection of a cinema theatre. And Skidder, with his limited imagination of a cross-roads storekeeper, listened cautiously, yet always conscious of agreeable thrills whenever the subject was mentioned.

And, although he knew that capital was shy and that conditions were not favourable, his thoughts always reverted to a man he might be willing to go into such a scheme with—the president of the Shadow Hill Trust Company, Alonzo Pawling.

At that very moment, too, it chanced that Mr. Pawling's business had brought him to New York—in fact, his business was partly with Palla Dumont, and they were now lunching together at the Ritz.

Alonzo Pawling stood well over six feet. He still had all his hair—which was dyed black—and also an inky pair of old-fashioned side whiskers. For the beauty of his remaining features less could be said, because his eyes were a

melancholy and faded blue, his nose very large and red, and his small, loose mouth seemed inclined to sag, as though saturated with moisture.

Many years a widower he had, when convenient opportunity presented itself, never failed to offer marriage to Palla Dumont. And when, as always, she refused him in her frank, amused fashion, they returned without embarrassment to their amiable footing of many years—she as child of his old friend and neighbour, Judge Dumont, he as her financial adviser, and banker.

As usual, Mr. Pawling had offered Palla his large, knotty hand in wedlock that morning. And now that this inevitable preliminary was safely over, they were approaching the end of a business luncheon on entirely amiable terms with each other.

Financial questions had been argued, investments decided upon, news of the town discussed, and Palla was now telling him about Elmer Skidder and his new and apparently prosperous venture into moving pictures.

“He came to see me last evening,” she said, smiling at the recollection, “and he arrived in a handsome limousine with an extra man on the front—oh, very gorgeous, Mr. Pawling!—and we had tea and he told me how prosperous he had become in the moving picture business.”

“I guess,” said Mr. Pawling, “that there’s a lot of money in moving pictures. But nobody ever seems to get any of it except the officials of the corporation and their favourite stars.”

“It seems to be an exceedingly unattractive business,” said Palla, recollecting her unpleasant impressions at the Super-Picture studios.

“The right end of it,” said Mr. Pawling, “is to own a big theatre.”

She smiled: “You wouldn’t advise me to make such an investment, would you?”

Mr. Pawling’s watery eyes rested on her reflectively and he sucked in his lower lips as though trying to extract the omnipresent moisture.

“I dunno,” he said absently.

“Mr. Skidder told me that he would double his invested capital in a year,” she said.

“I guess he was bragging.”

“Perhaps,” she rejoined, laughing, “but I should not care to make such an investment.”

“Did he ask you?”

“No. But it seemed to me that he hinted at something of that nature. And I was not at all interested because I am contented with my little investments and my income as it is. I don’t really need much money.”

Mr. Pawling’s pendulous lip, released, sagged wetly and his jet-black eyebrows were lifted in a surprised arch.

“You’re the first person I ever heard say they had enough money,” he remarked.

“But I have!” she insisted gaily.

Mr. Pawling’s sad horse-face regarded her with faded surprise. He passed for a rich man in Shadow Hill.

“Where is Elmer’s place of business?” he inquired finally, producing a worn note-book and a gold pencil. And he wrote down the address.

There was in all the world only one thing that seriously worried Mr. Pawling, and that was this worn note-book. Almost every day of his life he concluded to burn it. He lived in a vague and daily fear that it might be found on him if he died suddenly. Such things could happen—automobile or railroad accidents—any one of numberless mischances.

And still he carried it, and had carried it for years—always in a sort of terror while the recent Mrs. Pawling was still alive—and in dull but perpetual anxiety ever since.

There were in it pages devoted to figures. There were, also, memoranda of stock transactions. There were many addresses, too, mostly feminine.

Now he replaced it in the breast pocket of his frock-coat, and took out a large wallet strapped with a rubber band.

While he was paying the check, Palla drew on her gloves; and, at the Madison Avenue door, stood chatting with him a moment longer before leaving for the canteen.

Then, smilingly declining his taxi and offering her slender hand in adieu, she went westward on foot as usual. And Mr. Pawling’s directions to the chauffeur were whispered ones as though he did not care to have the world at large share in his knowledge of his own occult destination.

Palla’s duty at the canteen lasted until six o’clock that afternoon, and she hurried on her way home because people were dining there at seven-thirty.

With the happy recollection that Jim, also, was dining with her, she ran lightly up the steps and into the house; examined the flowers which stood in jars of water in the pantry, called for vases, arranged a centre-piece for the table, and carried other clusters of blossoms into the little drawing-room, and others still

upstairs.

Then she returned to criticise the table and arrange the name-cards. And, this accomplished, she ran upstairs again to her own room, where her maid was waiting.

Two or three times in a year—not oftener—Palla yielded to a rare inclination which assailed her only when unusually excited and happy. That inclination was to whistle.

She whistled, now, while preparing for the bath; whistled like a blackbird as she stood before the pier-glass before the maid hooked her into a filmy, rosy evening gown—her first touch of colour since assuming mourning.

The bell rang, and the waitress brought an elaborate florist's box. There were pink orchids in it and Jim's card;—perfection.

How could he have known! She wondered rapturously, realising all the while that they'd have gone quite as well with her usual black.

Would he come early? She had forgotten to ask it. Would he? For, in that event—and considering his inclination to take her into his arms—she decided to leave off the orchids until the more strenuous rites of friendship had been accomplished.

She was carrying the orchids and the long pin attached, in her left hand, when the sound of the doorbell filled her with abrupt and delightful premonitions. She ventured a glance over the banisters, then returned hastily to the living room, where he discovered her and did exactly what she had feared.

Her left hand, full of orchids, rested on his shoulder; her cool, fresh lips rested on his. Then she retreated, inviting inspection of the rosy dinner gown; and fastened her orchids while he was admiring it.

Her guests began to arrive before either was quite ready, so engrossed were they in happy gossip. And Palla looked up in blank surprise that almost amounted to vexation when the bell announced that their tête-à-tête was ended.

Shotwell had met the majority of Palla's dinner guests. Seated on her right, he received from his hostess information concerning some of those he did not know.

"That rather talkative boy with red hair is Larry Rideout," she said in a low voice. "He edits a weekly called *The Coming Race*. The Post Office authorities have refused to pass it through the mails. It's rather advanced, you know."

"Who is the girl on his right—the one with the chalky map?"

"Questa Terrett. Don't you think her pallor is fascinating?"

“No. What particular stunt does she perform?”

“Don’t be flippant. She writes.”

“Ads?”

“Jim! She writes poems. Haven’t you seen any of them?”

“I don’t think so.”

“They’re rather modern poems. The lines don’t rhyme and there’s no metrical form,” explained Palla.

“Are they any good?”

“They’re a little difficult to understand. She leaves out so many verbs and nouns——”

“I know. It’s a part of her disease——”

“Jim, please be careful. She is taken seriously——”

“Taken seriously ill? There, dear, I won’t guy your guests. What an absolutely deathly face she has!”

“She is considered beautiful.”

“She has the profile of an Egyptian. She’s as dead-white as an Egyptian leper——”

“Hush!”

“Hush it is, sweetness! Who’s the good-looking chap over by Ilse?”

“Stanley Wardner.”

“And his star trick?”

“He’s a secessionist sculptor.”

“What’s that?”

“He is one of the ultra-modern men who has seceded from the Society of American Sculptors to form, with a few others, a new group.”

“Is he any good?”

“Well, Jim, I don’t know,” she said candidly. “I don’t think I am quite in sympathy with his work.”

“What sort is it?”

“If I understand him, he is what is termed, I believe, a concentrationist. For instance, in a nude figure which he is exhibiting in his studio, it’s all a rough

block of marble except, in the middle of the upper part, there is a nose."

"A nose!"

"Really, it is beautifully sculptured," insisted Palla.

"But—good heavens!—isn't there any other anatomical feature to that block of marble?"

"I explained that he is a concentrationist. His school believes in concentrating on a single feature only, and in rendering that feature as minutely and perfectly as possible."

Jim said: "He looks as sane as a broker, too. You never can tell, can you, sweetness?"

He glanced at several other people whose features were not familiar, but Palla's explanations of her friends had slightly discouraged him and he made no further inquiries.

Vanya Tchernov was there, dreamy and sweet-mannered; Estridge sat by Ilse, looking a trifle careworn, as though hospital work were taking it out of him. Marya Lanois was there, too, with her slightly slanting green eyes and her tiger-red hair—attracting from him a curious sort of stealthy admiration, inexplicable to him because he knew he was so entirely in love with Palla.

A woman of forty sat on his right—he promptly forgot her name each time he heard it—who ate fastidiously and chose birth-control as the subject for conversation. And he dodged it in vain, for her conversation had become a monologue, and he sat fiddling with his food, very red, while the silky voice, so agreeable in pitch and intonation, slid smoothly on.

Afterward Palla explained that she was a celebrated sociologist, but Jim remained shy of her.

Other people came in after dinner. Vanya seated himself at the piano and played from one of his unpublished scores. Ilse sang two Scandinavian songs in her fresh, wholesome, melodious voice—the song called *Ygdrasil*, and the *Song of Thokk*. Wardner had brought a violin, and he and Vanya accompanied Marya's Asiatic songs, but with some difficulty on the sculptor's part, as modern instruments are scarcely adapted to the sort of Russian music she chose to sing.

Marya had a way, when singing, which appeared almost insolent. Seated, or carelessly erect, her supple figure fell into lines of indolently provocative grace; and the warm, golden notes welling from her throat seemed to be flung broadcast and indifferently to her listeners, as alms are often flung, without interest, toward abstract poverty and not to the poor breathing thing at one's elbow.

She sang, in her preoccupied way, one of her savage, pentatonic songs, more Mongol than Cossack; then she sang an impudent *burlatskiya* lazily defiant of her listeners; then a so-called “dancing song,” in which there was little restraint in word or air.

The subtly infernal enchantment of girl and music was felt by everybody; but several among the illuminati and the fair ultra-modernettes had now reached their limit of breadth and tolerance, and were becoming bored and self-conscious, when abruptly Marya’s figure straightened to a lovely severity, her mouth opened sweetly as a cherub’s, and, looking up like a little, ruddy bird, she sang one of the ancient *Kolyadki*, Vanya alone understanding as his long, thin fingers wandered instinctively into an improvised accompaniment:

I

“Young tears
Your fears disguise;
He is not coming!
Sweet lips
Let slip no sighs;
Cease, heart, your drumming!
He is not coming,
[A*Lada!*
He is not coming.
Lada oy Lada!

“Gaze not in wonder,—
Yonder no rider comes;
Hark how the kettle-drums
Mock his hoofs’ thunder;
Hark to their thudding,
Pretty breasts budding,—
Setting the Buddhist bells
Clanking and banging,—
Wheels at the hidden wells
Clinking and clanging!
(*Lada oy Lada!*
Plough the flower under;
Tear it asunder!

“Young eyes
In swift surprise,
What terror veils you?
Clear eyes,
Who gallops here?

What wolf assails you?
What horseman hails you,
Lada!
What pleasure pales you?
Lada oy Lada!

“Knight who rides boldly,
May Erlik impale you,—
Your mother bewail you,
If you use her coldly!
Health to the wedding!
Joy to the bedding!
Set all the Christian bells
Swinging and ringing—
Monks in their stony cells
Chanting and singing
(*Lada oy Lada!*
Bud of the rose,
Gently unclose!”

Marya, her gemmed fingers bracketed on her hips, the last sensuous note still afloat on her lips, turned her head so that her rounded chin rested on her bare shoulder; and looked at Shotwell. He rose, applauding with the others, and found a chair for her.

But when she seated herself, she addressed Ilse on the other side of him, leaning so near that he felt the warmth of her hair.

“Who was it wrestled with Loki? Was it Hel, goddess of death? Or was it Thor who wrestled with that toothless hag, Thokk?”

Ilse explained.

The conversation became general, vaguely accompanied by Vanya’s drifting improvisations, where he still sat at the piano, his lost gaze on Marya.

Bits of the chatter around him came vaguely to Shotwell—the birth-control lady’s placid inclination toward obstetrics; Wardner on concentration, with Palla listening, bending forward, brown eyes wide and curious and snowy hands framing her face; Ilse partly turned where she was seated, alert, flushed, half smiling at what John Estridge, behind her shoulder, was saying to her,—some improvised nonsense, of which Jim caught a fragment:

“If he who dwells in Midgard
With cunning can not floor her,
What hope that Mistress Westgard
Will melt if I implore her?

“And yet I’ve come to Asgard,
And hope I shall not bore her
If I tell Mistress Westgard
How deeply I adore her——”

Through the hum of conversation and capricious laughter, Vanya’s vague music drifted like wind-blown thistle-down, and his absent regard never left Marya, where she rested among the cushions in low-voiced dialogue with Jim.

“I had hoped,” she smiled, “that you had perhaps remembered me—enough to stop for a word or two some day at tea-time.”

He had had no intention of going; but he said that he had meant to and would surely do so,—the while she was leisurely recognising the lie as it politely uncoiled.

“Why won’t you come?” she asked under her breath.

“I shall certainly——”

“No; you won’t come.” She seemed amused: “Tell me, are you too a concentrationist?” And her beryl-green eyes barely flickered toward Palla. Then she smiled and laid her hand lightly on her breast: “I, on the contrary, am a Diffusionist. It’s merely a matter of how God grinds the lens. But prisms colour one’s dull white life so gaily!”

“And split it up,” he said, smiling.

“And disintegrate it,” she nodded, “—so exquisitely.”

“Into rainbows.”

“You do not believe that there is hidden gold there?” And, looking at him, she let one hand rest lightly against her hair.

“Yes. I believe it,” he said, laughing at her enchanting effrontery. “But, Marya, when the rainbow goes a-glimmering, the same old grey world is there again. It’s always there——”

“Awaiting another rainbow!”

“But storms come first.”

“Is another rainbow not worth the storm?”

“Is it?” he demanded.

“Shall we try?” she asked carelessly.

He did not answer. But presently he looked across at Vanya.

“Who is there who would not love him?” said Marya serenely.

“I was wondering.”

“No need. All love Vanya. I, also.”

“I thought so.”

“Think so. For it is quite true.... Will you come to tea alone with me some afternoon?”

He looked at her; reddened. Marya turned her head leisurely, to hear what Palla was saying to her. At the sound of her voice, Jim turned also, and saw Palla bending near his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she was saying to Marya, “but Questa Terrett desires to know Jim——”

“Is it any wonder,” said Marya, “that women should desire to know him? Alas!—” She laughed and turned to Ilse, who seated herself as Jim stood up.

Palla, her finger-tips resting lightly on his arm, said laughingly: “Our youthful and tawny enchantress seemed unusually busy with you this evening. Has she turned you into anything very disturbing?”

“Would you care?”

“Of course.”

“Enough to come to earth and interfere?”

“Good heavens, has it gone as far as that!” she whispered in gay consternation. “And could I really arrive in time, though breathless?”

He laughed: “You don’t need to stir from your niche, sweetness. I swept your altar once. I’ll keep the fire clean.”

“You adorable thing—” He felt the faintest pressure of her fingers; then he heard himself being presented to Questa Terrett.

The frail and somewhat mortuary beauty of this slim poetess, with her full-lipped profile of an Egyptian temple-girl and her pale, still eyes, left him guessing—rather guiltily—recollecting his recent but meaningless disrespect.

“I don’t know,” she said, “just why you are here. Soldiers are no novelty. Is somebody in love with you?”

It was a toss-up whether he’d wither or laugh, but the demon of gaiety won out.

She also smiled.

“I asked you,” she added, “because you seem to be quite featureless.”

“Oh, I’ve a few eyes and noses and that sort——”

“I mean psychologically accentless.”

“Just plain man?”

“Yes. That is all you are, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid it is,” he admitted, quite as much amused as she appeared to be.

“I see. Some crazy girl here is enamoured of you. Otherwise, you scarcely belong among modern intellectuals, you know.”

At that he laughed outright.

She said: “You really are delightful. You’re just a plain, fighting male, aren’t you?”

“Well, I haven’t done much fighting——”

“Unimaginative, too! You could have led yourself to believe you had done a lot,” she pointed out. “And maybe you could have interested me.”

“I’m sorry. But suppose you try to interest *me*?”

“Don’t I? I’ve tried.”

“Do your best,” he encouraged her cheerfully. “You never can be sure I’m not listening.”

At that she laughed: “You nice youth,” she said, “if you’d talk that way to your sweetheart she’d sit up and listen.... Which I’m afraid she doesn’t, so far.”

He felt himself flushing, but he refused to wince under her amused analysis.

“You’ve simply got to have imagination, you know,” she insisted. “Otherwise, you don’t get anywhere at all. Have you read my smears?”

“Smears?”

“Bacteriologists take a smear of something on a glass slide and slip it under a microscope. My poems are like that. The words are the bacteria. Few can identify them.”

“Are you serious?”

“Entirely.”

He maintained his gravity: “Would you be kind enough to take a smear and let me look?” he inquired politely.

“Certainly: the experiment is called ‘Unpremeditation.’”

She dropped one thin and silken knee over the other and crossed her hands on it as she recited her poem.

“UNPREMEDITATION.”

“In the tube.
Several,
With intonation.
Red, red, red.
A square fabric
Once white
With intention.
Soiled, soiled, soiled.
Six hundred hundred million
Swarm like vermin,
Without intention.
Redder. Redder.
Drip, drip, drip.
A goes west,
B goes east,
C goes north,
Pink, pink, pink.
Two white squares.
And a coat-sleeve.
Without intention,
Intonations.
Pinker. Redder.
Six hundred hundred million.
Billions. Trillions.
A week. Two weeks.
Otherwise?
Eternity.”

Jim’s features had become a trifle glassy. “You do skip a few words,” he said, “don’t you?”

“Words are animalculæ. Some skip, some gyrate, some sub-divide.”

He put a brave face on the matter: “If you’re not really guying me,” he ventured, “would you tell me a little about your poem?”

“Why, yes,” she replied amiably. “To put it redundantly, then, I have sketched in my poem a man in the subway, with influenza, which infects others in his vicinity.”

She rose, smiled, and sauntered off, leaving him utterly unable to determine whether or not he had been outrageously imposed upon. Palla rescued him, and he went with her, a little wild-eyed, downstairs to the nearly empty and carpetless drawing-room, where a music box was playing and people were already dancing.

Toward midnight, Marya, passing Jim on her way to the front door, leaned wide from Vanya's arm:

"Let us at least discuss my rainbow theory," she said, laughing, and her face a shade too close to his; and continued on, still clinging to the sleeve of Vanya's fur-lined coat.

Ilse was the last to leave, with Estridge waiting behind her to hold her wrap.

She came up to Palla, took both her hands in an odd, subdued, wistful way.

After a moment she kissed her, and, close to her ear: "Wait, darling."

Palla did not understand.

Ilse said: "I mean—wait before you ever take any step to—to prove any theory—or belief."

Still Palla did not comprehend.

"With—Jim," said Ilse in a low voice.

"Oh. Why, of course. But—it could never happen."

"Why?"

Palla said honestly: "One reason is because he wouldn't anyway."

"You must not be certain."

"I am. I'm absolutely certain."

Ilse gazed at her, then laughed and pressed her hand. "Are you cold?" asked Palla.

"No."

"I thought I felt you shiver, dearest."

Ilse flushed and held out her arms for the sleeves of her fur coat, which Estridge was holding.

They went away together, leaving Palla alone with Shotwell, among the fading flowers.

[A

The ancient Slavonic Venus.

CHAPTER XV

“So,” said Puma, “you are quite convinced he has much wealth. Yes?”

“You betcha,” replied Elmer Skidder. “That pious guy has got all kinds of it. Why, Alonzo D. Pawling can buy you and me like we were two subway tickets and then forget which pocket he put us in.”

“He also is a sport? Yes?”

“On the quiet. Oh, I got his number some years ago. Ran into him once in New York, where you used to knock three times and ring twice before they slid the panel on you.”

“A bank president?”

“Did you ever know one that didn’t?” grinned Skidder, inserting pearl studs in his shirt.

“It is very bad—for a shake-down,” mused Puma, smoothing his glossy top hat with one of Skidder’s silk mufflers.

“Aw, you can’t scare Alonzo D. Pawling. Say, Angy, what dames have you commandeered?”

“I ask Barclay and West. Also, they got another—Vanna Brown.”

“Pictures?”

“No, she has a friend.”

Skidder continued to attire himself in an over-braided evening dress; Puma, seated behind him, gazed absently at his partner’s features reflected in the looking glass.

“A theatre on Broadway,” he mused. “You say he has seemed interested, Elmer?”

“He didn’t run away screaming.”

“How did he behave?”

“Well, it’s hard to size up Alonzo D. Pawling. He’s a fly guy, Angy. What a man says at a little supper for four, with a peach pulling his Depews and a good looker sticking gardenias in his buttonhole, ain’t what he’s likely to say next day in your office.”

“You have accompany him to Broadway and you have shown him the parcel?”

“I sure did.”

“You explain how we can not lose out? You mention the option?”

Skidder cast aside his white tie and tried another, constructed on the butterfly plan.

“I put the whole thing up to him,” he said. “No use stalling with Alonzo D. Pawling. I know him too well. So I let out straight from the shoulder, and he knows the scheme we’ve got in mind and he knows we want his money in it. That’s how it stands to-night.”

Puma nodded and softly joined his over-manicured finger-tips:

“We give him a good time,” he said. “We give him a little dinner like there never was in New York. Yes?”

“You betcha.”

“Barclay is a devil. You think she please him?”

“Alonzo D. Pawling is some bird himself,” remarked Skidder, picking up his hat and turning to Puma, who rose with lithe briskness, put on his hat, and began to pull at his white gloves.

They went down to the street, where Puma’s car was waiting.

“I stop at the office a moment,” he said, as they entered the limousine. “You need not get out, Elmer.”

At the studio he descended, saying to Skidder that he’d be back in a moment.

But it was very evident when he entered his office that he had not expected to find Max Sondheim there; and he hesitated on the threshold, his white-gloved hand still on the door-knob.

“Come in, Puma; I want to see you,” growled Sondheim, retaining his seat but pocketing *The Call*, which he had been reading.

“To-morrow,” said Puma coolly; “I have no time——”

“No, *now*!” interrupted Sondheim.

They eyed each other for a moment in silence, then Puma shrugged:

“Very well,” he said. “But be quick, if you please——”

“Look here,” interrupted the other in a menacing voice, “you’re getting too damned independent, telling me to be quick! I had a date with you here at five o’clock. You thought you wouldn’t keep it and you left at four-thirty. But I

stuck around till you 'phoned in that you'd stop here to get some money. It's seven o'clock now, and I've waited for you. And I guess you've got enough time to hear what I'm going to say."

Puma looked at him without any expression at all on his sanguine features. "Go on," he said.

"What I got to say to you is this," began Sondheim. "There's a kind of a club that uses our hall on off nights. It's run by women."

Puma waited.

"They meet this evening at eight in our hall,—your hall, if you choose."

Puma nodded carelessly.

"All right. Put them out."

"What?"

"Put 'em out!" growled Sondheim. "We don't want them there to-night or any other night."

"You ask me to evict respectable people who pay me rent?"

"I don't ask you; I *tell* you."

Puma turned a deep red: "And whose hall do you think it is?" he demanded in a silky voice.

"Yours. That's why I tell you to get rid of that bunch and their Combat Club."

"Why have you ask me such a——"

"Because they're fighting us and you know it. That's a good enough reason."

"I shall not do so," said Puma, moistening his lips with his tongue.

"Oh, I guess you will when you think it over," sneered Sondheim, getting up from his chair and stuffing his newspaper into his overcoat pocket. He crossed the floor and shot an ugly glance at Puma *en passant*. Then he jerked open the door and went out briskly.

Puma walked into the inner waiting room, where a telephone operator sat reading a book.

"Where's McCabe?" he asked.

"Here he comes now, Governor."

The office manager sauntered up, eating a slice of apple pie, and Puma stepped forward to meet him.

“For what reason have you permit Mr. Sondheim to wait in my office?” he demanded.

“He said you told him to go in and wait there.”

“He is a liar! Hereafter he shall wait out here. You understand, McCabe?”

“Yes, sir. You’re always out when he calls, ain’t you?”

Puma meditated a few moments: “No. When he calls you shall let me know. Then I decide. But he shall not wait in my office.”

“Very good, sir.” And, as Puma turned to go: “The police was here again this evening, sir.”

“Why?”

“They heard of the row in the hall last night.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Oh, the muss was all swept up—windows fixed and the busted benches in the furnace, so I said there had been no row as far as I knew, and I let ’em go in and nose around.”

