THE YOUNG MAY MOON

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BY

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AUTHOR OF
THE MAD CAREWS,
WILD GEESE, ETC.

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To
MY FRIEND
LILLIAN DURKIN BAKER

THE YOUNG MAY MOON

CHAPTER ONE

THIS long trestle that hung darkly between the stars and their drowned images in the spring flood below marked the halfway point between Bethune and Amaranth. Seven miles yet to go.

Her footsteps echoed bizarrely over the bridge. Like a dog barking in a well, sharp and hollow. It cheered you to think things like that. For a moment you forgot to be afraid. But her fear only grew; it became terror. The echoes were hollow voices out of the past, following from below, close upon her heels. For it was here that Hugh Vorse, the drunken section-boss who was her father, had lost his life and caused the loss of two other lives as well. Death does not soon forsake its haunt, she knew. She tried to run to escape the sound, but fatigue caught at her body, and the baying voices mocked her. She had come too far from Bethune, running and stumbling over the railway track in this strange white darkness so possessed of stars, to run any more.

Darkness possessed of stars—it was rather to the ceaseless clamor of wild fowl that the night belonged. Wings whistling against the sky, plump bodies rushing downward to meet the water, hungry foragers scuttling somberly among the weft of shore sedge—and always, always, that broken cry filling the air and keeping the night alive.

Had it not been for the fear of meeting someone, Marcia would have taken the gravel road that lay through brush and prairie between the two towns. She had gone that way earlier in the night when she had ridden up to Bethune in the fiddler's van. Three Ruthenians, on their way to a dance in Bethune, had halted on the road and asked her to ride with them. They had given her only a dark look or two and had left her quite to herself in the back of the van. Nor had they spoken a word when she got down before the box-

shaped section-house that stood hard by the track, the sight of which had been like a rush of cold water over her inflamed spirit.

It was the sight of that house standing under the white starlight, its familiar doorway and the steps in front where her father used to sit and smoke in the summer evenings, its homely square windows in which she had set sweet peas to flower in early spring, its gentle roof under which she had lain and listened to the rush of the rain—it was this that had made her turn back. And it was this, too, that had made her choose to go back by way of the railroad, lest someone passing might see her—and wonder. No one, either in Bethune or in Amaranth, must know that Rolf Gunther's wife had run away from him. Rather than have Rolf—proud, sensitive, inscrutable Rolf Gunther—suffer that humiliation, she would crawl back every foot of the way on hands and knees, slinking home like a hunted animal. Now, no one would know, no one except Rolf and herself, and they would strive to forget.

Terror gripped her as again, for the hundredth time since she had started upon this dolorous journey, the enormity of what she had done came over her. She must have been mad, cruelly, immeasurably mad. That empty, flat pasture, lying on the edge of Bethune, strange under night-depth as only pasture land can be strange, had brought down upon her the full sense of her madness. Presences, there where the little, deep-rutted road emerged from the brushland at the edge of the pasture, had spoken to her out of the silence. The dim presence, maybe, of old Hugh Vorse, himself so sorely come to disaster; of her own lonely childhood in those fields, become legend now with the legends of the past; of Rolf Gunther, who had walked with her there on an October evening only a season ago, in some enchantment forever dispelled.

Forever? No—no, not forever!

She had come to the end of the trestle at last and the barking echoes ceased. Her heart lightened. After all, this was only a nightmare that would be completely dissolved when she crept into Rolf's arms again and asked his forgiveness. And he, large and harassed and angry, inarticulate because of what she had done, would relent at last, then gather her close, close, where she wanted to be. Oh, he *would*! Had he not always forgiven her!

In the end, perhaps—she dared to think it—this reckless thing she had done might yield its good. Perhaps it would restore to them the lost magic of those days in Bethune where Rolf had found her fighting to live down her father's disgrace. *Perhaps* it would. Stranger things than that had happened,

if you could believe what you read in books. And yet—she struck her breast in vain self-questioning. With Dorcas Gunther, Rolf's fanatically religious mother in the house—or they, rather, in Dorcas Gunther's house—would enchantment ever hold them again?

Marcia began to run, in effect only dragging her feet over the rough ground. She was overcome suddenly with the sensation of pitching headlong. She could go no farther. The strength had left her limbs. Tongues of unnatural heat were leaping up over her body. She sank down upon the edge of the pebbly bank, her breath sobbing out of lungs and throat that seemed lined with sand.

She sank heavily across the rail, her body full of the sore trembling of utter exhaustion. Her ear lay against the cold steel so that she could hear the thin singing in it. How often as a child she had lain so, listening with delicious terror to the hum that told her of a train rushing, rushing toward her from beyond that naked curve where the earth cut into the sky. There would probably be a freight train along soon, she thought dully. None had passed her since she left Bethune. She would have to get off the track then, down the side of the grade to the edge of the ditches filled with flood-water. But for the moment it was good to lie here, to rest and think of Rolf—the Rolf of the Bethune days, of course, whose shining image had somehow misted over during the past months, as do the fables that make up the creed of a child.

What had happened to the Rolf Gunther she had known and loved in that sorrow-sweet fall of the year when she was just past twenty? Had it been merely that his mother, Dorcas, had taken him back into herself, that jealous and austere self that had so abhorred an interloper? Or had it been something else, something deeper, something within Rolf's own soul that she had never quite been able to understand?

Abject creature-weariness pinned her to the ground. She wondered, listlessly, why she should be so tired. Had those endless winter months in Dorcas Gunther's house spent her spirit utterly? She had done her best to shape her life to theirs. She had no need to be reminded that her father had been the drunken free-thinker of Bethune. She had followed Rolf's leading until she had learned gradually what was expected of her. She had gone to church with Dorcas. She had even embraced the ordeal of conversion . . . "Her sinful heart has yielded to the voice of the Holy Spirit!" old Dorcas Gunther had cried aloud before the whole congregation. Dorcas had praised the Lord then. And Rolf had murmured, "Praise the Lord!" too, in response to his mother's words. And Marcia had risen to her feet there and stood

alone—dear God in Heaven, how heart-brokenly alone!—between her strong young husband and his frail old mother, and tried to speak but that her tears forbade her.

Thereafter, throughout the dreary winter, she had sat among the singers in the choir loft and wondered much about what Dorcas had meant when she had spoken of a consecrated voice. Had her voice been different, then, when she had gone singing through the brushland and the pasture outside Bethune? Had there been no God to listen to her when she sang the songs her father had taught her in the long winter evenings when they were alone together in the big room in the section-house?

Oh, Rolf—Rolf! She folded her arms down beneath her face and called his name softly to herself, from utter loneliness.

It was only when she thought of what had happened between them the evening before that her spirit flamed up and made her almost forget her weariness. How could Rolf have been such a fool! She had wanted so little, it seemed to her. She had asked only for his love, his real love—not the secret, somehow shamed desire he had rarely enough shown her. She had asked for love, then. She had never asked another man for that. She had never wanted to. Other men had offered love to her, but she could not take where she could not give. Howard Masterson, who came down from Bethune on Thursday nights to train the choir, had offered his love a year ago, before she had met Rolf. But she had waited—waited until Rolf Gunther had come to her, because she knew she could love Rolf Gunther.

What was it he had said there among the poplars where they had walked at sundown only last evening? She had scarcely heard him at first, so low he had spoken, as if he had been talking to himself rather. “You will never understand . . . you will never understand. Perhaps I can never tell you . . . a man’s wife, Marcia, is something more than—something more than flesh. A man’s wife is—”

She had broken in