“Next time,” said Puma, “you shall say to them that there was a very bad riot.”

“Sir?”

“A big fight,” continued Puma. “And if there is only a little damage you shall make more. And you shall show it to the police.”

“I get you, Governor. I’ll stage it right; don’t worry.”

“Yes, you shall stage it like there never was in all of France any ruins like my hall! And afterward,” he said, half to himself, “we shall see what we shall see.”

He went back to his office, took a packet of hundred dollar bills from the safe, and walked slowly out to where the limousine awaited him.

“Say, what the hell—” began Skidder impatiently; but Puma leaped lightly to his seat and pulled the fur robe over his knees.

“Now,” he said, in excellent humour, “we pick up Mr. Pawling at the Astor.”

“Where are the ladies?”

“They join us, Hotel Rajah. It will be, I trust, an amusing evening.”

About midnight, dinner merged noisily into supper in the private dining room

reserved by Mr. Puma for himself and guests at the new Hotel Rajah.

There had been intermittent dancing during the dinner, but now the negro jazz specialists had been dismissed with emoluments, and a music-box substituted; and supper promised to become even a more lively repetition of the earlier banquet.

Puma was superb—a large, heavy man, he danced as lightly as any ballerina; and he and Tessa Barclay did a Paraguayan dance together, with a leisurely and agile perfection of execution that elicited uproarious demonstrations from the others.

Not a whit winded, Puma resumed his seat at table, laughing as Mr. Pawling insisted on shaking hands with him.

“You are far too kind to my poor accomplishments,” he said in deprecation. “It was not at all difficult, that Paraguayan dance.”

“It was art!” insisted Mr. Pawling, his watery eyes brimming with emotion. And he pressed the pretty waist of Tessa Barclay.

“Art,” rejoined Puma, laying a jewelled hand on his shirt-front, “is an ecstatic outburst from within, like the song of the bird. Art is simple; art is not difficult. Where effort begins, art ends. Where self-expression becomes a labour, art already has perished!”

He thumped his shirt-front with an impassioned and highly-coloured fist.

“What is art?” he cried, “if it be not pleasure? And pleasure ceases where effort begins. For me, I am all heart, all art, like there never was in all the history of the Renaissance. As expresses itself the little innocent bird in song, so in my pictures I express myself. It is no effort. It is in me. It is born. Behold! Art has given birth to Beauty!”

“And the result,” added Skidder, “is a *ne plus ultra par excellence* which gathers in the popular coin every time. And say, if we had a Broadway theatre to run our stuff, and Angelo Puma to soopervise the combine—oh boy!—” He smote Mr. Pawling upon his bony back and dug him in the ribs with his thumb.

Mr. Pawling’s mouth sagged and his melancholy eyes shifted around him from Tessa Barclay—who was now attempting to balance a bon-bon on her nose and catch it between her lips—to Vanna Brown, teaching Miss West to turn cart-wheels on one hand.

Evidently Art had its consolations; and the single track genius who lived for art alone got a bonus, too. Also, what General Sherman once said about Art seemed to be only too obvious.

A detail, however, worried Mr. Pawling. Financially, he had always been afraid of Jews. And the nose of Angelo Puma made him uneasy every time he looked at it.

But an inch is a mile on a man's nose; and his own was bigger, yet entirely Yankee; so he had about concluded that there was no racial occasion for financial alarm.

What he should have known was that no Jew can compete with a Connecticut Yankee; but that any half-cast Armenian is master of both. Especially when born in Mexico of a Levantine father.

Now, in spite of Angelo Puma's agile gaiety and exotic exuberances, his brain remained entirely occupied with two matters. One of these concerned the possibility of interesting Mr. Pawling in a plot of ground on Broadway, now defaced by several taxpayers.

The other matter which fitfully preoccupied him was his unpleasant and unintentional interview with Sondheim.

For it had come to a point, now, that the perpetual bullying of former associates was worrying Mr. Puma a great deal in his steadily increasing prosperity.

The war was over. Besides, long ago he had prudently broken both his pledged word and his dangerous connections in Mexico, and had started what he believed to be a safe and legitimate career in New York, entirely free from perilous affiliations.

Government had investigated his activities; Government had found nothing for which to order his internment as an enemy alien.

It had been a close call. Puma realised that. But he had also realised that there was no law in Mexico ten miles outside of Mexico City;—no longer any German power there, either;—when he severed all connections with those who had sent him into the United States camouflaged as a cinema promoter, and under instruction to do all the damage he could to everything American.

But he had not counted on renewing his acquaintance with Karl Kastner and Max Sondheim in New York. Nor did they reveal themselves to him until he had become too prosperous to denounce them and risk investigation and internment under the counter-accusations with which they coolly threatened him.

So, from the early days of his prosperity in New York, it had been necessary for him to come to an agreement with Sondheim and Kastner. And the more his prosperity increased the less he dared to resent their petty tyranny and

blackmail, because, whether or not they might suffer under his public accusations, it was very certain that internment, if not imprisonment for a term of years, would be the fate reserved for himself. And that, of course, meant ruin.

So, although Puma ate and drank and danced with apparent abandon, and flashed his dazzling smile over everybody and everything, his mind, when not occupied by Alonzo D. Pawling, was bothered by surmises concerning Sondheim. And also, at intervals, he thought of Palla Dumont and the Combat Club, and he wondered uneasily whether Sondheim's agents had attempted to make any trouble at the meeting in his hall that evening.

There had been some trouble. The meeting being a public one, under municipal permission, Kastner had sent a number of his Bolshevik followers there, instructed to make what mischief they could. They were recruited from all sects of the Reds, including the American Bolsheviki, known commonly as the I. W. W. Also, among them were scattered a few pacifists, hun-sympathisers, conscientious objectors and other birds of analogous plumage, quite ready for interruptions and debate.

Palla presided, always a trifle frightened to find herself facing any audience, but ashamed to avoid the delegated responsibility.

Among others on the platform around her were Ilse and Marya and Questa Terrett and the birth-control lady—Miss Thane—neat and placid and precise as usual, and wearing long-distance spectacles for a more minute inspection of the audience.

Palla opened the proceedings in a voice which was clear, and always became steadier under heckling.

Her favourite proposition—the Law of Love and Service—she offered with such winning candour that the interruption of derisive laughter, prepared by several of Kastner's friends, was postponed; and Terry Hogan, I. W. W., said to Jerry Smith, I. W. W.:

"God love her, she's but a baby. Lave her chatter."

However, a conscientious objector got up and asked her whether she considered that the American army abroad had conformed to her Law of Love and Service, and when she answered emphatically that every soldier in the United States army was fulfilling to the highest degree his obligations to that law, both pacifists and conscientious objectors dissented noisily, and a student from Columbia College got up and began to harangue the audience.

Order was finally obtained: Palla added a word or two and retired; and Ilse Westgard came forward.

Somebody in the audience called out: "Say, just because you're a good-looker

it don’t mean you got a brain!”

Ilse threw back her golden head and her healthy laughter rang uncontrolled.

“Comrade,” she said, “we all have to do the best we can with what brain we have, don’t we?”

“Sure!” came from her grinning heckler, who seemed quite won over by her good humour.

So, an armistice established, Ilse plunged vigorously into her theme:

“Let me tell you something which you all know in your hearts: any class revolution based on violence and terrorism is doomed to failure.”

“Don’t be too sure of that!” shouted a man.

“I am sure of it. And you will never see any reign of terror in America.”

“But you may see Bolshevism here—Bolshevist propaganda—Bolshevist ideas penetrating. You may see these ideas accepted by Labor. You may see strikes—the most senseless and obsolete weapon ever wielded by thinking men; you may see panics, tie-ups, stagnation, misery. But you never shall see Bolshevism triumphant here, or permanently triumphant anywhere.

“Because Bolshevism is autocracy!”

“The hell it is!” yelled an I. W. W.

“Yes,” said Ilse cheerfully, “as you have said it is hell. And hell is an end, not a means, not a remedy.

“Because it is the negation of all socialism; the death of civilisation. And civilisation has an immortal destiny; and that destiny is socialism!”

A man interrupted, but she asked him so sweetly for a few moments more that he reseated himself.

“Comrades,” she said, “I know something about Bolshevism and revolution. I was a soldier of Russia. I carried a rifle and full pack. I was part of what is history. And I learned to be tolerant in the trenches; and I learned to love this unhappy human race of ours. And I learned what is Bolshevism.

“It is one of many protests against the exploitation of men by men. It is one of the many reactions against intolerable wrong. It is not a policy; it is an outburst against injustice; against the stupidity of present conditions, where the few monopolise the wealth created by the many; and the many remain poor.

“And Bolshevism is the remedy proposed—the violent superimposition of a brand new autocracy upon the ruins of the old!

“It does not work. It never can work, because it imposes the will of one class upon all other classes. It excludes all parties excepting its own from government. It is, therefore, not democratic. It is a tyranny, imposing upon capital and labour alike its will.

“And I tell you that Labour has just won the greatest of all wars. Do you suppose Labour will endure the autocracy of the Bolsheviki? The time is here when a more decent division is going to be made between the employer and the labourer.

“I don’t care what sort of production it may be, the producer is going to receive a much larger share; the employer a much smaller. And the producer is going to enjoy a better standard of living, opportunities for leisure and self-cultivation; and the three spectres that haunt him from childhood to grave—lack of money to make a beginning; fear for a family left on its own resources by his death; terror of poverty in old age—shall vanish.

“Against these three evil ghosts that haunt his bedside when the long day is done, there are going to be guarantees. Because those who won for us this righteous war, whether abroad or at home, are going to have something to say about it.

“And it will be they, not the Bolsheviki—it will be labourer and employer, not incendiary and assassin, who shall determine what is to be the policy of this Republic toward those to whom it owes its salvation!”

A man stood up waving his arms: “All right! All right! The question is whether the sort of government we have is worth saving. You talk very flip about the Bolsheviki, but I’ll tell you they’ll run this country yet, and every other too, and run ’em to suit themselves! It’s our turn; you’ve had your inning. Now, you’ll get a dose of what you hand to us if we have to ram it down with a gun barrel!”

There was wild cheering from Kastner’s men scattered about the hall; cries of “That’s the stuff! Take away their dough! Kick ’em out of their Fifth Avenue castles and set ’em to digging subways!”

Ilse said calmly: “Thank you very much for proving my contention for all these people who have been so kind as to listen to me.

“I said to you that Bolshevism is merely a new and more immoral autocracy which wishes to confiscate all property, annihilate all culture and set up in the public places a new god—the god of Ignorance!

“You have been good enough to corroborate me. And I and my audience now know that Bolshevism is on its way to America, and that its agents are already here.

“It is in view of such a danger that this Combat Club has been organised. And

it was time to organise it.

“It is evident, too, that the newspapers agree with us. Let us read you what one of them has to say:

“‘We fully realise the atrocity of the Bolshevik propaganda, which is really the doctrine of communism and anarchy. We realise the perilous ferment which endangers civilisation. But in the countries which have held fast to moral standards during the war we believe the factors of safety are sufficiently great, the forces of sanity are far stronger than those of chaos——’”

Here, those whose rôle it was to interrupt with derisive laughter, broke out at a preconcerted signal. But Ilse read on:

“‘In a word, as a mere matter of self-interest and common sense, we can only see the people, as a whole, in any country, as opposed to anarchy in any form. In our own land, even granted that there are a hundred thousand ”red“ agitators, or say a quarter of a million—and we have no real belief that this is so—what are these in a population of one hundred and five millions? Are the ninety and nine sane, moral, law abiding men and women going to allow themselves to be stampeded into ruin by a handful of criminals and lunatics?

“‘We do not for a moment believe it. These agitators and incendiaries have a sort of maniacal impetus that fills the air with dust and noise and alarms the credulous. Perhaps it may be wise to counteract this with a little quiet promotion of ideas of safety and prosperity, based on order and law. It may be well to calm the nerves of the timorous and it can do no harm to set in motion a counter wave of horror and repulsion against those who are planning to lead the world back to conditions of tribal savagery. Educational work is always beneficent. Let us have much of that but no panic. The power of truth and reason is in calm confidence.’”

And now a bushy-headed man got on his feet and levelled his forefinger at Ilse: “Take shame for your-selluf!” he shouted. “I know you! You fought mit Korniloff! You took orders from Kerensky, from aristocrats, from cadets!”

Ilse said pleasantly. “I fought for Russia, my friend. And when the robbers and despoilers of Russia became the stronger, I took a vacation.”

Some people laughed, but a harsh voice cried: “We know what you did. You rescued the friend of the Romanoffs—that Carmelite nun up there on the platform behind you, who calls herself Miss Dumont!”

And from the other side of the hall another man bawled out: “You and the White Nun have done enough mischief. And you and your club had better get out of here while the going is good!”

Estridge, who was standing in the rear of the hall with Shotwell, came down

along the aisle. Jim followed.

“Who said that?” he demanded, scanning the faces on that side while Shotwell looked among the seats beyond.

Nobody said anything, for John Estridge stood over six feet and Jim looked physically very fit.

Estridge, standing in the aisle, said in his cool, penetrating voice:

“This club is a forum for discussion. All are free to argue any point. Only swine would threaten violence.

“Now go on and argue. Say what you like. But the next man who threatens these ladies or this club with violence will have to leave the hall.”

“Who’ll put him out?” piped an unidentified voice.

Then the two young men laughed; and their mirth was not reassuring to the violently inclined.

There were disturbances during the evening, but no violence, and only a few threats—those that made them remaining in prudent incognito.

Miss Thane made a serene, precise and perfectly logical address upon birth control.

Somebody yelled that the millionaires didn’t have to resort to it, being already sufficiently sterile to assure the dwindling of their class.

A woman rose and said she had always done what she pleased in the matter, law or no law, but that if it were true the Bolsheviki in America were but a quarter of a million to a hundred million of the bourgeoisie, then it was time to breed and breed to the limit.

“And let the kids starve?” cried another woman—a mere girl. “That isn’t the way. The way to do is to even things with a hundred million hand grenades!”

Instantly the place was in an uproar; but Palla came forward and said that the meeting was over, and Estridge and Shotwell and two policemen kept the aisles fairly clear while the wrangling audience made their way to the street.

“Aw, it’s all lollipop!” said a man. “What d’ yeh expect from a bunch of women?”

“The Red Flag Club is better,” rejoined another. “Say, bo! There’s somethin’ doin’ when Sondheim hands it out!”

Ilse went away with Estridge. Palla came along among the other women, and turned aside to offer her hand to Jim.

“Did you expect to take me home?” she asked demurely.

“Didn’t you expect me to?” he inquired uneasily.

“I? Why should I?” She slipped her arm into his with a little nestling gesture. “And it’s a very odd thing, Jim, that they left the chafing dish on the table. And that before she went to bed my waitress laid covers for two.”

CHAPTER XVI

“Are you worried about this Dumont girl?” asked Shotwell Senior abruptly.

His wife did not look up from her book. After an interval:

“Yes,” she said, “I am.”

Her husband watched her over the top of his newspaper.

“I can’t believe there’s anything in it,” he said. “But it’s a shame that Jim should worry you so.”

“He doesn’t mean to.”

“Probably he doesn’t, but what’s the difference? You’re unhappy and he’s the reason of it. And it isn’t as though he were a cub any longer, either. He’s old enough to know what he’s about. He’s no Willy Baxter.”

“That is what makes me anxious,” said Helen Shotwell. “Do you know, dear, that he hasn’t dined here once this week, yet he seems to go nowhere else—nowhere except to her.”

“What sort of woman is she?” he demanded, wiping his eyeglasses as though preparing to take a long-distance look at Palla.

“I know her only at the Red Cross.”

“Well, is she at all common?”

“No.... That is why it is difficult for me to talk to Jim about her. There’s nothing of that sort to criticise.”

“No social objections to the girl?”

“None. She’s an unusual girl.”

“Attractive?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Well, then——”

“Oh, James, I *want* him to marry Elorn! And if he’s going to make himself conspicuous over this Dumont girl, I don’t think I can bear it!”

“What *is* the objection to the girl, Helen?” he asked, flinging his paper onto a table and drawing nearer the fire.

“She isn’t at all our kind, James——”

“But you just said——”

“I don’t mean socially. And still, as far as that goes, she seems to care nothing whatever for position or social duties or obligations.”

“That’s not so unusual in these days,” he remarked. “Lots of nice girls are fed up on the social aspects of life.”

“Well, for example, she has not made the slightest effort to know anybody worth knowing. Janet Speedwell left cards and then asked her to dinner, and received an amiable regret for her pains. No girl can afford to decline invitations from Janet, even if her excuse is a club meeting.

“And two or three other women at the Red Cross have asked her to lunch at the Colony Club, and have made advances to her on Leila Vance’s account, but she hasn’t responded. Now, you know a girl isn’t going to get on by politely ignoring the advances of such women. But she doesn’t even appear to be aware of their importance.”

“Why don’t you ask her to something?” suggested her husband.

“I did,” she said, a little sharply. “I asked her and Leila Vance to dine with us. I intended to ask Elorn, too, and let Jim realise the difference if he isn’t already too blind to see.”

“Did she decline?”

“She did,” said Helen curtly.

“Why?”

“It happened that she had asked somebody to dine with her that evening. And I have a horrid suspicion it was Jim. If it was, she could have postponed it. Of course it was a valid excuse, but it annoyed me to have her decline. That’s what I tell you, James, she has a most disturbing habit of declining overtures from everybody—even from——”

Helen checked herself, looked at her husband with an odd smile, in which there was no mirth; then:

“You probably are not aware of it, dear, but that girl has also declined Jim’s overtures.”

“Jim’s what?”

“Invitation.”

“Invitation to do what?”

“Marry him.”

Shotwell Senior turned very red.

“The devil she did! How do you know?”

“Jim told me.”

“That she turned him down?”

“She declined to marry him.”

Her husband seemed unable to grasp such a fact. Never had it occurred to Shotwell Senior that any living, human girl could decline such an invitation from his only son.

After a painful silence: “Well,” he said in a perplexed and mortified voice, “she certainly seems to be, as you say, a most unusual girl.... But—if it’s settled—why do you continue to worry, Helen?”

“Because Jim is very deeply in love with her.... And I’m sore at heart.”

“Hard hit, is he?”

“Very unhappy.”

Shotwell Senior reddened again: “He’ll have to face it,” he said.... “But that girl seems to be a fool!”

“I—wonder.”

“What do you mean?”

“A girl may change her mind.” She lifted her head and looked with sad humour at her husband, whom she also had kept dangling for a while. Then:

“James, dear, our son *is* as fine as we think him. But he’s just a splendid, wholesome, everyday, unimaginative New York business man. And he’s fallen in love with his absolute antithesis. Because this girl is all ardent imagination, full of extravagant impulses, very lovely to look at, but a perfectly illogical fanatic!

“Mrs. Vance has told me all about her. She really belongs in some exotic romance, not in New York. She’s entirely irresponsible, perfectly unstable.

There is in her a generous sort of recklessness which is quite likely to drive her headlong into any extreme. And what sort of mate would such a girl be for a young man whose ambition is to make good in the real estate business, marry a nice girl, have a pleasant home and agreeable children, and otherwise conform to the ordinary conventions of civilisation?"

"I think," remarked her husband grimly, "that she'd keep him guessing."

"She would indeed! And that's not all, James. For I've got to tell you that the girl entertains some rather weird and dreadful socialistic notions. She talks socialism—a mild variety—from public platforms. She admits very frankly that she entertains no respect for accepted conventions. And while I have no reason to doubt her purity of mind and personal chastity, the unpleasant and startling fact remains that she proposes that humanity should dispense with the marriage ceremony and discard it and any orthodox religion as obsolete superstitions."

Her husband stared at her.

"For heaven's sake," he began, then got frightfully red in the face once more. "What that girl needs is a plain spanking!" he said bluntly. "I'd like to see her or any other girl try to come into this family on any such ridiculous terms!"

"She doesn't seem to want to come in on any terms," said Helen.

"Then what are you worrying about?"

"I am worrying about what might happen if she ever changed her mind."

"But you say she doesn't believe in marriage!"

"She doesn't."

"Well, that boy of ours isn't crazy," insisted Shotwell Senior.

But his mother remained silent in her deep misgiving concerning the sanity of the simpler sex, when mentally upset by love. For it seemed very difficult to understand what to do—if, indeed, there was anything for her to do in the matter.

To express disapproval of Palla to Jim or to the girl herself—to show any opposition at all—would, she feared, merely defeat its own purpose and alienate her son's confidence.

The situation was certainly a most disturbing one, though not at present perilous.

And Helen would not permit herself to believe that it could ever really become an impossible situation—that this young girl would deliberately slap

civilisation in the face; or that her only son would add a kick to the silly assault and take the ruinous consequences of social ostracism.

The young girl in question was at that moment seated before her piano, her charming head uplifted, singing in the silvery voice of an immaculate angel, to her own accompaniment, the heavenly Mass of Saint Hildé:

“Love me,
Adorable Mother!
Mary,
I worship no other.
Save me,
O, graciously save me
I pray!
Let my Darkness be turned into Day
By the Light of Thy Grace
And Thy Face,
I pray!”

She continued the exquisite refrain on the keys for a while, then slowly turned to the man beside her.

“The one Mass I still love,” she murmured absently, “—memories of childhood, I suppose—when the Sisters made me sing the solo—I was only ten years old.” ... She shrugged her shoulders: “You know, in those days, I was a little devil,” she said seriously.

He smiled.

“I really was, Jim,—all over everything and wild as a swallow. I led the pack; Shadow Hill held us in horror. I remember I fought our butcher’s boy once—right in the middle of the street——”

“Why?”

“He did something to a cat which I couldn’t stand.”

“Did you whip him?”

“Oh, Jim, it was horrid. We both were dreadfully battered. And the constable caught us both, and I shall never, never forget my mother’s face!——”

She gazed down at the keys of the piano, touched them pensively.

“The very deuce was in me,” she sighed. “Even now, unless I’m occupied with all my might, something begins—to simmer in me——”

She turned and looked at him: “—A sort of enchanted madness that makes me wild to seize the whole world and set it right!—take it into my arms and defend it—die for it—or slay it and end its pain.”

“Too much of an armful,” he said with great gravity. “The thing to do is to select an individual and take *him* to your heart.”

“And slay him?” she inquired gaily.

“Certainly—like the feminine mantis—if you find you don’t like him. Individual suitors must take their chances of being either eaten or adored.”

“Jim, you’re so funny.”

She swung her stool, rested her elbow on the piano, and gazed at him interrogatively, the odd, half-smile edging her lips and eyes. And, after a little *duetto* of silence:

“Do you suppose I shall ever come to care for you—imprudently?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t let you.”

“How could you help it? And, as far as that goes, how could I, if it happened?”

“If you ever come to care at all,” he said, “you’ll care enough.”

“That is the trouble with you,” she retorted, “you don’t care enough.”

A slight flush stained his cheek-bones: “Sometimes,” he said, “I almost wish I cared less. And that would be what you call enough.”

Colour came into her face, too:

“Do you know, Jim, I really don’t know how much I do care for you? It sounds rather silly, doesn’t it?”

“Do you care more than you did at first?”

“Yes.”

“Much more?”

“I told you I don’t know how much.”

“Not enough to marry me?”

“Must we discuss that again?”

He got up, went out to the hall, pulled a book from his overcoat pocket, and returned.

“Would you care to hear what the greatest American says on the subject, Palla?”

“On the subject of marriage?”

“No; he takes the marriage for granted. It’s what he has to say concerning the

obligations involved.”

“Proceed, dear,” she said, laughingly.

He read, eliminating what was not necessary to make his point:

“‘A race is worthless and contemptible if its men cease to work hard and, at need, to fight hard; and if its women cease to breed freely. If the best classes do not reproduce themselves the nation will, of course, go down.

“‘When the ordinary decent man does not understand that to marry the woman he loves, as early as he can, is the most desirable of all goals; when the ordinary woman does not understand that all other forms of life are but makeshift substitutes for the life of the wife, the mother of healthy children; then the State is rotten at heart.

“‘The woman who shrinks from motherhood is as low a creature as a man of the professional pacifist, or poltroon, type, who shirks his duty as a soldier.

“‘The only full life for man or woman is led by those men and women who together, with hearts both gentle and valiant, face lives of love and duty, who see their children rise up to call them blessed, and who leave behind them their seed to inherit the earth.

“‘No celibate life approaches such a life in usefulness. The mother comes ahead of the nun.

“‘But if the average woman does not marry and become the mother of enough healthy children to permit the increase of the race; and if the average man does not marry in times of peace and do his full duty in war if need arises, then the race is decadent and should be swept aside to make room for a better one.

“‘Only that nation has a future whose sons and daughters recognise and obey the primary laws of their racial being!’”

He closed the book and laid it on the piano.

“Now,” he said, “either we’re really a rotten and decadent race, and might as well behave like one, or we’re sound and sane.”

Something unusual in his voice—in the sudden grim whiteness of his face—disturbed Palla.

“I want you to marry me,” he said. “You care for no other man. And if you don’t love me enough to do it, you’ll learn to afterward.”

“Jim,” she said gently, and now rather white herself, “that is an outrageous thing to say to me. Don’t you realise it?”

“I’m sorry. But I love you—I need you so that I’m fit for nothing else. I can’t keep my mind on my work; I can’t think of anybody—anything but you.... If

you didn’t care for me more or less I wouldn’t come whining to you. I wouldn’t come now until I’d entirely won your heart—except that—if I did—and if you refused me marriage and offered the other thing—I’d be about through with everything! And I’d know damned well that the nation wasn’t worth the powder to blow it to hell if such women as you betray it!”

The girl flushed furiously; but her voice seemed fairly under control.

“Hadn’t you better go, Jim, before you say anything more?”

“Will you marry me?”

“No.”

He stood up very straight, unstirring, for a long time, not looking at her.

Then he said “good-bye,” in a low voice, and went out leaving her quite pale again and rather badly scared.

As the lower door closed, she sprang to the landing and called his name in a frightened voice that had no carrying power.

Later she telephoned to his several clubs. At eleven she called each club again; and finally telephoned to his house.

At midnight he had not telephoned in reply to the messages she had left requesting him to call her.

Her anxiety had changed to a vague bewilderment. Her dismayed resentment at what he had said to her was giving place to a strange and unaccustomed sense of loneliness.

Suddenly an overwhelming desire to be with Ilse seized her, and she would have called a taxi and started immediately, except for the dread that Jim might telephone in her absence.

Yet, she didn’t know what it was that she wanted of him, except to protest at his attitude toward her. Such a protest was due them both—an appeal in behalf of the friendship which meant so much to her—which, she had abruptly discovered, meant far more to her than she supposed.

At midnight she telephoned to Ilse. A sleepy maid replied that Miss Westgard had not yet returned.

So Palla called a taxi, pinned on her hat and struggled into her fur coat, and, taking her latch-key, started for Ilse’s apartment, feeling need of her in a blind sort of way—desiring to listen to her friendly voice, touch her, hear her clear, sane laughter.

A yawning maid admitted her. Miss Westgard had dined out with Mr. Estridge, but had not yet returned.

So Palla, wondering a little, laid aside her coat and went into the pretty living room.

There were books and magazines enough, but after a while she gave up trying to read and sat staring absently at a photograph of Estridge in uniform, which stood on the table at her elbow.

Across it was an inscription, dated only a few days back: “To Ilse from Jack, on the road to Asgard.”

Then, as she gazed at the man’s handsome features, for the first time a vague sense of uneasiness invaded her.

Of a gradually growing comradeship between these two she had been tranquilly aware. And yet, now, it surprised her to realise that their comradeship had drifted into intimacy.

Lying back in her armchair, her thoughts hovered about these two; and she went back in her mind to recollect something of the beginning of this intimacy;—and remembered various little incidents which, at the time, seemed of no portent.

And, reflecting, she recollected now what Ilse had said to her after the last party she had given—and which Palla had not understood.

What had Ilse meant by asking her to “wait”? Wait for what?... Where was Ilse, now? Why did she remain out so late with John Estridge? It was after one o’clock.

Of course they must be dancing somewhere or other. There were plenty of dances to go to.

Palla stirred restlessly in her chair. Evidently Ilse had not told her maid that she meant to be out late, for the girl seemed to have expected her an hour ago.

Palla’s increasing restlessness finally drove her to the windows, where she pulled aside the shades and stood looking out into the silent night.

The night was cold and clear and very still. Rarely a footfarer passed; seldom a car. And the stillness of the dark city increased her nervousness.

New York has rare phases of uncanny silence, when, for a space, no sound disturbs the weird stillness.

The clang of trains, the feathery whirr of motors, the echo of footsteps, the immense, indefinable breathing vibration of the iron monster, drowsing on its rock between three rivers and the sea, ceases utterly. And a vast stillness reigns, mournful, ominous, unutterably sad.

Palla looked down into the empty street. The dark chill of it seemed to rise and

touch her; and she shivered unconsciously and turned back into the lighted room.

It was two o’clock. Her eyes were heavy, her heart heavier. Why should everything suddenly happen to her in that way? Where had Jim gone when he left her? And who was it answered the telephone at his house when she had called up and asked to speak to him? It was a woman’s voice—a maid, no doubt—yet, for an instant, she had fancied that the voice resembled his mother’s.

But it couldn’t have been, for Palla had given her name, and Mrs. Shotwell would have spoken to her—unless—perhaps his mother—disapproved of something—of her calling Jim at such an hour.... Or of something ... perhaps of their friendship ... of herself, perhaps——

She heard the clock strike and looked across at the mantel.

What was Ilse doing at half-past two in the morning? Where could she be?

Palla involuntarily turned her head and looked at the photograph. Of course Ilse was safe with a man like John Estridge.... That is to say ...

Without warning, her face grew hot and the crimson tide mounted to the roots of her hair, dyeing throat and temples.

A sort of stunning reaction followed as the tide ebbed; she found herself stupidly repeating the word “safe,” as though to interpret what it meant.

Safe? Yes, Ilse was safe. She knew how to take care of herself ... unless....

Again the crimson tide invaded her skin to the temples.... A sudden and haunting fear came creeping after it had ebbed once more, leaving her gazing fixedly into space through the tumult of her thoughts. And always in dull, unmeaning repetition the word “safe” throbbed in her ears.

Safe? Safe from what? From the creed they both professed? From their common belief? From the consequences of living up to it?

At the thought, Palla sprang to her feet and stood quivering all over, both hands pressed to her throat, which was quivering too.

Where was Ilse? What had happened? Had she suddenly come face to face with that creed of theirs—that shadowy creed which they believed in, perhaps because it seemed so unreal!—because the ordeal by fire seemed so vague, so far away in that ghostly bourne which is called the future, and which remains always so inconceivably distant to the young—star-distant, remote as inter-stellar dust—aloof as death.

It was three o’clock. There were velvet-dark smears under Palla’s eyes, little

colour in her lips. The weight of fatigue lay heavily on her young shoulders; on her mind, too, partly stupefied by the violence of her emotions.

Once she had risen heavily, had gone into the maid's room and had told her to go to bed, adding that she herself would wait for Miss Westgard.

That, already, was nearly an hour ago, and the gilt hands of the clock were already creeping around the gilded dial toward the half hour.

As it struck on the clear French bell, a key turned in the outside door; then the door closed; and Palla rose trembling from her chair as Ilse entered, her golden hair in lovely disorder, the evening cloak partly flung from her shoulders.

There was a moment's utter silence. Then Ilse stepped swiftly forward and took Palla in her arms.

"My darling! What has happened?" she asked. "Why are you here at this hour? You look dreadfully ill!——"

Palla's head dropped on her breast.

"What is it?" whispered Ilse. "Darling—darling—you did—you did wait—didn't you?"

Palla's voice was scarcely audible: "I don't know what you mean.... I was only frightened about you.... I've been so unhappy.... And Jim said—good-bye—and I can't—find him——"

"I want you to answer me! Are you in love with him?"

"No.... I don't—think so——"

Ilse drew a deep breath.

"It's all right, then," she said.

Then, suddenly, Palla seemed to understand what Ilse had meant when she had said, "Wait!"

And she lifted her head and looked blindly into the sea-blue eyes—blindly, desperately, striving to see through those clear soul-windows what it might be that was looking out at her.

And, gazing, she knew that she dared not ask Ilse where she had been.

The latter smiled; but her voice was very tender when she spoke.

"We'll telephone your maid in the morning. You must go to bed, Palla."

"Alone?"

Ilse turned carelessly and laid her cloak across a chair. There was a second

chamber beyond her own. She went into it, turned down the bed and called Palla, who came slowly after her.

They kissed each other in silence. Then Ilse went back to her own room.

CHAPTER XVII

“Jim,” said his mother, “Miss Dumont called you on the telephone at an unusual hour last night. You had gone to your room, and on the chance that you were asleep I did not speak to you.”

That was all—sufficient explanation to discount any reproach from her son incident on his comparing notes with the girl in question. Also just enough in her action to convey to the girl a polite hint that the Shotwell family was not at home to people who telephoned at that unconventional hour.

On his way to business that morning, Jim telephoned to Palla, but, learning she was not at home, let the matter rest.

In his sullen and resentful mood he no longer cared—or thought he didn’t, which resulted in the same thing—the accumulation of increasing bitterness during a dull, rainy working day at the office, and a dogged determination to keep clear of this woman until effort to remain away from her was no longer necessary.

For the thing was utterly hopeless; he’d had enough. And in his bruised heart and outraged common sense he was boyishly framing an indictment of modern womanhood—lumping it all and cursing it out—swearing internally at the entire enfranchised pack which the war had set afoot and had licensed to swarm all over everything and raise hell with the ancient and established order of things.

The stormy dark came early; and in this frame of mind when he left the office he sulkily avoided the club.

He very rarely drank anything; but, not knowing what to do, he drifted into the Biltmore bar.

He met a man or two he knew, but declined all suggestions for the evening, turned up his overcoat collar, and started through the hotel toward the northern exit.

And met Marya Lanois face to face.

She was coming from the tea-room with two or three other people, but turned immediately on seeing him and came toward him with hand extended.

“Dear me,” she said, “you look very wet. And you don’t look particularly well. Have you arrived all alone for tea?”

“I had my tea in the bar,” he said. “How are you, Marya?—but I musn’t detain you—” he glanced at the distant group of people who seemed to be awaiting her.

“You are not detaining me,” she said sweetly.

“Your people seem to be waiting——”

“They may go to the deuce. Are you quite alone?”

“I—yes——”

“Shall we have tea together?”

He laughed. “But you’ve had yours——”

“Well, you know there are other things that one sometimes drinks.”

There seemed no way out of it. They went into the tea-room together and seated themselves.

“How is Vanya?” he inquired.

“Vanya gives a concert to-night in Baltimore.”

“And you didn’t go!”

“No. It was rainy. Besides, I hear Vanya play when I desire to hear him.”

Their order was served.

“So you wouldn’t go to Baltimore,” said Jim smilingly. “It strikes me, Marya, that you can be a coldblooded girl when you wish to be.”

“After all, what do you know about me?”

He laughed: “Oh, I don’t mean that I’ve got your number——”

“No. Because I have many numbers. I am a complicated combination,” she added, smiling; “—yet after all, a combination only. And quite simple when one discovers the key to me.”

“I think I know what it is,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Mischief.”

They laughed. Marya, particularly, was intensely amused. She was extremely fetching in her bicorne toque and narrow gown of light turquoise, and her

golden beaver scarf and muff.

“Mischief,” she repeated. “I should say not. There seems to be already sufficient mischief loose in the world, with the red tide rising everywhere—in Russia, in Germany, Austria, Italy, England—yes, and here also the crimson tide of Bolshevism begins to move.... Tell me; you are coming to the club to-morrow evening, I hope.”

“No.”

“Oh. Why?”

“No,” he repeated, almost sullenly. “I’ve had enough of queerness for a while——”

“Jim! Do you dare include me?”

He had to laugh at her pretence of fury: “No, Marya, you’re just a pretty mischief-maker, I suppose——”

“Then what do you mean by ‘queerness’? Don’t you think it’s sensible to combat Bolshevism and fight it with argument and debate on its own selected camping ground? Don’t you think it is high time somebody faced this crimson tide—that somebody started to build a dyke against this threatened inundation?”

“The best dykes have machine guns behind them, not orators,” he said bluntly.

“My friend, I have seen that, also. And to what have machine guns led us in Petrograd, in Moscow, in Poland, Finland, Courland—” She shrugged her pretty shoulders. “No. I have seen enough blood.”

He said: “I have seen a little myself.”

“Yes, I know. But a soldier is always a soldier, as a hound is always a hound. The blood of the quarry is what their instinct follows. Your goal is death; we only seek to tame.”

“The proper way to check Bolshevism in America is to police the country properly, and kick out the outrageous gang of domestic Bolsheviki who have exploited us, tricked us, lied to us, taxed us unfairly, and in spite of whom we have managed to help our allies win this war.

“Then, when this petty, wretched, crooked bunch has been swept out, and the nation aired and disinfected, and when the burden of taxation is properly distributed, and business dares lift its head again, then start your debates and propaganda and try to educate your enemies if you like. But keep your machine guns oiled.”

“You speak in an uncomplimentary fashion of government,” said the girl,

smiling.

“I am all for government. That does not mean that I am for the particular incumbents in office under the present Government. I have no use for them. Know that this war was won, not through them but in spite of them.

“Yet I place loyalty first of all—loyalty to the true ideals of that Government which some of the present incumbents so grotesquely misrepresent.

“That means, stand by the ship and the flag she flies, no matter who steers or what crew capers about her decks.

“That means, watch out for all pirates;—open fire on anything that flies a hostile flag, red or any other colour.

“And that’s my creed, Marya!”

“To shoot; not to debate?”

“An inquest is safer.”

“We shall never agree,” said the girl, laughing. “And I’m rather glad.”

“Why?”

“Because disagreements are more amusing than any *entente cordiale*, *mon ami*. It is the opposing forces that never bore each other. In life, too—I mean among human beings. Once they agree, interest lessens.”

“Nonsense,” he said, smiling.

“Oh, it is quite true. Behold us. We don’t agree. But I am interested,” she added with pretty audacity; “so please take me to dinner somewhere.”

“You mean now, as we are?”

“Parbleu! Did you wish to go home and dress?”

“I don’t care if you don’t,” he said.

“Suppose,” she suggested, “we dine where there is something to see.”

“A Broadway joint?” he asked, amused.

“A joint?” she repeated, smilingly perplexed. “Is that a place where we may dine and see a spectacle too and afterward dance?”

“Something of that sort,” he admitted, laughing. But under his careless gaiety an ugly determination had been hardening; he meant to go no more to Palla; he meant to welcome any distraction of the moment to help tide him over the long, grey interval that loomed ahead—welcome any draught that might mitigate the bitter waters he was tasting—and was destined to drain to their

revolting dregs.

They went to the Palace of Mirrors and were lucky enough to secure a box.

The food was excellent; the show a gay one.

Between intermissions he took Marya to the floor for a dance or two. The place was uncomfortably crowded: uniforms were everywhere, too; and Jim nodded to many men he knew, and to a few women.

And, in the vast, brilliant place, there was not a man who saw Marya and failed to turn and follow her with his eyes. For Marya had been fashioned to trouble man. And that primitively constructed and obviously-minded sex never failed to become troubled.

“We’d better enjoy our champagne,” remarked Marya. “We’ll be a wineless nation before long, I suppose.”

“It seems rather a pity,” he remarked, “that a man shouldn’t be free to enjoy a glass of claret. But if the unbaked and the half-baked, and the unwashed and the half-washed can’t be trusted to practise moderation, we others ought to abstain, I suppose. Because what is best for the majority ought to be the law for all.”

“If it were left to me,” said the girl, “I’d let the submerged drink themselves to death.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” he said. “I thought you were a socialist!”

“I am. I desire no law except that of individual inclination.”

“Why, that’s Bolshevism!”

Her laughter rang out unrestrained: “I believe in Bolshevism—for myself—but not for anybody else. In other words, I’d like to be autocrat of the world. If I were, I’d let everybody alone unless they interfered with me.”

“And in that event?” he asked, laughing, as the lights all over the house faded to a golden glimmer in preparation for the second part of the spectacle. He could no longer see her clearly across the little table. “What would you do if people interfered with you?” he repeated.

Marya smiled. The last ray of light smouldered in her tiger-red hair; the warm, fragrant, breathing youth of her grew vaguer, merging with the shadows; only the beryl-tinted eyes, which slanted slightly, remained distinct.

Her voice came to him through the music: “If I were autocrat, any man who dared oppose me would have his choice.”

“What choice?”

The music swelled toward a breathless crescendo.

She said: “Oppose me and you shall learn!——”

The house burst into a dazzling flood of moon-tinted light, all thronged with slim shapes whirling in an enchanted dance. Then clouds seemed to gather; the moon slid behind them, leaving a frosty demi-darkness through which, presently, snow began to fall.

The girl leaned toward him, watching the spectacle in silence. Perhaps unconsciously her left hand, satin-smooth, slipped over his—as though the contact were a symbol of enjoyment shared.

Light broke the next moment, revealing the spectacle on stage and floor in all its tinsel magnificence—snow-nymphs, polar-bears, all capering madly until an unearthly shriek heralded the coming of a favorite clown, who tumbled all the way down the stage steps and continued hysterically turning flip-flaps, cart-wheels, and somersaults until he landed with a crash at the foot of the steps again.

A large, highly coloured and over-glossy man, passing under their box during a dancing intermission, bowed rather extravagantly to Jim. He recognised Angelo Puma, with contemptuous amusement at his impudence.

It was evident, too, that Puma was quite ready to linger if encouraged—anxious, in fact, to extend his hand.

But his impudence had already ceased to amuse Jim, and he said carelessly to Marya, in a voice perfectly audible to Puma:

“There goes a man who, in collusion with a squinting partner of his, once beat me out of a commission.”

Puma’s heavy, burning face turned abruptly from Marya, whom he had been looking at; and he continued on across the floor. And Jim forgot him.

They remained until the place closed. Then he took her home.

It was an apartment overlooking the park from Fifty-ninth Street—a big studio and apparently many comfortable rooms—a large, still place where no servants were in evidence and where thick velvety carpets from Ushak and Sultanabad muffled every footfall.

She had insisted on his entering for a moment. He stood looking about him in the great studio, where Vanya’s concert-grand loomed up, a sprawling, shadowy shape under the dim drop-light which once had been a mosque-lamp in Samarcand.

The girl flung stole and muff from her, rolled up her gloves and took a shot at the piano, then, laughing, unpinned her hat and sent it scaling away into the golden dusk somewhere.

“Are you sleepy, Jim?”

A sudden vision of his trouble in the long, long night to face—trouble, insomnia, and the bitterness welling ever fresher with the interminable thoughts he could not suppress, could not control——

“I’m not sleepy,” he said. “But don’t you want to turn in?”

She went over to the piano, and, accompanying herself on deadened pedal where she stood, sang in a low voice the “*Snow-Tiger*,” with its uncanny refrain:

“Tiger-eyes
Tiger-eyes,
What do you see
Far in the dark
Over the snow?
Far in the dark
Over the snow,
Slowly the ghosts of dead men go,—
Horses and riders under the moon
Trample along to the dead men’s rune,
Slava! Slava!
Over the snow.”

“That’s too hilarious a song,” said Jim, laughing. “May I suggest a little rag to properly subdue us?”

“You don’t like *Tiger-eyes*?”

“I’ve heard more cheerful ditties.”

“When I’m excited by pleasure,” said the girl, “I sing *Tiger-eyes*.”

“Does it subdue you?”

She looked at him. “No.”

Still standing, she looked down at the keys, struck the muffled chords softly.

“Tiger-eyes
Tiger-eyes,
Where do they go,
Far in the dark
Over the snow?

Into the dark,
Over the snow,
Only the ghosts of the dead men know
Where they have come from, whither they go,
Riding at night by the corpse-light glow,
Slava! Slava!
Over the snow.”

“Well, for the love of Mike——”

Marya’s laughter pealed.

“So you don’t like *Tiger-eyes*?” she demanded, coming from behind the piano.

“I sure don’t,” he admitted.

“The real Russian name of the song is ‘Words! Words!’ And that’s all the song is—all that any song is—all that anything amounts to—words! words!—” She dropped onto the long couch,—“Anything except—love.”

“You may include that, too,” he said, lighting a cigarette for her; and she blew a ring of smoke at him, saying:

“I may—but I won’t. For goodness sake leave me the last one of my delusions!”

They both laughed and he said she was welcome to her remaining delusion.

“Won’t you share it with me?” she said, her smile innocent enough, save for the audacity of the red mouth.

“Share your delusion?”

“Yes, that too.”

This wouldn’t do. He lighted a cigarette for himself and sauntered over to the piano.

“I hope Vanya’s concert is a success,” he said. “He’s such a charming fellow, Vanya—so considerate, so gentle—” He turned and looked at Marya, and his eyes added: “Why the devil don’t you marry him and have a lot of jolly children?”

There seemed to be in his clear eyes enough for the girl to comprehend something of the question they flung at her.

“I don’t love Vanya,” she said.

“Of course you do!”

“As I might love a child—yes.”

After a silence: “It strikes me,” he said, “that you’re passionately in love.”

“I am.”

“With yourself,” he added, smiling.

“With *you*.”

This wouldn’t do any longer. The place slightly stifled him with its stillness, rugs—the odours that came from lacquered shapes, looming dimly, flowered and golden in the dusk—the aromatic scent of her cigarette——

“Hell!” he muttered under his breath. “This is no place for a white man.” But aloud he said pleasantly: “My very best wishes for Vanya to-night. Tell him so when he returns—” He put on his overcoat and picked up hat and stick.

“It’s infernally late,” he added, “and I’ve been a beast to keep you up. It was awfully nice of you.”

She rose from the lounge and walked with him to the door.

“Good night,” he said cheerily; but she retained his hand, added her other to it, and put up her face.

“Look here,” he said, smilingly, “I can’t do that, Marya.”

“Why can’t you?”

Her soft breath was on his face; the mouth too near—too near——

“No, I can’t!” he said curtly, but his voice trembled a little.

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because—there’s Vanya. No, I won’t do it!”

“Is that the reason?”

“It’s a reason.”

“I don’t love Vanya. I do love you.”

“Please remember——”

“No! No! I have nothing to remember—unless you give me something——”

“You had better try to remember that Vanya loves you. You and I can’t do a thing like that to Vanya—”

“Are there no other reasons?”

He reddened to the temples: “No, there are not—now. There is no other reason—except myself.”

“Yourself?”

“Yes, damn it, myself! That’s all that remains now to keep me straight. And I’ve been so. That may be news to you. Perhaps you don’t believe it.”

“Is it so, Jim?” she asked in a voice scarcely audible.

“Yes, it is. And so I shall keep on, and play the game that way—play it squarely with Vanya, too——”

He had lost his heavy colour; he stood looking at her with a white, strained, grim expression that tightened the jaw muscles; and she felt his powerful hand clenching between hers.

“It’s no use,” he said between his set lips, “I’ve got to go on—see it through in my own fashion—this rotten thing called life. I’m sorry, Marya, that I’m not a better sport——”

A wave of colour swept her face and her hands suddenly crushed his between them.

“You’re wonderful,” she said. “I do love you.”

But the tense, grey look had come back into his face. Looking at her in silence, presently his gaze seemed to become remote, his absent eyes fixed on something beyond her.

“I’ve a rotten time ahead of me,” he said, not knowing he had spoken. When his eyes reverted to her, his features remained expressionless, but his voice was almost tender as he said good night once more.

Her hands fell away; he opened the door and went out without looking back.

He found a taxi at the Plaza. He was swearing when he got into it. And all the way home he kept repeating to himself: “I’m one of those cursed, creeping Josephs; that’s what I am,—one of those pepless, sanctimonious, creeping Josephs.... And I always loathed that poor fish, too!”

CHAPTER XVIII

Shotwell Junior discovered in due course of time the memoranda of the repeated messages which Palla had telephoned to his several clubs, asking him to call her up immediately.

It was rather late to do that now, but his pulses began to quicken again in the old, hopeless way; and he went to the telephone booth and called the number which seemed burnt into his brain forever.

A maid answered; Palla came presently; and he thought her voice seemed colourless and unfamiliar.

“Yes, I’m perfectly well,” she replied to his inquiry; “where in the world did you go that night? I simply couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“What had you wished to say to me?”

“Nothing—except—that I was afraid you were angry when you left, and I didn’t wish you to part with me on such terms. Were you annoyed?”

“No.”

“You say it very curtly, Jim.”

“Is that all you desired to say to me?”

“Yes.... I was a little troubled.... Something else went wrong, too;—everything seemed to go wrong that night.... I thought perhaps—if I could hear your voice—if you’d say something kind——”

“Had you nothing else to tell me, Palla?”

“No.... What?”

“Then you haven’t changed your attitude?”

“Toward you? I don’t expect to——”

“You know what I mean!”

“Oh. But, Jim, we can’t discuss *that* over the telephone.”

“I suppose not.... Is anything wrong with you, Palla? Your voice sounds so tired——”

“Does it? I don’t know why. Tell me, please, what did you do that unhappy night?”

“I went home.”

“Directly?”

“Yes.”

“I telephoned your house about twelve, and was informed you were not at home.”

“They thought I was asleep. I’m sorry, Palla——”

“I shouldn’t have telephoned so late,” she interrupted, “I’m afraid that it was your mother who answered; and if it was, I received the snub I deserved!”

“Nonsense! It wasn’t meant that way——”

“I’m afraid it was, Jim. It’s quite all right, though. I won’t do it again.... Am I to see you soon?”

“No, not for a while——”

“Are you so busy?”

“There’s no use in my going to you, Palla.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m in love with you,” he said bluntly, “and I’m trying to get over it.”

“I thought we were *friends*, too.”

After a lengthy silence: “You’re right,” he said, “we are.”

She heard his quick, deep breath like a sigh. “Shall I come to-night?”

“I’m expecting some people, Jim—women who desire to establish a Combat Club in Chicago, and they have come on here to consult me.”

“To-morrow night, then?”

“Please.”

“Will you be alone?”

“I expect to be.”

Once more he said: “Palla, is anything worrying you? Are you ill? Is Ilse all right?”

There was a pause, then Palla’s voice, resolutely tranquil. “Everything is all right in the world as long as you are kind to me, Jim. When you’re not, things darken and become queer——”

“Palla!”

“Yes.”

“Listen! This is to serve notice on you. I’m going to make a fight for you.”

After a silence, he heard her sweet, uncertain laughter.

“Jim?”

“Yes, dear.”

“I suppose it would shock you if I made a fight for—*you*!”

He took it as a jest and laughed at her perverse humour. But what she had meant she herself scarcely realised; and she turned away from the telephone, conscious of a vague excitement invading her and of a vaguer consternation, too. For behind the humorous audacity of her words, she seemed to realise there remained something hidden—something she was on the verge of discovering—something indefinable, menacing, grave enough to dismay her and drive from her lips the last traces of the smile which her audacious jest had left there.

The ladies from Chicago were to dine with her; her maid had hooked her gown; orchids from Jim had just arrived, and she was still pinning them to her waist—still happily thrilled by this lovely symbol of their renewed accord, when the bell rang.

It was much too early to expect anybody: she fastened her orchids and started to descend the stairs for a last glance at the table, when, to her astonishment, she saw Angelo Puma in the hall in the act of depositing his card upon the salver extended by the maid.

He looked up and saw her before she could retreat: she made the best of it and continued on down, greeting him with inquiring amiability:

“Miss Dumont, a thousand excuses for this so bold intrusion,” he began, bowing extravagantly at every word. “Only the urgent importance of my errand could possibly atone for a presumption like there never has been in all——”

“Please step into the drawing room, Mr. Puma, if you have something of importance to say.”

He followed her on tiptoe, flashing his magnificent eyes about the place, still wearing over his evening dress the seal overcoat with its gardenia, which was already making him famous on Broadway.

Palla seated herself, wondering a little at the perfumed splendour of her landlord. He sat on the extreme edge of an arm chair, his glossy hat on his knee.

“Miss Dumont,” he said, laying one white-gloved paw across his shirt-front, “you shall behold in me a desolate man!”

“I’m sorry.” She looked at him in utter perplexity.

“What shall you say to me?” he cried. “What just reproaches shall you address to me, Miss Dumont!”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Mr. Puma,” she said, inclined to laugh, “—until you tell me what is your errand.”

“Miss Dumont, I am most unhappy and embarrass. Because you have pay me in advance for that which I am unable to offer you.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Alas! You have pay to me by cheque for six months more rent of my hall.”

“Yes.”

“I have given to you a lease for six months more, and with it an option for a year of renewal.”

“Yes.”

“Miss Dumont, behold me desolate.”

“But why?”

“Because I am force by circumstance over which I have no control to cancel this lease and option, and ask you most respectfully to be so kind as to secure other quarters for your club.”

“But we can’t do that!” exclaimed Palla in dismay.

“I am so very sorry——”

“We can’t do it,” added Palla with decision. “It’s utterly impossible, Mr. Puma. All our meetings are arranged for months in advance; all the details are completed. We could not disarrange the programme adopted. From all over the United States people are invited to come on certain fixed dates. All arrangements have been made; you have my cheque and I have your signed lease. No, we are obliged to hold you to your contract, and I’m very sorry if it inconveniences you.”

Puma’s brilliant eyes became tenderly apprehensive.

“Miss Dumont,” he said in a hushed and confidential voice, “believe me when I venture to say to you that your club should leave for reasons most grave, most serious.”

“What reasons?”

“The others—the Red Flag Club. Who knows what such crazy people might do in anger? They are very angry already. They complain that your club has interfere with them——”

“That is exactly why we’re there, Mr. Puma—to interfere with them, neutralise their propaganda, try to draw the same people who listen to their violent tirades. That is why we’re there, and why we refuse to leave. Ours is a crusade of education. We chose that hall because we desired to make the fight in the very camp of the enemy. And I must tell you plainly that we shall not give up

our lease, and that we shall hold you to it."

The dark blood flooded his heavy features:

"I do not desire to take it to the courts," he said. "I am willing to offer compensation."

"We couldn't accept. Don't you understand, Mr. Puma? We simply must have that particular hall for the Combat Club."

Puma remained perfectly silent for a few moments. There was still, on his thick lips, the suave smile which had been stamped there since his appearance in her house.

But in this man's mind and heart there was growing a sort of dull and ferocious fear—fear of elements already gathering and combining to menace his increasing prosperity.

Sullenly he was aware that this hard-won prosperity was threatened. Always its conditions had been unstable at best, but now the atmospheric pressure was slowly growing, and his sky of promise was not as clear.

Some way, somehow, he must manage to evict these women. Twice Sondheim had warned him. And that evening Sondheim had sent him an ultimatum by Kastner.

And Puma was perfectly aware that Karl Kastner knew enough about him to utterly ruin him in the great Republic which was now giving him a fortune and which had never discovered that his own treacherous mission here was the accomplishment of her ruin.

Puma stood up, heavily, cradling his glossy hat. But his urbane smile became brilliant again and he made Palla an extravagant bow.

"It shall be arrange," he said cheerfully. "I consult my partner—your *friend*, Mr. Skidder! Yes! So shall we arrive at entente."

His large womanish eyes swept the room. Suddenly they were arrested by a photograph of Shotwell Junior—in a silver frame—the only ornament, as yet, in the little drawing room.

And instantly, within Angelo Puma, the venomous instinct was aroused to do injury where it might be done safely and without suspicion of intent.

"Ah," he exclaimed gaily, "my friend, Mr. Shotwell! It is from him, Miss Dumont, you have purchase this so beautiful residence!"

He bent to salute with a fanciful inclination the photograph of the man who had spoken so contemptuously of him the evening previous.

“Mr. Shotwell also adores gaiety,” he said laughingly. “Last night I beheld him at the Palace of Mirrors—and with an attractive young lady of your club, Miss Dumont—the charming young Russian lady with whom you came once to pay me the rent—” He kissed his hand in an ecstasy of recollection. “So beautiful a young lady! So gay were they in their box! Ah, youth! youth! Ah, the happiness and folly when laughter bubbles in our wine!—the magic wine of youth!”

He took his leave, moving lightly to the door, almost grotesque in his elaborate evolutions and adieux.

Palla went slowly upstairs.

The evening paper lay on a table in the living room. She unfolded it mechanically; looked at it but saw no print, merely an unsteady haze of greyish tint on which she could not seem to concentrate.

Marya and Jim ... together.... That was the night he went away angry.... The night he told her he had gone directly home.... But it couldn’t have been.... He couldn’t have lied....

She strove to recollect as she sat there staring at the newspaper.... What was it that beast had said about it?... Of course—*last* night!... Marya and Jim had been together last night.... But where was Vanya?... Oh, yes.... Last night Vanya was away ... in Baltimore.

The paper dropped to her lap; she sat looking straight ahead of her.

What had so shocked her then about Jim and Marya being together? True, she had not supposed them to be on such terms—had not even thought about it....

Yes, she *had* thought about it, scarcely conscious of her own indefinable uneasiness—a memory, perhaps, of that evening when the Russian girl had been at little pains to disguise her interest in this man. And Palla had noticed it—noticed that Marya was seated too near him—noticed that, and the subtle attitude of provocation, and the stealthy evolution of that occult sorcery which one woman instantly divines in another and finds slightly revolting.

Was it merely that memory which had been evoked when Puma’s laughing revelation so oddly chilled her?—the suspected and discovered predilection of this Russian girl for Jim? Or was it something else, something deeper, some sudden and more profound illumination which revealed to her that, in the depths of her, she was afraid?

Afraid? Afraid of what?

Her charming young head sank; the brown eyes stared at the floor.

She was beginning to understand what had chilled her, what she had

unconsciously been afraid of—*her own creed!*—when applied to another woman.

And this was the second time that this creed of hers had risen to confront her, and the second time she had gazed at it, chilled by fear: once, when she had waited for Ilse to return; and now once again.

For now she began to comprehend how ruthless that creed could become when professed by such a girl as Marya Lanois.

She was still seated there when Marya came in, her tiger-red hair in fascinating disorder from the wind, her skin fairly breathing the warm fragrance of exotic youth.

“My Palla! How pale you seem!” she exclaimed, embracing her. “You are quite well? Really? Then I am reassured!”

She went to the mirror and tucked in a burnished strand or two of hair.

“These Chicago ladies—they have not arrived, I see. Am I then so early? For I see that Ilse is not yet here——”

“It is only a quarter to eight,” said Palla, smiling; but the brown eyes were calmly measuring this lithe and warm and lovely thing with green eyes—measuring it intently—taking its measure—taking, for the first time in her life, her measure of any woman.

“Was Vanya’s concert a great success?” she asked.

“Vanya has not yet returned.” She shrugged. “There was nothing in New York papers.”

“I suppose you were very nervous last night,” said Palla.

For a moment Marya continued to arrange her hair by the aid of the mantel mirror, then she turned very lithely and let her green gaze rest full on Palla’s face.

What she might possibly have divined was hidden behind the steady brown eyes that met hers may have determined her attitude and words; for she laughed with frank carelessness and plunged into it all:

“Fancy, Palla, my encountering Jim Shotwell in the Biltmore, and dining with him at that noisy Palace of Mirrors last night! Did he tell you?”

“I haven’t seen him.”

“—Over the telephone, perhaps?”

“No, he did not mention it.”

“Well, it was most amusing. It is the unpremeditated that is delightful. And can you see us in that dreadful place, as gay as a pair of school children? And we must laugh at nothing and find it enchanting—and we must dance amid the hoi polloi and clap our hands for the encore too!——”

A light peal of laughter floated from her lips at the recollections evoked:

“And after! Can you see us, Palla, in Vanya’s studio, too wide awake to go our ways!—and the song I sang at that unearthly hour—the song I sing always when happily excited——”

The bell rang; the first guest had arrived.

CHAPTER XIX

Vanya’s concert had been enough of a success to attract the attention of genuine music-lovers and an impecunious impresario—an irresponsible promoter celebrated for rushing headlong into things and being kicked headlong out of them.

All promising virtuosi had cut their wisdom teeth on him; all had acquired experience and its accompanying toothache; none had acquired wealth until free of this ubiquitous impresario.

His name was Wilding: he seized upon Vanya; and that gentle and disconcerted dreamer offered no resistance.

So Wilding began to haunt Vanya’s apartment at all hours of the day, rushing in with characteristic enthusiasm to discuss the vast campaign of nation-wide concerts which in his mind’s eye were already materialising.

Marya had no faith in him and was becoming very tired of his noise and bustle in the stillness and subdued light which meant home to her, and which this loud, excitable, untidy man was eternally invading.

Always he was shouting at Vanya: “It’s a knock-out! It will go big! big! big! We got ’em started in Baltimore!”—a fact, but none of his doing! “We’ll play Philadelphia next; I’m fixin’ it for you. All you gotta do is go there and the yelling starts. Well, I guess. Some riot, believe *me*!”

Wilding had no money in the beginning. After a while, Vanya had none, or very little; but the impresario wore a new fur coat and spats. And Broadway winked wearily and said: “He’s got another!”—doubtless deeming specification mere redundancy.

Yet, somehow, Wilding did manage to book Vanya in Philadelphia—at a

somewhat distant date, it is true—but it was something with which to begin the promised “nation-wide tour” under the auspices of Dawson B. Wilding.

Marya had money of her own, but trusted none of it in Wilding’s schemes. In fact, she had come to detest him thoroughly, and whenever he was announced she would rise like some beautiful, disgusted feline, which something has disturbed in her dim and favourite corner, and move lithely away to another room. And it almost seemed as though her little, warm, closely-chiselled ears actually flattened with bored annoyance as the din of Wilding’s vociferous greeting to Vanya arose behind her.

One day toward Christmas time, she said to Vanya, in her level, satin-smooth voice:

“You know, *mon ami*, I am tiring rapidly of this great fool who comes shouting and tramping into our home. And when I am annoyed beyond my nerve capacity, I am likely to leave.”

Vanya said gently that he was sorry that he had entered into financial relations with a man who annoyed her, but that it could scarcely be helped now.

He was seated at his piano, not playing, but scoring. And he resumed his composition after he had spoken, his grave, delicate head bent over the ruled sheets, a gold pencil held between his long fingers.

Marya lounged near, watched him. Not for the first time, now, did his sweet temper and gentleness vaguely irritate her—string her nerves a little tighter until they began to vibrate with an indefinable longing to say something to arouse this man—startle him—awaken him to a physical tensity and strength.... Such as Shotwell’s for example....

“Vanya?”

He looked up absently, the beauty of dreams still clouding his eyes.

And suddenly, to her own astonishment, her endurance came to its end. She had never expected to say what she was now going to say to him. She had never dreamed of confession—of enlightening him. And now, all at once, she knew she was going to do it, and that it was a needless and cruel and insane and useless thing to do, for it led her nowhere, and it would leave him in helpless pain.

“Vanya,” she said, “I am in love with Jim Shotwell.”

After a few moments, she turned and slowly crossed the studio. Her hat and coat lay on a chair. She put them on and walked out.

The following morning, Palla, arriving to consult Marya on a matter of the Club’s business, discovered Vanya alone in the studio.

He was lying on the lounge when she entered, and he looked ill, but he rose with all his characteristic grace and charm and led her to a chair, saluting her hand as he seated her.

“Marya has not yet arrived?” she inquired.

His delicate features became very grave and still.

“I thought,” added Palla, “that Marya usually breakfasted at eleven——”

Something in his expression checked her; and she fell silent, fascinated by the deathly whiteness of his face.

“I am sorry to tell you,” he said, in a pleasant and steady voice, “that Marya has not returned.”

“Why—why, I didn’t know she was away——”

“Yesterday she decided. Later she was good enough to telephone from the Hotel Rajah, where, for the present, she expects to remain.”

“Oh, Vanya!” Palla’s involuntary exclamation brought a trace of colour into his cheeks.

He said: “It is not her fault. She was loyal and truthful. One may not control one’s heart.... And if she is in love—well, is she not free to love him?”

“Who—is—it?” asked Palla faintly.

“Mr. Shotwell, it appears.”

In the dead silence, Vanya passed his hand slowly across his temples; let it drop on his knee.

“Freedom above all else,” he said, “—freedom to love, freedom to cease loving, freedom to love anew.... Well ... it is curious—the scheme of things.... Love must remain inexplicable. For there is no analysis. I think there never could be any man who cared as I have cared, as I do care for her....”

He rose, and to Palla he seemed already a trifle stooped;—it may have been his studio coat, which fitted badly.

“But, Vanya dear—” Palla looked at him miserably, conscious of her own keen fears as well as of his sorrow. “Don’t you think she’ll come back? Do you suppose it is really so serious—what she thinks about—Mr. Shotwell?”

He shook his head: “I don’t know.... If it is so, it is so. Freedom is of first importance. Our creed is our creed. We must abide by what we teach and believe.”

“Yes.”

He nodded absently, staring palely into space.

Perhaps his lost gaze evoked the warm-skinned, sunny-haired girl who had gone out of the semi-light of this still place, leaving the void unutterably vast around him. For this had been the lithe thing's silken lair—the slim and supple thing with beryl eyes—here where thick-piled carpets of the East deadened every human movement—where no sound stirred, nor any air—where dull shapes loomed, lacquered and indistinct, and an odour of Chinese lacquer and nard haunted the tinted dusk.

Like one of those lazy, golden, jewelled sea-creatures of irresponsible freedom brought seemed to fill the girl cooler currents arouses a restlessness infernal, Marya's first long breath of freedom subtly excited her.

She had no definite ideas, no plans. She was merely tired of Vanya.

Perhaps her fresh, wholesome contact with Jim had started it—the sense of a clean vitality which had seemed to envelop her like the delicious, half-resented chill of a spring-pool plunge. For the exhilaration possessed her still; and the sudden stimulation which the sense of irresponsible freedom brought seemed to fill the girl with a new vigour.

Foot-loose, heart-loose, her green eyes on the open world where it stretched away into infinite horizons, she paced her new nest in the Hotel Rajah, tingling with subdued excitement, innocent of the faintest regret for what had been.

For a week she lived alone, enjoying the sensation of being hidden, languidly savouring the warm comfort of isolation.

She had not sent for her belongings. She purchased new personal effects, enchanted to be rid of familiar things.

There was no snow. She walked a great deal, moving in unaccustomed sections of the city at all hours, skirting in the early winter dusk the glitter of Christmas preparations along avenues and squares, lunching where she was unlikely to encounter anybody she knew, dining, too, at hazard in unwonted places—restaurants she had never heard of, tea-rooms, odd corners.

Vanya wrote her. She tossed his letters aside, scarcely read. Ilse and Palla wrote her, and telephoned her. She paid them no attention.

The metropolitan jungle fascinated her. She adored her liberty, and looked out of beryl-green eyes across the border of license, where ghosts of the half-world swarmed in no-man's-land.

Conscious that she had been fashioned to trouble man, the knowledge merely left her indefinitely contented, save when she remembered Jim. But that he had checked her drift toward him merely excited her; for she knew she had

been made to trouble such as he; and she had seen his face that night....

Ilse, on her way home to dress—for she was going out somewhere with Estridge—stopped for tea at Palla's house, and found her a little disturbed over an anonymous letter just delivered—a typewritten sheet bluntly telling her to take her friends and get out of the hall where the Combat Club held its public sessions; and warning her of serious trouble if she did not heed this "friendly" advice.

"Pouf!" exclaimed Ilse contemptuously, "I get those, too, and tear them up. People who talk never strike. Are you anxious, darling?"

Palla smiled: "Not a bit—only such cowardice saddens me.... And the days are grey enough...."

"Why do you say that? I think it is a wonderful winter—a beautiful year!"

Palla lifted her brown eyes and let them dwell on the beauty of this clear-skinned, golden-haired girl who had discovered beauty in the aftermath of the world's great tragedy.

Ilse smiled: "Life is good," she said. "This world is all to be done over in the right way. We have it all before us, you and I, Palla, and those who love and understand."

"I am wondering," said Palla, "who understands us. I'm not discouraged, but—there seems to be so much indifference in the world."

"Of course. That is our battle to overcome it."

"Yes. But, dear, there seems to be so much hatred, too, in the world. I thought the war had ended, but everywhere men are still in battle—everywhere men are dying of this fierce hatred that seems to flame up anew across the world; everywhere men fight and slay to gain advantage. None yields, none renounces, none gives. It is as though love were dead on earth."

"Love is being reborn," said Ilse cheerfully. "Birth means pain, always——"

Without warning, a hot flush flooded her face; she averted it as the tea-tray was brought and set on a table before Palla. When her face cooled, she leaned back in her chair, cup in hand, a sort of confused sweetness in her blue eyes.

Palla's heart was beating heavily as she leaned on the table, her cup untasted, her idle fingers crumbing the morsel of biscuit between them.

After a moment she said: "So you have concluded that you care for John Estridge?"

"Yes, I care," said Ilse absently, the same odd, sweet smile curving her cheeks.

“That is—wonderful,” said Palla, not looking at her.

Ilse remained silent, her blue gaze aloof.

A maid came and turned up the lamps, and went away again.

Palla said in a low voice: “Are you—afraid?”

“No.”

They both remained silent until she rose to go. Palla, walking with her to the head of the stairs, holding one of her hands imprisoned, said with an effort: “I am frightened, dear.... I can’t help it.... You will be certain, first, won’t you?——”

“It is as certain as death,” said Ilse in a low, still voice.

Palla shivered; she passed one arm around her; and they stood so for a while. Then Ilse’s arm tightened, and the old gaiety glinted in her sea-blue eyes:

“Is your house in order too, Palla?” she asked. “Turn around, little enigma! There; I can look into those brown eyes now. And I see nothing in them to answer me my question.”

“Do you mean Jim?”

“I do.”

“I haven’t seen him.”

“For how long?”

“Weeks. I don’t know how long it has been——”

“Have you quarrelled?”

“Yes. We seem to. This is quite the most serious one yet.”

“You are not in love with him.”

“Oh, Ilse, I don’t know. He simply can’t understand me. I feel so bruised and tired after a controversy with him. He seems to be so merciless to my opinions—so violent——”

“You poor child.... After all, Palla, freedom also means the liberty to change one’s mind.... If you should care to change yours——”

“I can’t change my inmost convictions.”

“Those—no.”

“I have not changed them. I almost wish I could. But I’ve got to be honest....

And he can’t understand me.”

Ilse smiled and kissed her: “That is scarcely to be wondered at, as you don’t seem to know your own mind. Perhaps when you do he, also, may understand you. Good-bye! I must run——”

Palla watched her to the foot of the stairs; the door closed; the engine of a taxi began to hum.

Her telephone was ringing when she returned to the living room, and the quick leap of her heart averted her of the hope revived.

But it was a strange voice on the wire,—a man’s voice, clear, sinister, tainted with a German accent:

“Iss this Miss Dumont? Yess? Then this I haff to say to you: You shall find yourself in serious trouble if you do not move your foolish club of vimmen out of the vicinity of which you know. We giff you one more chance. So shall you take it or you shall take some consequences! *Goot-night!*”

The instrument clicked in her ear as the unknown threatener hung up, leaving her seated there, astonished, hurt, bewildered.

The man who “hung up on her” stepped out of a saloon on Eighth Avenue and joined two other men on the corner.

The man was Karl Kastner; the other two were Sondheim and Bromberg.

“Get her?” growled the latter, as all three started east.

“Yess. And now we shall see what we shall see. We start the finish now already. All foolishness shall be ended. Now we fix Puma.”

They continued on across the street, clumping along with their overcoat collars turned up, for it had turned bitter cold and the wind was rising.

“You don’t think it’s a plant?” inquired Sondheim, for the third time.

Bromberg blew his red nose on a dirty red handkerchief.

“We’ll plant Puma if he tries any of that,” he said thickly.

Kastner added that he feared investigation more than they did because he had more at stake.

“Dot guy he iss rich like a millionaire,” he added. “Ve make him pay some dammach, too.”

“How’s he going to fire that bunch of women if they got a lease?” demanded Bromberg.

“Who the hell cares how he does it?” grunted Sondheim.

“Sure,” added Kastner; “let him dig up. You buy anybody if you haff sufficient coin. Effery time! Yess. Also! Let him dig down into his pants once. So shall he pay them, these vimmen, to go avay und shut up mit their mischief what they make for us already!”

Sondheim was still muttering about “plants” in the depths of his soiled overcoat-collar, when they arrived at the hall and presented themselves at the door of Puma’s outer office.

A girl took their message. After a while she returned and piloted them out, and up a wide flight of stairs to a door marked, “No admittance.” Here she knocked, and Puma’s voice bade them enter.

Angelo Puma was standing by a desk when they trooped in, keeping their hats on. The room was ventilated and illumined in the daytime only by a very dirty transom giving on a shaft. Otherwise, there were no windows, no outlet to any outer light and air.

Two gas jets caged in wire—obsolete stage dressing-room effects—lighted the room and glimmered on Puma’s polished top-hat and the gold knob of his walking-stick.

As for Puma himself, he glanced up stealthily from the scenario he was reading as he stood by the big desk, but dropped his eyes again, and, opening a drawer, laid away the typed manuscript. Then he pulled out the revolving desk chair and sat down.

“Well?” he inquired, lighting a cigar.

There was an ominous silence among the three men for another moment. Then Puma looked up, puffing his cigar, and Sondheim stepped forward from the group and shook his finger in his face.

“What yah got planted around here for us? Hey?” he demanded in a low, hoarse voice. “Come on now, Puma! What yeh think yeh got on us?” And to Kastner and Bromberg: “Go ahead, boys, look for a dictaphone and them kind of things. And if this wop hollers I’ll do him.”

A ruddy light flickered in Puma’s eyes, but the cool smile lay smoothly on his lips, and he did not even turn his head to watch them as they passed along the walls, sounding, peering, prying, and jerking open the door of the cupboard—the only furniture there except the desk and the chair on which Puma sat.

“What the hell’s the matter with yeh?” snarled Sondheim, suddenly stooping to catch Puma’s eye, which had wandered as though bored by the proceedings.

“Nothing,” said Puma, coolly; “what’s the matter with you, Max?”

Kastner came around beside him and said in his thin, sinister tone:

“You know it vat I got on you, Angelo?”

“I do.”

“So? Also! Vas iss it you do about doze vimmen?”

“They won’t go.”

In Bromberg’s voice sounded an ominous roar: “Don’t hand us nothing like that! You hear what I’m telling you?”

Puma shrugged: “I hand you what I have to hand you. They have the lease. What is there for me to do?”

“Buy ’em off!”

“I try. They will not.”

“You offer ’em enough and they’ll quit!”

“No. They will not. They say they are here to fight you. They laugh at my money. What shall I do?”

“I’ll tell you one thing you’ll do, and do it damn quick!” roared Bromberg. “Hand over that money we need!”

“If you bellow in so loud a manner,” said Puma, “they could hear you in the studio.... How much do you ask for?”

“Two thousand.”

“No.”

“What yeh mean by ‘No’?”

“What I say to you, that I have not two thousand.”

“You lying greaser——”

“I do not lie. I have paid my people and there remains but six hundred dollars in my bank.”

“When do we get the rest?” asked Sondheim, as Puma tossed the packet of bills onto the desk.

“When I make it,” replied Puma tranquilly. “You will understand my receipts are my capital at present. What else I have is engaged already in my new theatre. If you will be patient you shall have what I can spare.”

Bromberg rested both hairy fists on the desk and glared down at Puma.

“Who’s this new guy you got to go in with you? What’s the matter with our getting a jag of his coin?”

“You mean Mr. Pawling?”

“Yeh. Who the hell is that duck what inks his whiskers?”

“A partner.”

“Well, let him shove us ours then.”

“You wish to ruin me?” inquired Puma placidly.

“Not while you’re milkin’,” said Sondheim, showing every yellow fang in a grin.

“Then do not frighten Mr. Pawling out. Already you have scared my other partner, Mr. Skidder, like there never was any rabbits scared. You are foolish. If you are reasonable, I shall make money and you shall have your share. If you are not, then there is no money to give you.”

Sondheim said: “Take a slant at them yellow-backs, Karl.” And Kastner screwed a powerful jeweller’s glass into his eye and began a minute examination of the orange-coloured treasury notes, to find out whether they were marked bills.

Bromberg said heavily: “See here, Angelo, you gotta quit this damned stalling! You gotta get them women out, and do it quick or we’ll blow your dirty barracks into the North River!”

Sondheim began to wag his soiled forefinger again.

“Yeh quit us cold when things was on the fritz. Now, yeh gotta pay. If you wasn’t nothing but a wop skunk yeh’d stand in with us. The way you’re fixed would help us all. But now yeh makin’ money and yeh scared o’ yeh shadow!——”

Bromberg cut in: “And you’ll be outside when the band starts playing. Look what’s doing all over the world! Every country is starting something! You watch Berlin and Rosa Luxemburg and her bunch. Keep your eye peeled, Angy, and see what we and the I. W. W. start in every city of the country!”

Kastner, having satisfied himself that the bills had not been marked, and pocketed his jeweller’s glass, pushed back his lank blond hair.

“Yess,” he said in his icy, incisive voice, “yoost vatch out already! Dot crimson tide it iss rising the vorld all ofer! It shall drown effery aristocrat, effery bourgeois, effery intellectual. It shall be but a red flood ofer all the vorld vere noddings shall live only our peoble off the proletariat!”

“And where the hell will you be then, Angelo?” sneered Bromberg. “By God, we won’t have to ask you for our share of your money then!”

Again Sondheim leaned over him and wagged his nicotine-dyed finger:

“You get the rest of our money! Understand? And you get them women out!—or I tell you we’ll blow you and your joint to Hoboken! Get that?”

“I have understood,” said Puma quietly; but his heavy face was a muddy red now, and he choked a little when he spoke.

“Give us a date and stick to it,” added Bromberg. “Set it yourself. And after that we won’t bother to do any more jawin’. We’ll just attend to business—*your* business, Puma!”

After a long silence, Puma said calmly: “How much you want?”

“Ten thousand,” said Sondheim.

“And them women out of this,” added Bromberg.

“Or ve get you,” ended Kastner in his deadly voice.

Puma lifted his head and looked intently at each one of them in turn. And seemed presently to come to some conclusion.

Kastner forestalled him: “You try it some monkey trick and you try it no more effer again.”

“What’s your date for the cash?” insisted Sondheim.

“February first,” replied Puma quietly.

Kastner wrote it on the back of an envelope.

“Und dese vimmen?” he inquired.

“I’ll get a lawyer——”

“The hell with that stuff!” roared Bromberg. “Get ’em out! Scare ’em out! Jesus Christ! how long d’yeh think we’re going to stand for being hammered by that bunch o’ skirts? They got a lot o’ people sore on us now. The crowd what uster come around is gettin’ leery. And who are these damned women? One of ’em was a White Nun, when they did the business for the Romanoffs. One of ’em fired on the Bolsheviki—that big blond girl with yellow hair, I mean! Wasn’t she one of those damned girl-soldiers? And look what she’s up to now—comin’ over here to talk us off the platform!—the dirty foreigner!”

“Yes,” growled Bromberg, “and there’s that redheaded wench of Vanya’s!—some Grand Duke’s slut, they say, before she quit him for the university to start something else——”

Kastner cut in in his steely voice: “If you do not throw out these women, Puma, we fix them and your hall and you—all at one time, my friend. Also! Iss it then for February the first, our understanding? Or iss it, a little later, the end of all your troubles, Angelo?”

Puma got up, nodded his acceptance of their ultimatum, and opened the door for them.

When they trooped out, under the brick arch, they noticed his splendid limousine waiting, and as they shuffled sullenly away westward, Bromberg, looking back, saw Puma come out and jump lightly into the car.

“Swine!” he snarled, facing the bitter wind once more and shuffling along beside his silent brethren.

Puma went east, then north to the Hotel Rajah, where, in a private room, he was to complete a financial transaction with Alonzo B. Pawling.

Skidder, too, came in at the same time, squinting rapidly at his partner; and together they moved toward the elevator.

The elevator waited a moment more to accommodate a willowy, red-haired girl in furs, whose jade eyes barely rested on Puma’s magnificent black ones as he stepped aside to make way for her with an extravagant bow.

“Some skirt,” murmured Skidder in his ear, as the car shot upward.

Marya left the car at the mezzanine floor: Puma’s eyes were like coals for a moment.

“You know that dame?” inquired Skidder, his eyes fairly snapping.

“No.” He did not add that he had seen her at the Combat Club and knew her to belong to another man. But his black eyes were almost blazing as he stepped from the elevator, for in Marya’s insolent glance he had caught a vague glimmer of fire—merely a green spark, very faint—if, indeed, it had been there at all....

Pawling himself opened the door for them.

“Is it all right? Do we get the parcel?” were his first words.

“It’s a knock-out!” cried Skidder, slapping him on the back. “We got the land, we got the plans, we got the iron, we got the contracts!—Oh, boy!—our dough is in—go look at it and smell it for yourself! So get into the jack, old scout, and ante up, because we break ground Wednesday and there’ll be bills before then, you betcha!”

When the cocktails were brought, Puma swallowed his in a hurry, saying he’d be back in a moment, and bidding Skidder enlighten Mr. Pawling during the interim.

He summoned the elevator, got out at the mezzanine, and walked lightly into the deserted and cloister-like perspective, his shiny hat in his hand.

And saw Marya standing by the marble ramp, looking down at the bustle below.

He stopped not far away. He had made no sound on the velvet carpet. But presently she turned her head and the green eyes met his black ones.

Neither winced. The sheer bulk of the beast and the florid magnificence of its colour seemed to fascinate her.

She had seen him before, and scarcely noted him. She remembered. But the world was duller, then, and the outlook grey. And then, too, her still, green eyes had not yet wandered beyond far horizons, nor had her heart been cut adrift to follow her fancy when the tides stirred it from its mooring—carrying it away, away through deeps or shallows as the currents swerved.

CHAPTER XX

The pale parody on that sacred date which once had symbolised the birth of Christ had come and gone; the ghastly year was nearing its own death—the bloodiest year, for all its final triumph, that the world had ever witnessed—*l'année horrible*!

Nor was the end yet, of all this death and dying: for the Crimson Tide, washing through Russia, eastward, seethed and eddied among the wrecks of empires, lapping Poland's bones, splashing over the charred threshold of the huns, creeping into the Balkans, crawling toward Greece and Italy, menacing Scandinavia, and arousing the stern watchers along the French frontier—the ultimate eastward barrier of human liberty.

And unless, despite the fools who demur, that barrier be based upon the Rhine, that barrier will fall one day.

Even in England, where the captive navies of the anti-Christ now sulked at anchor under England's consecrated guns, some talked glibly of rule by Soviet. All Ireland bristled now, baring its teeth at government; vast armies, disbanding, were becoming dully restless; and armed men, disarming, began to wonder what now might be their destiny and what the destiny of the world they fought for.

And everywhere, among all peoples, swarmed the stealthy agents of the Red Apocalypse, whispering discontent, hinting treasons, stirring the unhappy to sullen anger, inciting the simple-minded to insanity, the ignorant to revolution. For four years it had been a battle between Light and Night; and now there threatened to be joined in battle the uttermost forces of Evolution and Chaos—the spiritual Armageddon at last, where Life and Light and Order must fight a final fight with Degeneracy, Darkness and Death.

And always, everywhere, that hell-born Crimson Tide seemed to be rising. All newspapers were full of it, sounding the universal alarm. And Civilisation merely stared at the scarlet flood—gawked stupidly and unstirring—while the far clamour of massacre throughout Russia grew suddenly to a crashing discord in Berlin, shaking the whole world with brazen dissonance.

Like the first ominous puff before the tempest, the deadly breath of the Black Death—called “influenza,” but known of old among the verminous myriads of the East—swept over the earth from East to West. Millions died; millions were yet to perish of it; yet the dazed world, still half blind with blood and smoke, sat helpless and unstirring, barring no gates to this pestilence that stalked the stricken earth at noon-day.

New York, partly paralysed by sacrifice and the blood-sucking antics of half-crazed congressmen, gorged by six years feeding after decades of starvation, welcomed the incoming soldiers in a bewildered sort of way, making either an idiot’s din of dissonance or gaping in stupid silence as the huge troop-ships swept up the bay.

The battle fleet arrived—the home squadron and the “th battle squadron”—and lay towering along the Hudson, while officers and jackies swarmed the streets—streets now thronged by wounded, too—pallid cripples in olive drab, limping along slowly beneath lowering skies, with their citations and crosses and ribbons and wound chevrons in glinting gold under the relighted lustres of the metropolis.

So the false mockery of Christmas came to the city—a forced festival, unutterably sad, for all that the end of the war was subject of thanks in every church and synagogue. And so the mystic feast ended, scarcely heeded amid the slow, half-crippled groping for financial readjustment in the teeth of a snarling and vindictive Congress, mean in its envy, meaner in revenge—a domestic brand of sectional Bolsheviki as dirty and degenerate as any anarchist in all Russia.

The President had sailed away—(*Slava! Slava! Nechevo!*—and the newspapers were preparing to tell their disillusioned public all about it, if permitted.

And so dawned the New Year over the spreading crimson flood, flecking the mounting tide with brighter scarlet as it crept ever westward, ever wider, across a wounded world.

Palla had not seen Jim for a very long time now. Christmas passed, bringing neither gift nor message, although she had sent him a little remembrance—*The Divine Pantheon*, by an unfrocked Anglican clergyman, one Loxon Fettars, recently under detention pending investigation concerning an alleged multiplicity of wives.

The New Year brought no greeting from him, either; nobody she knew had seen him, and her pride had revolted at writing him after she had telephoned and left a message at his club—her usual concession after a stormy parting.

And there was another matter that was causing her a constantly increasing unrest—she had not seen Marya for many a day.

Quiet grief for what now appeared to be a friendship ended—at other times a tingle of bitterness that he had let it end so relentlessly—and sometimes, at night, the secret dread—eternally buried yet perennially resurrected—the still, hidden, ever-living fear of Marya; these the girl knew, now, as part of life.

And went on, steadily, with her life's business, as though moving toward a dark horizon where clouds towered gradually higher, reflecting the glimmer of unseen lightning.

Somehow, lately, a vague sensation of impending trouble had invaded her; and she never entirely shook it off, even in her lighter moods, when there was gay company around her; or in the warm flush of optimistic propaganda work; or in the increasingly exciting sessions of the Combat Club, now interrupted nightly by fierce outbreaks from emissaries of the Red Flag Club, who were there to make mischief.

Also, there had been an innovation established among her company of moderate socialists; a corps of missionary speakers, who volunteered on certain nights to speak from the classic soap-box on street corners, urging the propaganda of their panacea, the Law of Love and Service.

Twice already, despite her natural timidity and dread of public speaking, Palla had faced idle, half-curious, half sneering crowds just east or west of Broadway; had struggled through with what she had come to say; had gently replied to heckling, blushed under insult, stood trembling by her guns to the end.

Ilse was more convincing, more popular with her gay insouciance and infectious laughter, and her unexpected and enchanting flashes of militancy, which always interested the crowd.

And always, after these soap-box efforts, both Palla and Ilse were insulted over the telephone by unknown men. Their mail, also, invariably contained abusive or threatening letters, and sometimes vile ones; and Estridge purchased pistols for them both and exacted pledges that they carry them at night.

On the evening selected for Palla's third essay in street oratory, she slipped her pistol into her muff and set out alone, not waiting for Ilse, who, with John Estridge, was to have met her after dinner at her house, and, as usual, accompany her to the place selected.

But they knew where she was to speak, and she did not doubt they would turn up sooner or later at the rendezvous.

All that day the dull, foreboding feeling had been assailing her at intervals, and she had been unable to free herself entirely from the vague depression.

The day had been grey; when she left the house a drizzle had begun to wet the flagstones, and every lamp-post was now hooded with ghostly iridescence.

She walked because she had need of exercise, not even deigning to unfurl her umbrella against the mist which spun silvery ovals over every electric globe along Fifth Avenue, and now shrouded every building above the fourth story in a cottony ocean of fog.

When finally she turned westward, the dark obscurity of the cross-street seemed to stretch away into infinite night and she hurried a little, scarcely realising why.

There did not seem to be a soul in sight—she noticed that—yet suddenly, halfway down the street, she discovered a man walking at her elbow, his rubber-shod feet making no sound on the wet walk.

Palla had never before been annoyed by such attentions in New York, yet she supposed it must be the reason for the man's insolence.

She hastened her steps; he moved as swiftly.

"Look here," he said, "I know who you are, and where you're going. And we've stood just about enough from you and your friends."

In the quick revulsion from annoyance and disgust to a very lively flash of fright, Palla involuntarily slackened her pace and widened the distance between her and this unknown.

"You better right-about-face and go home!" he said quietly. "You talk too damn much with your face. And we're going to stop you. See?"

At that her flash of fear turned to anger:

"Try it," she said hotly; and hurried on, her hand clutching the pistol in her wet muff, her eyes fixed on the unknown man.

"I've a mind to dust you good and plenty right here," he said. "Quit your running, now, and beat it back again—" His vise-like grip was on her left arm, almost jerking her off her feet; and the next moment she struck him with her loaded pistol full in the face.

As he veered away, she saw the seam open from his cheek bone to his chin—saw the white face suddenly painted with wet scarlet.

The sight of the blood made her sick, but she kept her pistol levelled, backing away westward all the while.

There was an iron railing near; he went over and leaned against it as though stupefied.

And all the while she continued to retreat until, behind her, his dim shape merged into the foggy dark.

Then Palla turned and ran. And she was still breathing fast and unevenly when she came to that perfect blossom of vulgarity and apotheosis of all American sham—Broadway—where in the raw glare from a million lights the senseless crowds swept north and south.

And here, where Jew-manager and gentile ruled the histrionic destiny of the United States—here where art, letters, service, industry, business had each developed its own species of human prostitute—two muddy-brained torrents of humanity poured in opposite directions, crowding, shoving, shuffling along in the endless, hopeless Hunt for Happiness.

She had made, in the beginning of her street-corner career, arrangements with a neighbouring boot-black to furnish one soap-box on demand at a quarter of a dollar rent for every evening.

She extracted the quarter from her purse and paid the boy; carried the soap-box herself to the curb; and, with that invariable access of fright which attacked her at such moments, mounted it to face the first few people who halted out of curiosity to see what else she meant to do.

Columns of passing umbrellas hid her so that not many people noticed her; but gradually that perennial audience of shabby opportunists which always gathers anywhere from nowhere, ringed her soap-box. And Palla began to speak in the drizzling rain.

For some time there were no interruptions, no jeers, no doubtful pleasantries. But when it became more plain to the increasing crowd that this smartly though simply gowned young woman had come to Broadway in the rain for the purpose of protesting against all forms of violence, including the right of the working people to strike, ugly remarks became audible, and now and then a menacing word was flung at her, or some clenched hand insulted her and amid a restless murmur growing rougher all the time.

Once, to prove her point out of the mouth of the proletariat itself, she quoted from Rosa Luxemburg; and a well-dressed man shouldered his way toward her and in a low voice gave her the lie.

The painful colour dyed her face, but she went on calmly, explaining the different degrees and extremes of socialism, revealing how the abused term

had been used as camouflage by the party committed to the utter annihilation of everything worth living for.

And again, to prove her point, she quoted:

“Socialism does not mean the convening of Parliaments and the enactment of laws; it means the overthrow of the ruling classes with all the brutality at the disposal of the proletariat.”

The same well-dressed man interrupted again:

“Say, who pays you to come here and hand out that Wall Street stuff?”

“Nobody pays me,” she replied patiently.

“All right, then, if that’s true why don’t you tell us something about the interests and the profiteers and all them dirty games the capitalists is rigging up? Tell us about the guy who wants us to pay eight cents to ride on his damned cars! Tell us about the geezers who soak us for food and coal and clothes and rent!

“You stand there chirping to us about Love and Service and how we oughta give. *Give!* Jesus!—we ain’t got anything left to give. They ain’t anything to give our wives or our children,—no, nor there ain’t enough left to feed our own faces or pay for a patch on our pants! *Give?* Hell! The interests *took* it. And you stand there twittering about Love and Service! We oughta serve ’em a brick on the neck and love ’em with a black-jack!”

“How far would that get you?” asked Palla gently.

“As far as their pants-pockets anyway!”

“And when you empty those, who is to employ and pay you?”

“Don’t worry,” he sneered, “we’ll do the employing after that.”

“And will your employees do to you some day what you did to your employers with a black-jack?”

The crowd laughed, but her heckler shook his fist at her and yelled:

“Ain’t I telling you that we’ll be sitting in these damn gold-plated houses and payin’ wages to these here fat millionaires for blackin’ our shoes?”

“You mean that when Bolshevism rules there are to be rich and poor just the same as at present?”

Again the crowd laughed.

“All right!” bawled the man, waving both arms above his head, “—yes, I do mean it! It will be our turn then. Why not? What do we want to split fifty-fifty

with them soft, fat millionaires for? Nix on that stuff! It will be hog-killing time, and you can bet your thousand-dollar wrist watch, Miss, that there'll be some killin' in little old New York!"

He had backed out of the circle and disappeared in the crowd before Palla could attempt further reasoning with him. So she merely shook her head in gentle disapproval and dissent:

"What is the use," she said, "of exchanging one form of tyranny for another? Why destroy the autocracy of the capitalist and erect on its ruins the autocracy of the worker?

"How can class distinctions be eradicated by fanning class-hatred? In a battle against all dictators, why proclaim dictatorship—even of the proletariat?

"All oppression is hateful, whether exercised by God or man—whether the oppressor be that murderous, stupid, treacherous, tyrannical bully in the Old Testament, miscalled God, or whether the oppressor be the proletariat which screamed for the blood of Jesus Christ and got it!

"Free heart, free mind, free soul!—anything less means servitude, not service—hatred, not love!"

A man in the outskirts of the crowd shouted: "Say, you're some rag-chewer, little girl! Go to it!"

She laughed, then glanced at her wrist watch.

There were a few more words she might say before the time she allowed herself had expired, and she found courage to go on, striving to explain to the shifting knot of people that the battle which now threatened civilisation was the terrible and final fight between Order and Disorder and that, under inexorable laws which could never change, order meant life and survival; disorder chaos and death for all living things.

A few cheered her as she bade them good-night, picked up her soap-box and carried it back to her boot-black friend, who inhabited a shack built against the family-entrance side of a saloon.

She was surprised that Ilse and John Estridge had not appeared—could scarcely understand it, as she made her way toward a taxicab.

For, in view of the startling occurrence earlier in the evening, and the non-appearance of Ilse and Estridge, Palla had decided to return in a taxi.

The incident—the boldness of the unknown man and vicious brutality of his attitude, and also a sickening recollection of her own action and his bloody face—had really shocked her, even more than she was aware of at the time.

She felt tired and strained, and a trifle faint now, where she lay back, swaying

there on her seat, her pistol clutched inside her muff, as the ramshackle vehicle lurched its noisy way eastward. And always that dull sense of something sinister impending—that indefinable apprehension—remained with her. And she gazed darkly out on the dark streets, possessed by a melancholy which she did not attempt to analyse.

Yet, partly it came from the ruptured comradeship which always haunted her mind, partly because of Ilse and the uncertainty of what might happen to her—may have happened already for all Palla knew—and partly because—although she did not realise it—in the profound deeps of her girl's being she was vaguely conscious of something latent which seemed to have lain hidden there for a long, long time—something inert, inexorable, indestructible, which, if it ever stirred from its intense stillness, must be reckoned with in years to come.

She made no effort to comprehend what this thing might be—if, indeed, it really existed—no pains to analyse it or to meditate over the vague indications of its presence.

She seemed merely to be aware of something indefinable concealed in the uttermost depths of her.

It was Doubt, unborn.

The taxi drew up before her house. Rain was falling heavily, as she ran up the steps—a cold rain through which a few wet snowflakes slanted.

Her maid heard the rattle of her night-key and came to relieve her of her wet things, and to say that Miss Westgard had telephoned and had left a number to be called as soon as Miss Dumont returned.

The slip of paper bore John Estridge's telephone number and Palla seated herself at her desk and called it.

Almost immediately she heard Ilse's voice on the wire.

"What is the matter, dear?" inquired Palla with the slightest shiver of that premonition which had haunted her all day.

But Ilse's voice was cheerful: "We were so sorry not to go with you this evening, darling, but Jack is feeling so queer that he's turned in and I've sent for a physician."

"Shall I come around?" asked Palla.

"Oh, no," replied Ilse calmly, "but I've an idea Jack may need a nurse—perhaps two."

"What is it?" faltered Palla.

"I don't know. But he is running a high temperature and he says that it feels as

though something were wrong with his appendix.

“You see Jack is almost a physician himself, so if it really is acute appendicitis we must know as soon as possible.”

“Is there *anything* I could do?” pleaded Palla. “Darling, I do so want to be of use if——”

“I’ll let you know, dear. There isn’t anything so far.”

“Are you going to stay there to-night?”

“Of course,” replied Ilse calmly. “Tell me, Palla, how did the soap-box arguments go?”

“Not very well. I was heckled. I’m such a wretched public speaker, Ilse;—I can never remember what rejoinders to make until it’s too late.”

She did not mention her encounter with the unknown man; Ilse had enough to occupy her.

They chatted a few moments longer, then Ilse promised to call her if necessary, and said good-night.

A little after midnight Palla’s telephone rang beside her bed and she started upright with a pang of fear and groped for the instrument.

“Jack is seriously ill,” came the level voice of Ilse. “We have taken him to the Memorial Hospital in one of their ambulances.”

“W—what is it?” asked Palla.

“They say it is pneumonia.”

“Oh, Ilse!——”

“I’m not afraid. Jack is in magnificent physical condition. He is too splendid not to win the fight.... And I shall be with him.... I shall not let him lose.”

“Tell me what I can do, darling!”

“Nothing—except love us both.”

“I do—I do indeed——”

“Both, Palla!”

“Y—yes.”

“*Do you understand?*”

“Oh, I—I think I do. And I do love you—love you both—devotedly——”

“You must, *now*.... I am going home to get some things. Then I shall go to the

hospital. You can call me there until he is convalescent."

"Will they let you stay there?"

"I have volunteered for general work. They are terribly short-handed and they are glad to have me."

"I'll come to-morrow," said Palla.

"No. Wait.... Good-night, my darling."

CHAPTER XXI

As a mischievous caricaturist, in the beginning, draws a fairly good portrait of his victim and then gradually habituates his public to a series of progressively exaggerated extravagances, so progressed the programme of the Bolsheviki in America, revealing little by little their final conception of liberty and equality in the bloody and distorted monster which they had now evolved, and which they publicly owned as their ideal emblem.

In the Red Flag Club, Sondheim shouted that a Red Republic was impossible because it admitted on an equality the rich and well-to-do.

Karl Kastner, more cynical, coolly preached the autocracy of the worker; told his listeners frankly that there would always be masters and servants in the world, and asked them which they preferred to be.

With the new year came sporadic symptoms of unrest;—strikes, unwarranted confiscations by Government, increasingly bad service in public utilities controlled by Government, loose talk in a contemptible Congress, looser gabble among those who witlessly lent themselves to German or Bolshevik propaganda—or both—by repeating stories of alleged differences between America and England, America and France, America and Italy.

The hen-brained—a small minority—misbehaved as usual whenever the opportunity came to do the wrong thing; the meanest and most contemptible partisanship since the shameful era of the carpet bagger prevailed in a section of the Republic where the traditions of great men and great deeds had led the nation to expect nobler things.

For the same old hydra seemed to be still alive on earth, lifting, by turns, its separate heads of envy, intolerance, bigotry and greed. Ignorance, robed with authority, legally robbed those comfortably off.

The bleat of the pacifist was heard in the land. Those who had once chanted in sanctimonious chorus, "He kept us out of war," now sang sentimental hymns invoking mercy and forgiveness for the crucifiers of children and the rapers of

women, who licked their lips furtively and leered at the imbecile choir. Representatives of a great electorate vaunted their patriotism and proudly repeated: “We forced him into war!” Whereas they themselves had been kicked headlong into it by a press and public at the end of its martyred patience.

There appeared to be, so far, no business revival. Prosperity was penalised, taxed to the verge of blackmail, constantly suspected and admonished; and the Congressional Bolsheviki were gradually breaking the neck of legitimate enterprise everywhere throughout the Republic.

And everywhere over the world the crimson tide crept almost imperceptibly a little higher every day.

Toward the middle of January the fever which had burnt John Estridge for a week fell a degree or two.

Palla, who had called twice a day at the Memorial Hospital, was seated that morning in a little room near the disinfecting plant, talking to Ilse, who had just laid aside her mask.

“You look rather ill yourself,” said Ilse in her cheery, even voice. “Is anything worrying you, darling?”

“Yes.... You are.”

“I!” exclaimed the girl, really astonished. “Why?”

“Sometimes,” murmured Palla, “my anxiety makes me almost sick.”

“Anxiety about *me*!——”

“You know why,” whispered Palla.

A bright flush stained Ilse’s face: she said calmly:

“But our creed is broad enough to include all things beautiful and good.”

Palla shrank as though she had been struck, and sat staring out of the narrow window.

Ilse lifted a basket of soiled linen and carried it away. When, presently, she returned to take away another basket, she inquired whether Palla had made up her quarrel with Jim Shotwell, and Palla shook her head.

“Do you really suppose Marya has made mischief between you?” asked Ilse curiously.

“Oh, I don’t know, Ilse,” said the girl listlessly. “I don’t know what it is that seems to be so wrong with the world—with everybody—with me——”

She rose nervously, bade Ilse adieu, and went out without turning her head—perhaps because her brown eyes had suddenly blurred with tears.

Half way to Red Cross headquarters she passed the Hotel Rajah. And why she did it she had no very clear idea, but she turned abruptly and entered the gorgeous lobby, went to the desk, and sent up her name to Marya Lanois.

It appeared, presently, that Miss Lanois was at home and would receive her in her apartment.

The accolade was perfunctory: Palla's first glance informed her that Marya had grown a trifle more svelte since they had met—more brilliant in her distinctive coloration. There was a tawny beauty about the girl that almost blazed from her hair and delicately sanguine skin and lips.

They seated themselves, and Marya lighted the cigarette which Palla had refused; and they fell into the animated, gossiping conversation characteristic of such reunions.

"Vanya?" repeated Marya, smiling, "no, I have not seen him. That is quite finished, you see. But I hope he is well. Do you happen to know?"

"He seems—changed. But he is working hard, which is always best for the unhappy. And he and his somewhat vociferous friend, Mr. Wilding, are very busy preparing for their Philadelphia concert."

"Wilding," repeated Marya, as though swallowing something distasteful. "He was the last straw! But tell me, Palla, what are you doing these jolly days of the new year?"

"Nothing.... Red Cross, canteen, club—and recently I go twice a day to the Memorial Hospital."

"Why?"

"John Estridge is ill there."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Pneumonia."

"Oh. I am so sorry for Ilse!——" Her eyes rested intently on Palla's for a moment; then she smiled subtly, as though sharing with Palla some occult understanding.

Palla's face whitened a little: "I want to ask you a question, Marya.... You know our belief—concerning life in general.... Tell me—since your separation from Vanya, do you still believe in that creed?"

"Do I still believe in my own personal liberty to do as I choose? Of course."

“From the moral side?”

“Moral!” mocked Marya, “—What are morals? Artificial conventions accidentally established! Haphazard folkways of ancient peoples whose very origin has been forgotten! What is moral in India is immoral in England: what is right in China is wrong in America. It’s purely a matter of local folkways—racial customs—as to whether one is or is not immoral.

“Ethics apply to the Greek *Ethos*; morals to the Latin *Mores—moeurs* in French, *sitte* in German, *custom* in English;—and all mean practically the same thing—metaphysical hair-splitters to the contrary—which is simply this: all beliefs are local, and local customs or morals are the result. Therefore, they don’t worry me.”

Palla sat with her troubled eyes on the careless, garrulous, half-smiling Russian girl, and trying to follow with an immature mind the half-baked philosophy offered for her consumption.

She said hesitatingly, almost shyly: “I’ve wondered a little, Marya, how it ever happened that such an institution as marriage became practically universal——”

“Marriage isn’t an institution,” exclaimed Marya smilingly. “The family, which existed long before marriage, is the institution, because it has a definite structure which marriage hasn’t.

“Marriage always has been merely a locally varying mode of sex association. No laws can control it. Local rules merely try to regulate the various manners of entering into a marital state, the obligations and personal rights of the sexes involved. What really controls two people who have entered into such a relation is local opinion——”

She snapped her fingers and tossed aside her cigarette: “You and I happen to be, locally, in the minority with our opinions, that’s all.”

Palla rose and walked slowly to the door. “Have you seen Jim recently?” she managed to say carelessly.

Marya waited for her to turn before replying: “Haven’t *you* seen him?” she asked with the leisurely malice of certainty.

“No, not for a long while,” replied Palla, facing with a painful flush this miserable crisis to which her candour had finally committed her. “We had a little difference.... Have you seen him lately?”

Marya’s sympathy flickered swift as a dagger:

“What a shame for him to behave so childishly!” she cried. “I shall scold him soundly. He’s like an infant—that boy—the way he sulks if you deny him

anything—” She checked herself, laughed in a confused way which confessed and defied.

Palla’s fixed smile was still stamped on her rigid lips as she made her adieux. Then she went out with death in her heart.

At the Red Cross his mother exchanged a few words with her at intervals, as usual, during the séance.

The conversation drifted toward the subject of religious orders in Russia, and Mrs. Shotwell asked her how it was that she came to begin a novitiate in a country where Catholic orders had, she understood, been forbidden permission to establish themselves in the realm of the Greek church.

Palla explained in her sweet, colourless voice that the Czar had permitted certain religious orders to establish themselves—very few, however,—the number of nuns of all orders not exceeding five hundred. Also she explained that they were forbidden to make converts from the orthodox religion, which was why the Empress had sternly refused the pleading of the little Grand Duchess.

“I do not think,” added Palla, “that the Bolsheviki have left any Catholic nuns in Russia, unless perhaps they have spared the Sisters of Mercy. But I hear that non-cloistered orders like the Dominicans, and cloistered orders such as the Carmelites and Ursulines have been driven away.... I don’t know whether this is true.”

Mrs. Shotwell, her eyes on her flying needle, said casually: “Have you never felt the desire to reconsider—to return to your novitiate?”

The girl, bending low over her work, drew a deep, still breath.

“Yes,” she said, “it has occurred to me.”

“Does it still appeal to you at times?”

The girl lifted her honest eyes: “In life there are moments when any refuge appeals.”

“Refuge from what?” asked Helen quietly.

Palla did not evade the question: “From the unkindness of life,” she said. “But I have concluded that such a motive for cloistered life is a cowardly one.”

“Was that your motive when you took the white veil?”

“No, not then.... It seemed to be an overwhelming need for service and adoration.... It’s strange how faiths change though need remains.”

“You still feel that need?”

“Of course,” said the girl simply.

“I see. Your clubs and other service give you what you require to satisfy you and make you happy and contented.”

As Palla made no reply, Helen glanced at her askance; and caught a fleeting glimpse of tragedy in this girl’s still face—the face of a cloistered nun burnt white—purged utterly of all save the mystic passion of the spirit.

The face altered immediately, and colour came into it; and her slender hands were steady as she turned her bandage and cut off the thread.

What thoughts concerning this girl were in her mind, Helen could neither entirely comprehend nor analyse. At moments a hot hatred for the girl passed over her like flame—anger because of what she was doing to her only son.

For Jim had changed; and it was love for this woman that had changed him—which had made of him the silent, listless man whose grey face haunted his mother’s dreams.

That he, dissipating all her hopes of him, had fallen in love with Palla Dumont was enough unhappiness, it seemed; but that this girl should have found it possible to refuse him—that seemed to Helen a monstrous thing.

And even were Jim able to forget the girl and free himself from this exasperating unhappiness which almost maddened his mother, still she must always afterward remember with bitterness the girl who had rejected her only son.

Not since Palla had telephoned on that unfortunate night had she or Helen ever mentioned Jim. The mother, expecting his obsession to wear itself out, had been only too glad to approve the rupture.

But recently, at moments, her courage had weakened when, evening after evening, she had watched her son where he sat so silent, listless, his eyes dull and remote and the book forgotten on his knees.

A steady resentment for all this change in her son possessed Helen, varied by flashes of impulse to seize Palla and shake her into comprehension of her responsibility—of her astounding stupidity, perhaps.

Not that she wanted her for a daughter-in-law. She wanted Elorn. But now she was beginning to understand that it never would be Elorn Sharrow. And—save when the change in Jim worried her too deeply—she remained obstinately determined that he should not bring this girl into the Shotwell family.

And the amazing paradox was revealed in the fact that Palla fascinated her; that she believed her to be as fine as she was perverse; as honest as she was beautiful; as spiritually chaste as she knew her to be mentally and bodily

untainted by anything ignoble.

This, and because Palla was the woman to whom her son's unhappiness was wholly due, combined to exercise an uncanny fascination on Helen, so that she experienced a constant and haunting desire to be near the girl, where she could see her and hear her voice.

At moments, even, she experienced a vague desire to intervene—do something to mitigate Jim's misery—yet realising all the while she did not desire Palla to relent.

As for Palla, she was becoming too deeply worried over the darkening aspects of life to care what Helen thought, even if she had divined the occult trend of her mind toward herself.

One thing after another seemed to crowd more threateningly upon her;—Jim's absence, Marya's attitude, and the certainty, now, that she saw Jim;—and then the grave illness of John Estridge and her apprehensions regarding Ilse; and the increasing difficulties of club problems; and the brutality and hatred which were becoming daily more noticeable in the opposition which she and Ilse were encountering.

After a tiresome day, Palla left a new Hostess House which she had aided to establish, and took a Fifth Avenue bus, too weary to walk home.

The day had been clear and sunny, and she wondered dully why it had left with her the impression of grey skies.

Dusk came before she arrived at her house. She went into her unlighted living room, and threw herself on the lounge, lying with eyes closed and the back of one gloved hand across her temples.

When a servant came to turn up the lamp, Palla had bitten her lip till the blood flecked her white glove. She sat up, declined to have tea, and, after the maid had departed, she remained seated, her teeth busy with her under lip again, her eyes fixed on space.

After a long while her eyes swerved to note the clock and what its gilt hands indicated.

And she seemed to arrive at a conclusion, for she went to her bedroom, drew a bath, and rang for her maid.

"I want my rose evening gown," she said. "It needs a stitch or two where I tore it dancing."

At six, not being dressed yet, she put on a belted chamber robe and trotted into the living room, as confidently as though she had no doubts concerning what she was about to do.

It seemed to take a long while for the operator to make the connection, and Palla's hand trembled a little where it held the receiver tightly against her ear. When, presently, a servant answered:

"Please say to him that a client wishes to speak to him regarding an investment."

Finally she heard his voice saying: "This is Mr. James Shotwell Junior; who is it wishes to speak to me?"

"A client," she faltered, "—who desires to—to participate with you in some plan for the purpose of—of improving our mutual relationship."

"Palla." She could scarcely hear his voice.

"I—I'm so unhappy, Jim. Could you come to-night?"

He made no answer.

"I suppose you haven't heard that Jack Estridge is very ill?" she added.

"No. What is the trouble?"

"Pneumonia. He's a little better to-night."

She heard him utter: "That's terrible. That's a bad business." Then to her: "Where is he?"

She told him. He said he'd call at the hospital. But he said nothing about seeing her.

"I wondered," came her wistful voice, "whether, perhaps, you would dine here alone with me this evening."

"Why do you ask me?"

"Because—I—our last quarrel was so bitter—and I feel the hurt of it yet. It hurts even physically, Jim."

"I did not mean to do such a thing to you."

"No, I know you didn't. But that numb sort of pain is always there. I can't seem to get rid of it, no matter what I do."

"Are you very busy still?"

"Yes.... I saw—Marya—to-day."

"Is that unusual?" he asked indifferently.

"Yes. I haven't seen her since—since she and Vanya separated."

“Oh! Have they separated?” he asked with such unfeigned surprise that the girl’s heart leaped wildly.

“Didn’t you know it? Didn’t Marya tell you?” she asked shivering with happiness.

“I haven’t seen her since I saw you,” he replied.

Palla’s right hand flew to her breast and rested there while she strove to control her voice. Then:

“Please, Jim, let us forgive and break bread again together. I—” she drew a deep, unsteady breath—“I can’t tell you how our separation has made me feel. I don’t quite know what it’s done to me, either. Perhaps I can understand if I see you—if I could only see you again——”

There ensued a silence so protracted that a shaft of fear struck through her. Then his voice, pleasantly collected:

“I’ll be around in a few minutes.”

She was scared speechless when the bell rang—when she heard his unhurried step on the stair.

Before he was announced by the maid, however, she had understood one problem in the scheme of things—realised it as she rose from the lounge and held out her slender hand.

He took it and kept it. The maid retired.

“Well, Palla,” he said.

“Well,” she said, rather breathlessly, “—I know now.”

His voice and face seemed amiable and lifeless; his eyes, too, remained dull and incurious; but he said: “I don’t think I understand. What is it you know?”

“Shall I tell you?”

“If you wish.”

His pleasant, listless manner chilled her; she hesitated, then turned away, withdrawing her hand.

When she had seated herself on the sofa he dropped down beside her in his old place. She lighted a cigarette for him.

“Tell me about poor old Jack,” he said in a low voice.

Their dinner was a pleasant but subdued affair. Afterward she played for him—interrupted once by a telephone call from Ilse, who said that John’s

temperature had risen a degree and the only thing to do was to watch him every second. But she refused Palla's offer to join her at the hospital, saying that she and the night nurse were sufficient; and the girl went slowly back to the piano.

But, somehow, even that seemed too far away from her lover—or the man who once had been her avowed lover. And after idling-with the keys for a few minutes she came back to the lounge where he was seated.

He looked up from his revery: "This is most comfortable, Palla," he said with a slight smile.

"Do you like it?"

"Of course."

"You need not go away at all—if it pleases you." Her voice was so indistinct that for a moment he did not comprehend what she had said. Then he turned and looked at her. Both were pale enough now.

"That is what—what I was going to tell you," she said. "Is it too late?"

"Too late!"

"To say that I am—in love with you."

He flushed heavily and looked at her in a dazed way.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I mean—if you want me—I am—am not afraid any more——"

They had both risen instinctively, as though to face something vital. She said:

"Don't ask me to submit to any degrading ceremony.... I love you enough."

He said slowly: "Do you realise what you say? You are crazy! You and your socialist friends pretend to be fighting anarchy. You preach against Bolshevism! You warn the world that the Crimson Tide is rising. And every word you utter swells it! *You* are the anarchists yourselves! You are the Bolsheviki of the world! You come bringing disorder where there is order; you substitute unproven theory for proven practice!

"Like the hun, you come to impose your will on a world already content with its own God and its own belief! And that is autocracy; and autocracy is what you say you oppose!

"I tell you and your friends that it was not wolves that were pupped in the sand of the shaggy Prussian forests when the first Hohenzollern was dropped. It was swine! Swine were farrowed;—not even *sanglier*, but decadent domestic swine;—when Wilhelm and his degenerate litter came out to root up Europe!

And *they* were the first real Bolsheviki!”

He turned and began to stride to and fro; his pale, sunken face deeply shadowed, his hands clenching and unclenching.

“What in God’s name,” he said fiercely, “are women like you doing to us! What do you suppose happens to such a man as I when the girl he loves tells him she cares only to be his mistress! What hope is there left in him?—what sense, what understanding, what faith?

“You don’t have to tell me that the Crimson Tide is rising. I saw it in the Argonne. I wish to God I were back there and the hun was still resisting. I wish I had never lived to come back here and see what demoralisation is threatening my own country from that cursed germ of wilful degeneracy born in the Prussian twilight, fed in Russian desolation, infecting the whole world——”

His voice died in his throat; he walked swiftly past her, turned at the threshold:

“I’ve known three of you,” he said, “—you and Ilse and Marya. I’ve seen a lot of your associates and acquaintances who profess your views. And I’ve seen enough.”

He hesitated; then when he could control his voice again:

“It’s bad enough when a woman refuses marriage to a man she does not love. That man is going to be unhappy. But have you any idea what happens to him when the girl he loves, and who says she cares for him, refuses marriage?

“It was terrible even when you cared for me only a little. But—but now—do you know what I think of your creed? I hate it as you hated the beasts who slew your friend! Damn your creed! To hell with it!”

She covered her face with both hands: there was a noise like thunder in her brain.

She heard the door close sharply in the hall below.

This was the end.

CHAPTER XXII

She felt a trifle weak. In her ears there lingered a dull, confused sensation, like the echo of things still falling. Something had gone very wrong with the scheme of nature. Even beneath her feet, now, the floor seemed unsteady, unreliable.

A half-darkness dimmed her eyes; she laid one slim hand on the sofa-back and seated herself, fighting instinctively for consciousness.

She sat there for a long while. The swimming faintness passed away. An intense stillness seemed to invade her, and the room, and the street outside. And for vast distances beyond. Half hours and hours rang clearly through the silence from the mantel-clock. So still was the place that a sheaf of petals falling from a fading rose on the piano seemed to fill the room with ghostly rustling.

This, then, was the finish. Love had ended. Youth itself was ending, too, here in the dead silence of this lamplit room.

There remained nothing more. Except that ever darkening horizon where, at the earth's ends, those grave shapes of cloud closed out the vista of remote skies.

There seemed to be no shelter anywhere in the vast nakedness of the scheme of things—no shadow under which to crouch—no refuge.

Dim visions of cloistered forms, moving in a blessed twilight, grew and assumed familiar shape amid the dumb desolation reigning in her brain. The spectral temptation passed, repassed; processional, recessional glided by, timed by her heart's low rhythm.

But, little by little, she came to understand that there was no refuge even there; no mystic glow in the dark corridors of her own heart; no source of light save from the candles glimmering on the high altar; no aureole above the crucifix.

Always, everywhere, there seemed to be no shelter, no roof above the scheme of things.

She heard the telephone. As she slowly rose from the sofa she noted the hour as it sounded;—four o'clock in the morning.

A man's voice was speaking—an unhurried, precise, low-pitched, monotonous voice:

"This—is—the—Memorial Hospital. Doctor—Willis—speaking. Mr.—John—Estridge—died—at—ten minutes—to—four. Miss Westgard—wishes—to—go—to—your—residence—and—remain—over—night—if—convenient.... Thank you. Miss—Westgard—will—go—to—you—immediately. Good-night."

Palla rose from her chair in the unfurnished drawing-room, went out into the hall, admitted Ilse, then locked and chained the two front doors.

When she turned around, trembling and speechless, they kissed. But it was only Palla's mouth that trembled; and when they mounted the stairs it was

Ilse’s arm that supported Palla.

Except that her eyes were heavy and seemed smeared with deep violet under the lower lids, Ilse did not appear very much changed.

She took off her furs, hat, and gloves and sat down beside Palla. Her voice was quite clear and steady; there appeared to be no sign of shock or of grief, save for a passing tremor of her tired eyes now and then.

She said: “We talked a little together, Jack and I, after I telephoned to you.

“That was the last. His hand began to burn in mine steadily, like something on fire. And when, presently, I found he was not asleep, I motioned to the night nurse.

“The change seemed to come suddenly; she went to find one of the internes; I sat with my hand on his pulse.... There were three physicians there.... Jack was not conscious after midnight.”

Palla’s lips and throat were dry and aching and her voice almost inaudible:

“Darling,” she whispered, “—darling—if I could give him back to you and take his place!——”

Ilse smiled, but her heavy eyelids quivered:

“The scheme of things is so miserably patched together.... Except for the indestructible divinity within each one of us, it all would be so hopeless.... I had never been able to imagine Jack and Death together—” She looked up at the clock. “He was alive only an hour ago.... Isn’t it strange—”

“Oh, Ilse, Ilse! I wish this God who deals out such wickedness and misery had struck me down instead!”

Neither seemed to notice the agnostic paradox in this bitter cry wrung from a young girl’s grief.

Ilse closed her eyes as though to rest them, and sat so, her steady hand on Palla’s. And, so resting, said in her unfaltering voice:

“Jack, of course, lives.... But it seems a long time to wait to see him.”

“Jack lives,” whispered Palla.

“Of course.... Only—it seems so long a time to wait.... I wanted to show him—how kind love has been to us—how still more wonderful love could have been to us ... for I could have borne him many children.... And now I shall bear but one.”

After a silence, Palla lifted her eyes. In them the shadow of terror still

lingered; there was not an atom of colour in her face.

Ilse slept that night, though Palla scarcely closed her eyes. Dreadful details of the coming day rose up to haunt her—all the ghastly routine necessary before the dead lie finally undisturbed by the stir and movement of many footsteps—the coming and going of the living.

Because what they called pneumonia was the Black Death of the ancient East, they had warned Ilse to remain aloof from that inert thing that had been her lover. So she did not look upon his face again.

There were relatives of sorts at the chapel. None spoke to her. The sunshine on the flower-covered casket was almost spring like.

And in the cemetery, too, there was no snow; and, under the dead grass, everywhere new herbage tinted the earth with delicate green.

Ilse returned from the cemetery with Palla. Her black veil and garments made of her gold hair and blond skin a vivid beauty that grief had not subdued.

That deathless courage which was part of her seemed to sustain the clear glow of her body's vigour as it upheld her dauntless spirit.

"Did you see Jim in the chapel?" she asked quietly.

Palla nodded. She had seen Marya, also. After a little while Ilse said gravely:

"I think it no treachery to creed when one submits to the equally vital belief of another. I think our creed includes submission, because that also is part of love."

Palla lifted her face in flushed surprise:

"Is there any compromising with truth?" she asked.

"I think love is the greatest truth. What difference does it make how we love?"

"Does not our example count? You had the courage of your belief. Do you counsel me to subscribe to what I do not believe by acquiescing in it?"

Ilse closed her sea-blue eyes as though fatigued. She said dreamily:

"I think that to believe in love and mating and the bearing of children is the only important belief in the world. But under what local laws you go about doing these things seems to be of minor importance,—a matter, I should say, of personal inclination."

Ilse wished to go home. That is, to her own apartment, where now were enshrined all her memories of this dead man who had given to her womanhood that ultimate crown which in her eyes seemed perfect.

She said serenely to Palla: “Mine is not the loneliness that craves company with the living. I have a long time to wait; that is all. And after a while I shall not wait alone.

“So you must not grieve for me, darling. You see I know that Jack lives. It’s just the long, long wait that calls for courage. But I think it is a little easier to wait alone until—until there are two to wait—for him——”

“Will you call me when you want me, Ilse?”

“Always, darling. Don’t grieve. Few women know happiness. I have known it. I know it now. It shall not even die with me.”

She smiled faintly and turned to enter her doorway; and Palla continued on alone toward that dwelling which she called home.

The mourning which she had worn for her aunt, and which she had worn for John Estridge that morning, she now put off, although vaguely inclined for it. But she shrank from the explanations in which it was certain she must become involved when on duty at the Red Cross and the canteen that afternoon.

Undressed, she sent her maid for a cup of tea, feeling too tired for luncheon. Afterward she lay down on her bed, meaning merely to close her eyes for a moment.

It was after four in the afternoon when she sat up with a start—too late for the Red Cross; but she could do something at the canteen.

She went about dressing as though bruised. It seemed to take an interminable time. Her maid called a taxi; but the short winter daylight had nearly gone when she arrived at the canteen.

She remained there on kitchen duty until seven, then untied her white tablier, washed, pinned on her hat, and went out into the light-shot darkness of the streets and turned her steps once more toward home.

There is, among the weirder newspapers of the metropolis, a sheet affectionately known as “pink-and-punk,” the circulation of which seems to depend upon its distribution of fake “extras.”

As Palla turned into her street, shabby men with hoarse voices were calling an extra and selling the newspaper in question.

She bought one, glanced at the headlines, then, folding it, unlocked her door.

Dinner was announced almost immediately, but she could not touch it.

She sank down on the sofa, still wearing her furs and hat. After a little while she opened her newspaper.

It seemed that a Bolsheviki plot had been discovered to murder the premiers and rulers of the allied nations, and to begin simultaneously in every capital and principal city of Europe and America a reign of murder and destruction.

In fact, according to the account printed in startling type, the Terrorists had already begun their destructive programme in Philadelphia. Half a dozen buildings—private dwellings and one small hotel—had been more or less damaged by bombs. A New York man named Wilding, fairly well known as an impresario, had been killed outright; and a Russian pianist, Vanya Tchernov, who had just arrived in Philadelphia to complete arrangements for a concert to be given by him under Mr. Wilding's management, had been fatally injured by the collapse of the hotel office which, at that moment, he was leaving in company with Mr. Wilding.

A numbness settled over Palla's brain. She did not seem to be able to comprehend that this affair concerned Vanya—that this newspaper was telling her that Vanya had been fatally hurt somewhere in Philadelphia.

Hours later, while she was lying on the lounge with her face buried in the cushions, and still wearing her hat and furs, somebody came into the room. And when she turned over she saw it was Ilse.

Palla sat up stupidly, the marks of tears still glistening under her eyes. Ilse picked up the newspaper from the couch, laid it aside, and seated herself.

"So you know about Vanya?" she said calmly.

Palla nodded.

"You don't know all. Marya called me on the telephone a few minutes ago to tell me."

"Vanya is dead," whispered Palla.

"Yes. They found an unmailed letter directed to Marya in his pockets. That's why they notified her."

After an interval: "So Vanya is dead," repeated Palla under her breath.

Ilse sat plaiting the black edges of her handkerchief.

"It's such a—a senseless interruption—death——" she murmured. "It seems so wanton, so meaningless in the scheme of things ... to make two people wait so long—so long!—to resume where they had been interrupted——"

Palla asked coldly whether Marya had seemed greatly shocked.

"I don't know, Palla. She called me up and told me. I asked her if there was anything I could do; and she answered rather strangely that what remained for

her to do she would do alone. I don't know what she meant."

Whether Marya herself knew exactly what she meant seemed not to be entirely clear to her. For, when Mr. Puma, dressed in a travelling suit and carrying a satchel, arrived at her apartment in the Hotel Rajah, and entered the reception room with his soundless, springy step, she came out of her bedroom partly dressed, and still hooking her waist.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded contemptuously, looking him over from, head to foot. "Did you really suppose I meant to go to Mexico with you?"

His heavy features crimsoned: "What pleasantry is this, my Marya?——" he began; but the green blaze in her slanting eyes silenced him.

"The difference," she said, "between us is this. You run from those who threaten you. I kill them."

"Of—of what nonsense are you speaking!" he stammered. "All is arranged that we shall go at eleven——"

"No," she said wearily, "one sometimes plays with stray animals for a few moments—and that is all. And that is all I ever saw in you, Angelo—a stray beast to amuse and entertain me between two yawns and a cup of tea." She shrugged, still twisted lithely in her struggle to hook her waist. "You may go," she added, not even looking at him, "or, if you are not too cowardly, you may come with me to the Red Flag Club."

"In God's name what do you mean——"

"Mean? I mean to take my pistol to the Red Flag Club and kill some Bolsheviki. That is what I mean, my Angelo—my ruddy Eurasian pig!"

She slipped in the last hook, turned and enveloped him again with an insolent, slanting glance: "*Allons!* Do you come to the Red Flag?"

"Marya——"

"Yes or no! *Allez!*"

"My God, are—are you then demented?" he faltered.

"My God, I'm not," she mimicked him, "but I can't answer for what I might do to you if you hang around this apartment any longer."

She came slowly toward him, her hands bracketed on her hips, her strange eyes narrowing.

"Listen to me," she said. "I have loved many times. But never *you*! One doesn't love your kind. One experiments, possibly, if idle.

“A man died to-day whom I loved; but was too stupid to love enough. Perhaps he knows now how stupid I am.... Unless they blew his soul to pieces, also. *Allez!* Good-night. I tell you I have business to attend to, and you stand there rolling your woman’s eyes at me!——”

“Damn you!” he said between his teeth. “What is the matter with you——”

He had caught her arm; she wrenched it free, tearing the sleeve to her naked shoulder.

Then she went to her desk and took a pistol from an upper drawer.

“If you don’t go,” she said, “I shall have to shoot you and leave you here kicking on the carpet.”

“In God’s name, Marya!” he cried hoarsely, “who is it you shall kill at the hall?”

“I shall kill Sondheim and Bromberg and Kastner, I hope. What of it?”

“But—if I go to-night—the others will say *I* did it! I can’t run away if you do such thing! I can not go into Mexico but they shall arrest me before I am at the border——”

“Eurasian pig, I shall admit the killing!” she said with a green gleam in her eyes that perhaps was laughter.

“Yes, my Marya,” he explained in agony, the sweat pouring from his temples, “but if they think me your accomplice they shall arrest me. Me—I can not wait—I shall be ruined if I am arrest! You do not comprehend. I have not said it to you how it is that I am compel to travel with some money which—which is not—my own.”

Marya looked at him for a long while. Suddenly she flung the pistol into a corner, threw back her head while peal on peal of laughter rang out in the room.

“A thief,” she said, fairly holding her slender sides between gemmed fingers: “—Just a Levantine thief, after all! Not a thing to shoot. Not a man. No! But a giant cockroach from the tropics. Ugh! Too large to place one’s foot upon!——”

She came leisurely forward, halted, inspected him with laughing insolence:

“And the others—Kastner, Sondheim—and the other vermin? You were quite right. Why should I kill them—merely because to-day a real man died? What if they are the same species of vermin that slew Vanya Tchernov? They are not men to pay for it. My pistol could not make a dead man out of a live louse! No, you are quite correct. You know your own kind. It would be no

compliment to Vanya if I should give these vermin the death that real men die!”

Puma stood close to the door, furtively passing a thick tongue over his dry, blanched lips.

“Then you will not interfere?” he asked softly.

She shrugged her shoulders: one was bare with the torn sleeve dangling. “No,” she said wearily. “Run home, painted pig. After all, the world is mostly swine.... I, too, it seems——” She half raised her arms, but the gesture failed, and she stood thinking again and staring at the curtained window. She did not hear him leave.

CHAPTER XXIII

In the strange, springlike weather which prevailed during the last days of January, Vanya was buried under skies as fleecy blue as April’s, and Marya Lanois went back to the studio apartment where she and Vanya had lived together. And here, alone, in the first month of the new year, she picked up again the ravelled threads of life, undecided whether to untangle them or to cut them short and move on once more to further misadventure; or to Vanya; or somewhere—or perhaps nowhere. So, pending some decision, she left her pistol loaded.

Afternoon sunshine poured into the studio between antique silken curtains, now drawn wide to the outer day for the first time since these two young people had established for themselves a habitation.

And what, heretofore, even the lighted mosque-lamps had scarcely half revealed, now lay exposed to outer air and daylight, gilded by the sun—cabinets and chests of ancient lacquer; deep-toned carpets in which slumbered jewelled fires of Asia; carved gods from the East, crusted with soft gold; and tapestries of silk shot with amethyst and saffron, centred by dragons and guarded by the burning pearl.

Over all these, and the great mosque lantern drooping from above, the false-spring sunshine fell; and through every open window flowed soft, deceptive winds, fluttering the leaves of music on the piano, stirring the clustered sheafs of growing jonquils and narcissus, so that they swayed in their Chinese bowls.

Marya, in black, arranged her tiger-ruddy hair before an ancient grotesquerie set with a reflecting glass in which, on some days, one could see the form of the Lord Buddha, though none could ever tell from whence the image came.

Where Vanya had left his music opened on the piano rack, the sacred pages

now stirred slightly as the soft wind blew; and scented bells of Frisia swayed and bowed around a bowl where gold-fish glowed.

Marya, at the piano, reading at sight from his inked manuscript, came presently to the end of what was scored there—merely the first sketch for a little spring song.

Some day she would finish it as part of a new debt—new obligations she had now assumed in the slowly increasing light of new beliefs.

As she laid Vanya's last manuscript aside, under it she discovered one of her own—a cynical, ribald, pencilled parody which she remembered she had scribbled there in an access of malicious perversity.

As though curious to sound the obscurer depths of what she had been when this jeering cynicism expressed her mood, she began to read from her score and words, playing and intoning:

"CROQUE-MITAINE.

"Parfaît qu'on attend La Marée Rouge,
La chose est positive.
On n'sait pas quand el' bouge,
Mais on sait qu'el' arrive.
La Marée Rouge arrivera
Et tout le monde en crèvera!

"Croque'morts, sacristains et abbés,
Dans leurs sacré's boutiques
Se cachent auprès des machabé's
En répètant des cantiques.
Pape, cardinal, et sacré soeur
Miaulent avec tout leurs cliques,
Lorsque les Bolsheviks reprenn 'nt en choeur;
Mort aux saligaudes chic!

"La Marée Rouge montera
Et la bourgeoisie en crèvera!"

The vicious irony of the atrocious parody—words and music—died out in the sunny silence: for a few moments the girl sat staring at the scored page; then she leaned forward, and, taking the manuscript in both hands, tore it into pieces.

She was still occupied in destroying the unclean thing when a servant appeared, and in subdued voice announced Palla and Ilse.

They came in as Marya swept the tattered scraps of paper into an incense-bowl, dropped a lighted match upon them, and set the ancient bronze vessel on the sill of the open window.

“Some of my vileness I am burning,” she said, coming forward and kissing Ilse on both cheeks.

Then, looking Palla steadily in the eyes, she bent forward and touched her lips with her own.

“Nechevo,” she said; “the thing that dwelt within me for a time has continued on its way to hell, I hope.”

She took the pale girl by both hands: “Do you understand?”

And Palla kissed her.

When they were seated: “What religious order would be likely to accept me?” she asked serenely. And answered her own question: “None would tolerate me—no order with its rigid systems of inquiry and its merciless investigations.... And yet—I wonder.... Perhaps, as a lay-sister in some missionary order—where few care to serve—where life resembles death as one twin the other.... I don’t know: I wonder, Palla.”

Palla asked her in a low voice if she had seen the afternoon paper. Marya did not reply at once; but presently over her face a hot rose-glow spread and deepened. Then, after a silence:

“The paper mentioned me as Vanya’s wife. Is that what you mean? Yes; I told them that.... It made no difference, for they would have discovered it anyway. And I scarcely know why I made Vanya lie about it to you all;—why I wished people to think otherwise.... Because I have been married to Vanya since the beginning.... And I can not explain why I have not told you.”

She touched a rosebud in the vase that stood beside her, broke the stem absently, and sat examining it in silence. And, after a few moments:

“As a child I was too imaginative.... We do not change—we women. Married, unmarried, too wise, or too innocent, we remain what we were when our mothers bore us.... Whatever we do, we never change within: we remain, in our souls, what we first were. And unaltered we die.... In morgue or prison or Potter’s Field, where lies a dead female thing in a tattered skirt, there, hidden somewhere under rag and skin and bone, lies a dead girl-child.”

She laid the unopened rosebud on Palla’s knees; her preoccupied gaze wandered around that silent, sunlit place.

“I could have taken my pistol,” she said softly, “and I could have killed a few among those whose doctrines at last slew Vanya.... Or I could have killed

myself.”

She turned and her remote gaze came back to fix itself on Palla.

“But, somehow, I think that Vanya would grieve.... And he has grieved enough. Do you think so, Palla?”

“Yes.”

Ilse said thoughtfully: “There is always enough death on earth. And to live honestly, and love undauntedly, and serve humanity with a clean heart is the most certain way to help the slaying of that thing which murdered Vanya.”

Palla gazed at Marya, profoundly preoccupied by the astounding revelation that she had been Vanya’s legal wife; and in her brown eyes the stunned wonder of it still remained, nor could she seem to think of anything except of that amazing fact.

When they stood up to take leave of Marya, the rosebud dropped from Palla’s lap, and Marya picked it up and offered it again.

“It should open,” she said, her strange smile glimmering. “Cold water and a little salt, my Palla—that is all rosebuds need—that is all we women need—a little water to cool and freshen us; a little salt for all the doubtful worldly knowledge we imbibe.”

She took Palla’s hands and bent her lips to them, then lifted her tawny head:

“What do words matter? *Slava, slava*, under the moon! Words are but symbols of needs—your need and Ilse’s and mine—and Jack’s and Vanya’s—and the master-word differs as differ our several needs. And if I say Christ and Buddha and I are one, let me so believe, if that be my need. Or if, from some high minarette, I lift my voice proclaiming the unity of God!—or if I confess the Trinity!—or if, for me, the god-fire smoulders only within my own accepted soul—what does it matter? Slava, slava—the word and the need spell Love—whatever the deed, Palla—my Palla!—whatever the deed, and despite it.”

As they came, together, to Palla’s house and entered the empty drawing-room, Ilse said:

“In mysticism there seems to be no reasoning—nothing definite save only an occult and overwhelming restlessness.... Marya may take the veil ... or nurse lepers ... or she may become a famous courtesan.... I do not mean it cruelly. But, in the mystic, the spiritual, the intellectual and the physical seem to be interchangeable, and become gradually indistinguishable.”

“That is a frightful analysis,” murmured Palla. A little shiver passed over her and she laid the rosebud against her lips.

Ilse said: “Marya is right: love is the world’s overwhelming need. The way to

love is to serve; and if we serve we must renounce something."

They locked arms and began to pace the empty room.

"What should I renounce?" asked Palla faintly.

Ilse smiled that wise, wholesome smile of hers:

"Suppose you renounce your own omniscience, darling," she suggested.

"I do not think myself omniscient," retorted the girl, colouring.

"No? Well, darling, from where then do you derive your authority to cancel the credentials of the Most High?"

"What!"

"On what authority except your own omniscience do you so confidently preach the non-existence of omnipotence?"

Palla turned her flushed face in sensitive astonishment under the gentle mockery.

Ilse said: "Love has many names; and so has God. And all are good. If, to you, God means that little flame within you, then that is good. And so, to others, according to their needs.... And it is the same with love.... So, if for the man you love, love can be written only as a phrase—if the word love be only one element in a trinity of which the other two are Law and Wedlock—does it really matter, darling?"

"You mean I—I am to renounce my—creed?"

Ilse shook her head: "Who cares? The years develop and change everything—even creeds. Do you think your lover would care whether, at twenty-odd, you worship the flaming godhead itself, or whether you guard in spirit that lost spark from it which has become entangled with your soul?—whether you really do believe the man-made law that licenses your mating; or whether you reject it as a silly superstition? To a business man, convention is merely a safe procedure which, ignored, causes disaster—he knows that whenever he ignores it—as when he drives a car bearing no license; and the police stop him."

"I never expected to hear this from you, Ilse."

"Why?"

"You are unmarried."

"No, Palla."

The girl stared at her: "Did you *marry* Jack?" she gasped.

“Yes. In the hospital.”

“Oh, Ilse!——”

“He asked me.”

“But—” her mouth quivered and she bent her head and placed her hand on Ilse’s arm for guidance, because the starting tears were blinding her now. And at last she found her voice: “I meant I am so thankful—darling—it’s been a—a nightmare——”

“It would have been one to me if I had refused him. Except that Jack wished it, I did not care.... But I have lately learned—some things.”

“You—you consented because he wished it?”

“Of course. Is not that our law?”

“Do you so construe the Law of Love and Service? Does it permit us to seek protection under false pretences; to say yes when we mean no; to kneel before a God we do not believe in; to accept immunity under a law we do not believe in?”

“If all this concerned only one’s self, then, no! Or, if the man believed as we do, no! But even then—” she shook her head slowly, “unless *all* agree, it is unfair.”

“Unfair?”

“Yes, it is unfair if you have a baby. Isn’t it, darling? Isn’t it unfair and tyrannical?”

“You mean that a child should not arbitrarily be placed by its parents at what it might later consider a disadvantage?”

“Of course I mean just that. Do you know, Palla, what Jack once said of us? He said—rather brutally, I thought—that you and I were immaturely un-moral and pitiably unbaked; and that the best thing for both of us was to marry and have a few children before we tried to do any more independent thinking.”

Palla’s reply was: “He was such a dear!” But what she said did not seem absurd to either of them.

Ilse added: “You know yourself, darling, what a relief it was to you to learn that I had married Jack. I think you even said something like, ‘Thank God,’ when you were choking back the tears.”

Palla flushed brightly: “I meant—” but her voice ended in a sob. Then, all of a sudden, she broke down—went all to pieces there in the dim and empty little

drawing-room—down on her knees, clinging to Ilse's skirts....

She wished to go to her room alone; and so Ilse, watching her climb the stairs as though they led to some dread calvary, opened the front door and went her lonely way, drawing the mourning veil around her face and throat.

CHAPTER XXIV\

Leila Vance, lunching with Elorn Sharrow at the Ritz, spoke of Estridge:

"There seem to be so many of these well-born men who marry women we never heard of."

"Perhaps we ought to have heard of them," suggested Elorn, smilingly. "The trouble may lie with us."

"It does, dear. But it's something we can't help, unless we change radically. Because we don't stand the chance we once did. We never have been as attractive to men as the other sort. But once men thought they couldn't marry the other sort. Now they think they can. And they do if they have to."

"What other sort?" asked Elorn, not entirely understanding.

"The sort of girl who ignores the customs which make us what we are. We don't stand a chance with professional women any more. We don't compare in interest to girls who are arbiters of their own destinies.

"Take the stage as an illustration. Once the popularity of women who made it their profession was due partly to glamour, partly because that art drew to it and concentrated the very best-looking among us. But it's something else now that attracts men; it's the attraction of women who are doing something—clever, experienced, interesting, girls who know how to take care of themselves and who are not afraid to give to men a frank and gay companionship outside those conventional limits which circumscribe us."

Elorn nodded.

"It's quite true," said Leila. "The independent professional girl to-day, whatever art or business engages her, is the paramount attraction to men.

"A few do sneak back to us after a jolly caper in the open—a few timid ones, or snobs of sorts—thrifty, perhaps, or otherwise material, or cautious. But that's about all we get as husbands in these devilish days of general feminine *bouleversement*. And it's a sad and instructive fact, Elorn. But there seems to be nothing to do about it."

Elorn said musingly: "The main thing seems to be that men admire a girl's

effort to get somewhere—when she happens to be good-looking."

"It's a cynical fact, dear; they certainly do. And now that they realise they have to marry these girls if they want them—why, they do."

Elorn dissected her ice. "You know Stanley Wardner," she remarked.

"Mortimer Wardner's son?"

Elorn nodded. "He became a queer kind of sculptor. I think it is called a Concentrationist. Well, he's concentrated for life, now."

"Whom did he marry?" asked Leila, laughing.

"A girl named Questa Terrett. You never heard of her, did you?"

"No. And I can imagine the moans and groans of the Mortimer Wardners."

"I have heard so. She lives—*they* live now, together, in Abdingdon Square, where she possesses a studio and nearly a dozen West Highland terriers."

"What else does she do?" inquired Leila, still laughing.

"She writes cleverly when she needs an income; otherwise, she produces obscure poems with malice aforethought, and laughs in her sleeve, they say, when the precious-minded rave."

Leila reverted to Estridge:

"I had no idea he was married," she said. "Palla Dumont introduced his widow to me the other day—a most superb and beautiful creature. But, oh dear I—can you fancy her having once served as a girl-soldier in the Russian Battalion of Death!"

The slightest shadow crossed Elorn's face.

"By the way," added Leila, following quite innocently her trend of thought, "Helen Shotwell tells me that her son is going back to the army if he can secure a commission."

"Yes, I believe so," said Elorn serenely.

Leila went on: "I fancy there'll be a lot of them. A taste of service seems to spoil most young men for a piping career of peace."

"He cares nothing for his business."

"What is it?"

"Real estate. He is with my father, you know."

"Of course. I remember—" She suddenly seemed to recollect something else,

also—not, perhaps, quite certain of it, but instinctively playing safe. So she refrained from saying anything about this young man's recent devotion to her friend, Palla Dumont, although that was the subject which she had intended to introduce.

And, smiling to herself, she thought it a close call, because she had meant to ask Elorn whether she knew why the Shotwell boy had so entirely deserted her little friend Palla.

The Shotwell boy himself happened to be involved at that very moment, in matters concerning a friend of Mrs. Vance's little friend Palla—in fact, he had been trying, for the last half hour, to find this friend of Palla's on the telephone. The friend in question was Alonzo D. Pawling. And he was being vigorously paged at the Hotel Rajah.

As for Jim, he remained seated in the private office of Angelo Puma, whither he had been summoned in professional capacity by one Skidder, the same being Elmer, and partner of the Puma aforesaid.

The door was locked; the room in disorder. Safe, letter-files, cupboards, desks had been torn open and their contents littered the place.

Skidder, in an agony of perspiring fright, kept running about the room like a distracted squirrel. Jim watched him, darkly preoccupied with other things, including the whereabouts of Mr. Pawling.

"You say," he said to Skidder, "that Mr. Pawling will confirm what you have told me?"

"John D. Pawling knows damn well I own this plant!"

Jim shook his head: "I'm sorry, but that isn't sufficient. I can only repeat to you that there is no point in calling me in at present. You have no legal right to offer this property for sale. It belongs, apparently, to the creditors of your firm. What you require first of all is a lawyer——"

"I don't want a lawyer and I don't want publicity before I get something out of this dirty mess that scoundrel left behind!" cried Skidder, snapping his eyes like mad and swinging his arms. "I got to get something, haven't I? Isn't this property mine? Can't I sell it?"

"Apparently not, under the terms of your agreement with Puma," replied Jim, wearily. "However, I'm willing to hear what Mr. Pawling has to say."

"You mean to tell me, Puma fixed it so I'm stuck with all his debts? You mean to say my own personal property is subject to seizure to satisfy——"

"I certainly do mean just that, Mr. Skidder. But I'm not a lawyer——"

"I tell you I want to get something for myself before I let loose any lawyers on

the premises! I'll make it all right with you——"

"It's out of the question. We wouldn't touch the property——"

"I'll take a quarter of its value in spot cash! I'll give you ten thousand to put it through to-day!"

"Why can't you understand that what you suggest would amount to collusion?"

"What I propose is to get a slice of what's mine!" yelled Skidder, fairly dancing with fury. "D'yeh think I'm going to let that crooked wop, Puma, do this to me just like that! D'yeh think he's going to get away with all my money and all Pawling's money and leave me planted on my neck while about a million other guys come and sell me out and fill their pants pockets with what's mine?"

Jim said: "If Mr. Pawling is the very rich man you say he is, he's not going to let the defalcation of this fellow, Puma, destroy such a paying property."

"Damn it, I don't want him to buy it in for himself and freeze me out! I can't stop him, either; Puma's got all my money except what's in this parcel. And you betcha life I hang onto this, creditors or no creditors, and Pawling to the contrary! He knows damn well it belongs to me. Try him again at the Rajah——"

"They're paging him. I left the number. But I tell you the proper thing for you to do is to go to a lawyer, and then to the police," repeated Jim. "There's nothing else to do. This fellow, Puma, may have run for the Mexican border, or he may still be in the United States. Without a passport he couldn't very easily get on any trans-Atlantic boat or any South American boat either. The proper procedure is to notify the police——"

"Nix on the police!" shouted Skidder. "That'll start the land-slide, and the whole shooting-match will go. I want *this* property. If the papers show it's subject to the firm's liabilities, then that dirty skunk altered the thing. It's forgery.

"I never was fool enough to lump this parcel in with our assets. Not me. It's forgery; that's what it is, and this parcel belongs to me, privately——"

"See an attorney," repeated Jim patiently. "You can't keep a thing like this out of the papers, Mr. Skidder. Why, here's a man, Angelo Puma, who pounces on every convertible asset of his firm, stuffs a valise full of real money, and beats it for parts unknown.

"That's a matter for the police. You can't hope to hide it for more than a day or two longer. Your firm is bankrupt through the rascality of a partner. He's gone with all the money he could scrape together. He converted everything into

cash; he lied, swindled, stole, and skipped. And what he didn't take must remain to satisfy the firm's creditors. You can't conceal conditions, slyly pocket what Puma has left and then call in an attorney. That's criminal. You have your contracts to fulfil; you have a studio full of people whose salaries are nearly due; you have running expenses; you have notes to meet; you have obligations to face when a dozen or so contractors for your new theatre come to you on Saturday——"

"You mean that's all up to me?" shrieked Skidder, squinting horribly at a framed photograph of Puma. And suddenly he ran at it and hurled it to the floor and began to kick it about with strange, provincial maledictions:

"Dern yeh, yeh poor blimgasted thing! I'll skin yeh, yeh dumb-faced, ring-boned, two-edged son-of-a-skunk!——"

The telephone's clamour silenced him. Jim answered:

"Who? Oh, long-distance. All right." And he waited. Then, again: "Who wants him?... Yes, he's here in the office, now.... Yes, he'll come to the 'phone."

And to Skidder: "Shadow Hill wants to speak to you."

"I won't go. By God, if this thing is out!—Who the hell is it wants to speak to me? Wait! Maybe it's Alonzo D. Pawling!——"

"Shall I inquire?" And he asked for further information over the wire. Then, presently, and turning again to Skidder:

"You'd better come to the wire. It seems to be the Chief of Police who wants you."

Skidder's unhealthy skin became ghastly. He came over and took the instrument:

"What d'ye want, Chief? Sure it's me, Elmer.... Hey? Who? Alonzo D. Pawling? My God, is he dead? Took *pizen*! W-what for! He's a rich man, ain't he?... Speculated?... You say he took the bank's funds? Trust funds? What!" he screeched—"put 'em into *my* company! He's a liar! ... I don't care what letters he left!... Well, all right then. Sure, I'll get a lawyer——"

"Tell him to hold that wire!" cut in Jim; and took the receiver from Skidder's shaking fingers.

"Is the Shadow Hill Trust Company insolvent?" he asked. "You say that the bank closed its doors this morning? Have you any idea of its condition? Looted? Is it entirely cleaned out? Is there no chance for depositors? I wish to inquire about the trust funds, bonds and other investments belonging to a friend of mine, Miss Dumont.... Yes, I'll wait."

He turned a troubled and sombre gaze toward Skidder, who sat there pasty-

faced, with sagging jaw, staring back at him. And presently:

“Yes.... Yes, this is Mr. Shotwell, a friend of Miss Dumont.... Yes.... Yes.... Yes.... I see.... Yes, I shall try to communicate with her immediately.... Yes, I suppose the news will be published in the evening papers.... Certainly.... Yes, I have no doubt that she will go at once to Shadow Hill.... Thank you.... Yes, it does seem rather hopeless.... I’ll try to find her and break it to her.... Thank you. Good-bye.”

He hung up the receiver, took his hat and coat, his eyes fixed absently on Skidder.

“You’d better beat it to your attorney,” he remarked, and went out.

He could not find Palla. She was not at the Red Cross, not at the canteen, not at the new Hostess House.

He telephoned Ilse for information, but she was not at home.

Twice he called at Palla’s house, leaving a message the last time that she should telephone him at the club on her arrival.

He went to the club and waited there, trying to read. At a quarter to six o’clock no message from her had come.

Again he telephoned Ilse; she had not returned. He even telephoned to Marya, loath to disturb her; but she, also, was not at home.

The chances that he could break the news to Palla before she read it in the evening paper were becoming negligible. He had done his best to forestall them. But at six the evening papers arrived at the club. And in every one of them was an account of the defalcation and suicide of the Honorable Alonzo D. Pawling, president of the Shadow Hill Trust Company. But nothing yet concerning the defalcation and disappearance of Angelo Puma.

Jim had no inclination to eat, but he tried to at seven-thirty, still waiting and hoping for a message from Palla.

He tried her house again about half past eight. This time the maid answered that Miss Dumont had telephoned from down town that she would dine out and go afterward to the Combat Club. And that if Mr. Shotwell desired to see her he should call at her house after ten o’clock.

So Jim hastened to the cloak-room, got his hat and coat, found the starter, secured a taxi, bought an evening paper and stuffed it into his pocket, and started out to find Palla at the Combat Club. For it seemed evident to him that she had not yet read the evening paper; and he hoped he might yet encounter her in time to prepare her for news which, according to the newspapers, appeared even blacker than he had supposed it might be.

CHAPTER XXV

As he left the taxi in front of the dirty brick archway and flight of steps leading to the hall, where he expected to find Palla, he noticed a small crowd of wrangling foreigners gathered there—men and women—and a policeman posted near, calm and indifferent, juggling his club at the end of its leather thong.

Jim paused to inquire if there had been any trouble there that evening.

“Well,” said the policeman, “there’s two talking-clubs that chew the rag in that joint. It’s the Reds’ night, but wan o’ the ladies of the other club showed up—Miss Dumont—and the Reds yonder was all for chasing her out. So we run in a couple of ’em—that feller Sondheim and another called Bromberg. They’re wanted, anyhow, in Philadelphia.”

“Is there a meeting inside?”

“Sure. The young lady went in to settle it peaceful like; and she’s inside now jawin’ at them Reds to beat a pink tea.”

“Do you apprehend any violence?” asked Jim uneasily.

The policeman juggled his club and eyed him. “I—guess—not,” he drawled. And, to the jabbering, wrangling crowd on pavement and steps: “—Hey, you! Go in or stay out, one or the other, now! Step lively; you’re blockin’ the sidewalk.”

A number of people mounted the steps and went in with Jim. As the doors to the hall opened, a flare of smoky light struck him, and he pushed his way into the hall, where a restless, murmuring audience, some seated, others standing, was watching a number of men and women on the rostrum.

There seemed to be more wrangling going on there—knots of people disputing and apparently quite oblivious of the audience.

And almost immediately he caught sight of Palla on the platform. But even before he could take a step forward in the crowded aisle, he saw her force her way out of an excited group of people and come to the edge of the platform, lifting a slim hand for silence.

“Put her out!” shouted some man’s voice. A dozen other voices bawled out incoherencies; Palla waited; and after a moment or two there were no further interruptions.

“Please let me say what I have to say,” she said in that shy and gentle way she had when facing hostile listeners.

“Speak louder!” yelled a young man. “Come on, silk-stockings!—spit it out and go home to mother!”

“I wish I could,” she said.

Her rejoinder was so odd and unexpected that stillness settled over the place.

“But all I can do,” she added, in an even, colourless voice, “is to go home. And I shall do that after I have said what I have to say.”

At that moment there was a commotion in the rear of the hall. A dozen policemen filed into the place, pushing their way right and left and ranging themselves along the wall. Their officer came into the aisle:

“If there’s any disorder in this place to-night, I’ll run in the whole bunch o’ ye!” he said calmly.

“All right. Hit out, little girl!” cried the young man who had interrupted before. “We gotta lot of business to fix up after you’ve gone to bed, so get busy!”

“I, also, have some business to fix up,” she said in the same sweet, emotionless voice, “—business of setting myself right by admitting that I have been wrong.

“Because, on this spot where I am standing, I have spoken against the old order of things. I have said that there is no law excepting only the law of Love and Service. I have said that there is no God other than the deathless germ of deity within each one of us. I have said that the conventions and beliefs and usages and customs of civilisation were old, outworn, and tyrannical; and that there was no need to regard them or to obey the arbitrary laws based on them.

“In other words, I have preached disorder while attempting to combat it: I have preached revolution while counselling peace; I have preached bigotry where I have demanded toleration.

“For there is no worse bigot than the free-thinker who demands that the world subscribe to his creed; no tyrant like the under-dog when he becomes the upper one; no autocracy to compare with mob rule!

“You can not obtain freedom for all by imposing that creed upon anybody by the violence of revolutionary ukase!

“You can not wreck any edifice until all who enjoy ownership in it agree to its demolition. You can not build for all unless each voluntarily comes forward to aid with stone and mortar.

“Anarchy leaves the majority roofless. What is the use of saying, ‘Let them perish’? What is the use of trying to rebuild the world that way? You can’t do it, even if you set fire to the world and start your endless war of human

murder.

“If you were the majority you would not need to do it. But you are the minority, and there are too many against you.

“Only by infinite pains and patience can you alter the social structure to better it. Cautious and wary replacement is the only method, not exploding a mine beneath the keystone.

“The world has won out from barbarism so far. It must continue to emerge by degrees. And if beliefs and laws and customs be obsolete, only by general agreement may they be modified without danger to all. Not the violent revolt of one or a dozen or a thousand can alter what has, so far, nourished and sustained civilisation.

“That is the Prussian belief. Bolshevism was sired by Karl Marx and was hatched out in the shaggy gloom of the Prussian wilderness.

“It does not belong anywhere else; it does not belong on the plains of Russia or in her forests or on her mountains. It is a Prussian thing—a misbegotten monster born of a vile and decadent race,—a horrible parasite, like that one which carries typhus, infects as it spreads from the degraded race that hatched it, crawling from country to country and leaving behind it dead minds, dead hearts, dead souls, and rotting flesh.

“For order and disorder can not both reign paramount on this planet! The one shall slay the other. And Bolshevism is disorder—a violent and tyrannical and autocratic attempt to utterly destroy the vast majority for the benefit of the microscopic minority.

“You can not do it, you Terrorists! Prussia tried terrorism on the world. Where is she to-day? You can not teach by frightfulness. You can not scare beliefs out of anybody.

“Method, order, education—there is no other chance for any propagandist to-day.

“I have stood here night after night proclaiming that my personal conception of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood, of law and morals was the only intelligent one, and that I should ignore and disregard any other opinion.

“What I preached was Bolshevism! And I was such a fool I didn’t know it. But that’s what I preached. For it is an incitement to disorder to proclaim one’s self above obedience to what has been established as a law to govern all.

“It is an insidious counsel to violence, revolution, Bolshevism and utter anarchy to say to people that they should disregard any law formed by all for the common weal.

“If the marriage law seems unnecessary, unjust, then only by common consent can it be altered; and until it is altered, any who disregard it strike at civilisation!

“If the laws governing capital and labour seem cruel, stupid, tyrannical, only by general consent can they be altered safely.

“You of the Bolsheviki can not come among us dripping with human blood, showing us your fangs, and expect from us anything except a fusillade.

“And your propaganda, also, is not human. It is Prussian. Do you suppose, you foreign-born, that you can come here among this free people and begin your operations by cursing our laws and institutions and telling us we are not free?

“Because we tolerate you, do you suppose we don’t know that in most of the larger cities there are now organised Soviets, similar to those in Russia, that anarchists are now conducting schools, and that the radical propaganda which has taken on new life since the signing of the armistice is gaining headway in those parts of the country where there are large foreign-born populations?

“Do you suppose we don’t know Prussianism when we see it, after these last four years?

“Do you suppose we have not read the *Staats-Zeitung* editorial of December , which in part was as follows:

“‘Hundreds of thousands of our boys are standing now over there in the old homeland, which for nineteen months was enemy country and is that still, but which, as President Wilson promised, will soon be a land of peace again, rich in diligent work, rich in true and good people.... As the whole happy life of this blessed region presents a picture to the spectator, it is to be wondered whether his (the American soldier’s memory will awaken on what he read of this country (Germany at home long ago, whether he will feel a slight blush of shame in his cheeks and anger for those who, not from their own knowledge but from doubtful sources, branded a whole great people, ,,, as barbarians, huns, murderers of children and church robbers. And whether he (the American soldier will at the same time make a pledge in his heart to combat those lies and rumours when he is back home again, and to tell the truth about those (the Germans living behind those mountains.’”

Palla’s face flushed and she came close to the edge of the platform:

“I have been warned that if I came here to-night I’d have trouble. The anonymous writers who send me letters talk about bombs.

“Do you imagine because you murdered Vanya Tchernov in Philadelphia the other day that you can frighten anybody dumb?

“I tell you you don’t know what you’re doing. You’re dazed and scared and bewildered by finding yourselves suddenly in the open world after all those lurking years in hiding. As a forest wolf, his eyes dazzled by the sun, runs blindly across a field of new mown hay, dodging where there is nothing to dodge, leaping over shadows, so you, emerging from darkness, start out across the fertile world, the sun of civilisation blinding you so that you run as though stupefied and frightened, shying at straws, dodging zephyrs, leaping a pool of dew as though it were the Volga.

“What are you afraid of? You have nothing to fear except yourselves out here in the sunny open!

“Behold your enemies—yourselves!—selfish, defiant, full of false council, of envy, of cowardice, of treachery.

“For there would be no sorrow, no injustice in the world if we—each one of us—were true to our better selves! You know it! You can not come out of darkness and range the open world like wolves! Civilisation will kill you!

“But you can come out of your long twilight bearing yourselves like men—and find, by God’s grace, that you *are* men!—that you are fashioned like other men to stand upright in the light without blinking and slinking and dodging into cover.

“For the haymakers will not climb and stone you; the herds will not stampede; no watch-dogs of civilisation will attack you if you come out into the fields looking like men, behaving like men, asking to share the world’s burdens like men, and like men giving brain and brawn to make more pleasant and secure the only spot in the solar system dedicated by the Most High to the development of mankind!”

There was a dead silence in the place.

Palla slowly lifted her head and raised her right hand.

“I desire,” she said in a low, grave voice, “to acknowledge here my belief in law, in order, and in a divine, creative, and responsible wisdom. And in ultimate continuation.”

She turned away as a demonstration began, and Jim saw her putting on her coat. There was some scattering applause, but considerable disorder where men in the audience began to harangue each other and shake dirty fingers under one another’s noses. Two personal encounters and one hair-pulling were checked by bored policemen: a girl got up and began to shout that she was a striking garment worker and that she had neither money, time, nor inclination to wait until some amateur silk-stocking felt like raising her wages.

On the platform Karl Kastner had come forward, and his icy, incisive, menacing voice cut the growing tumult.

“You haff heard with patience thiss so silly prattle of a rich young girl—” he began. “Now it is a poor man who speaks to you out of a heart full of bitterness against this law and order which you haff heard so highly praised.

“For this much-praised law and order it hass to-night assassinated free speech; it has arrested our comrades, Nathan Bromberg and Max Sondheim; it hass fill our hall with policemen. And I wonder if there iss, perhaps, a little too much law and order in the world, und iff *vielleicht*, there may be too many policemen as vell as capitalist-little-girls in thiss hall.

“Und, sometimes, too, I am wondering why iss it ve do not kill a few——”

“That’ll do!” interrupted the sergeant of police, striding down the aisle. “Come on, now, Karl; you done it that time.”

An angry roar arose all around him; he nodded to his men:

“Run in any cut-ups,” he said briefly; climbed up to the rostrum, and laid his hand on Kastner’s arm.

At the same moment a stunning explosion shook the place and plunged it into darkness. Out of the smoke-choked blackness burst an uproar of shrieks and screams; plaster and glass fell everywhere; police whistles sounded; a frantic, struggling mass of humanity fought for escape.

As Jim reeled out into the lobby, he saw Palla leaning against the wall, with blood on her face.

Before the first of the trampling horde emerged he had caught her by the arm and had led her down the steps to the street.

“They’ve blown up the—the place,” she stammered, wiping her face with her gloved hand in a dazed sort of way.

“Are you badly hurt?” he asked unsteadily.

“No, I don’t think so——”

He had led her as far as the avenue, now echoing with the clang of fire engines and the police patrol. And out of the darkness, from everywhere, swarmed the crowd that only a great city can conjure instantly and from nowhere.

Blood ran down her face from a cut over her temple. A tiny triangular bit of glass still glittered in the wound; and he removed it and gave her his handkerchief.

“Was Ilse there, too?” he asked.

“No. Nobody went to-night except myself.... Why were you there, Jim?”

“Why in God’s name did *you* go there all alone among those Reds!”

She shook her head wearily:

“I had to.... What a horrible thing to happen!... I am so tired, Jim. Could you get me home?”

He found a taxi nearer Broadway and directed the driver to stop at a drug-store. Here he insisted that the tiny cut on Palla’s temple be properly attended to. But it proved a simple matter; there was no glass in it, and the bleeding ceased before they reached her house.

At the door he took leave of her, deeming it no time to subject her to any further shock that night; but she retained her hold on his arm.

“I want you to come in, Jim.”

“You said you were tired; and you’ve had a terrible shock——”

“That is why I need you,” she said in a low voice. Then, looking up at him with a pale smile: “I want you—just once more.”

They went in together. Her maid, hearing the opening door, appeared and took her away; and Jim turned into the living-room. A lighted lamp on the piano illuminated his own framed photograph—that was the first thing he noticed—the portrait of himself in uniform, flanked on either side by little vases full of blue forget-me-nots.

He started to lift one to his face, but reaction had set in and his hands were shaking. And he turned away and stood staring into the empty fireplace, passionately possessed once more by the eternal witchery of this young girl, and under the spell again of the enchanted place wherein she dwelt.

The very air breathed her magic; every familiar object seemed to be stealthily conspiring in the subdued light to reaccomplish his subjection.

Her maid appeared to say that Miss Dumont would be ready in a few minutes. She came, presently, in a clinging chamber-gown—a pale golden affair with misty touches of lace.

He arranged cushions for her: she lighted a cigarette for him; and he sank down beside her in the old place.

Both were still a little shaken. He said that he believed the explosion had come from the outside, and that the principal damage had been done next door, in Mr. Puma’s office.

She nodded assent, listlessly, evidently preoccupied with something else.

After a few moments she looked up at him.

“This is the second day of February,” she said. “Within the last month Jack Estridge died, and Vanya died.... To-day another man died—a man I have known from childhood.... His name was Pawling. And his death has ruined me.”

“When—when did you learn that?” he asked, astounded.

“This morning. My housekeeper in Shadow Hill telephoned me that Mr. Pawling had killed himself, that the bank was closed, and that probably there was nothing left for those who had funds deposited there.”

“You knew that this morning?” he asked, amazed.

“Yes.”

“And you—you still had courage to go to your Red Cross, to your canteen and Hostess House—to that horrible Red Flag Club—and face those beasts and make the—the perfectly magnificent speech you made!——”

“Did—did *you* hear it!” she faltered.

“Every word.”

For a few moments she sat motionless and very white in her knowledge that this man had heard her confess her own conversion.

Her brain whirled: she was striving to think steadily trying to find the right way to reassure him—to forestall any impulsive chivalry born of imaginary obligation.

“Jim,” she said in a colorless voice, “there are so many worse things than losing money. I think Mr. Pawling’s suicide shocked me much more than the knowledge that I should be obliged to earn my own living like millions of other women.

“Of course it scared me for a few minutes. I couldn’t help that. But after I got over the first unpleasant—feeling, I concluded to go about my business in life until it came time for me to adjust myself to the scheme of things.”

She smiled without effort: “Besides, it’s not really so bad. I have a house in Shadow Hill to which I can retreat when I sell this one; and with a tiny income from the sale of this house, and with what I can earn, I ought to be able to support myself very nicely.”

“So you—expect to sell?”

“Yes, I must. Even if I sell my house and land in Connecticut I cannot afford this house any longer.”

“I see.”

She smiled, keeping her head and her courage high without apparent effort:

“It’s another job for you,” she said lightly. “Will you be kind enough to put this house on your list?”

“If you wish.”

“Thank you, Jim, I do indeed. And the sooner you can sell it for me the better.”

He said: “And the sooner you marry me the better, Palla.”

At that she flushed crimson and made a quick gesture as though to check him; but he went on: “I heard what you said to those filthy swine to-night. It was the pluckiest, most splendid thing I ever heard and saw. And I have seen battles. Some. But I never before saw a woman take her life in her hands and go all alone into a cage of the same dangerous, rabid beasts that had slain a friend of hers within the week, and find courage to face them and tell them they *were* beasts!—and more than that!—find courage to confess her own mistakes—humble herself—acknowledge what she had abjured—bear witness to the God whom once she believed abandoned her!”

She strove to open her lips in protest—lifted her disconcerted eyes to his—shrank away a little as his hand fell over hers.

“I’ve never faltered,” he said. “It damned near killed me.... But I’d have gone on loving you, Palla, all my life. There never could have been anybody except you. There was never anybody before you. Usually there has been in a man’s life. There never was in mine. There never will be.”

His firm hand closed on hers.

“I’m such an ordinary, every day sort of fellow,” he said wistfully, “that, after I began to realise how wonderful you are, I’ve been terribly afraid I wasn’t up to you.

“Even if I have cursed out your theories and creeds, it almost seemed impertinent for me to do it, because you really have so many talents and accomplishments, so much knowledge, so infinite a capacity for things of the mind, which are rather out of my mental sphere. And I’ve wondered sometimes, even if you ever consented to marry me, whether such a girl as you are could jog along with a business man who likes the arts but doesn’t understand them very well and who likes some of his fellow men but not all of them and whose instinct is to punch law-breakers in the nose and not weep over them and lead them to the nearest bar and say, ‘Go to it, erring brother!’”

“Jim!”

For all the while he had been drawing her nearer as he was speaking. And she

was in his arms now, laughing a little, crying a little, her flushed face hidden on his shoulder.

He drew a deep breath and, holding her imprisoned, looked down at her.

“Will you marry me, Palla?”

“Oh, Jim, do you want me now?”

“Now, darling, but not this minute, because a clergyman must come first.”

It was cruel of him, as well as vigorously indelicate. Her hot blush should have shamed him; her conversion should have sheltered her.

But the man had had a hard time, and the bitterness was but just going.

“Will you marry me, Palla?”

After a long while her stifled whisper came: “You are brutal. Do you think I would do anything else—now?”

“No. And you never would have either.”

Lying there close in his arms, she wondered. And, still wondering, she lifted her head and looked up into his eyes—watching them as they neared her own—still trying to see them as his lips touched hers.

He was the sort of man who got hungry when left too long unfed. It was one o’clock. They had gone out to the refrigerator together, his arm around her supple waist, her charming head against his shoulder—both hungry but sentimental.

“And don’t you really think,” she said for the hundredth time, “that we ought to sell this house?”

“Not a bit of it, darling. We’ll run it if we have to live on cereal and do our own laundry.”

“You mean I’ll have to do that?”

“I’ll help after business hours.”

“You wonderful boy!”

There seemed to be some delectable things in the ice chest.

They sat side by side on the kitchen table, blissfully nourishing each other. Birds do it. Love-smitten youth does it.

“To think,” he said, “that you had the nerve to face those beasts and tell them what you thought of them!”

“Darling!” she remonstrated, placing an olive between his lips.

“You should have the Croix de Guerre,” he said indistinctly.

“All I aspire to is a very plain gold ring,” she said, smiling at him sideways.

And she slipped her hand into his.

“*Are* you going back into the army, Jim?” she asked.

“Who said that?” he demanded.

“I—I heard it repeated.”

“Not now,” he said. “Unless—” His eyes narrowed and he sat swinging his legs with an absent air and puckered brows.

And after a while the same aloof look came into her brown eyes, and she swung her slim feet absently.

Perhaps their remote gaze was fixed on visions of a nearing future, brilliant with happiness, gay with children’s voices; perhaps they saw farther than that, where the light grew sombre and where a shadowed sky lowered above a blood-red flood, rising imperceptibly, yet ever rising—a stealthy, crawling crimson tide spreading westward across the world.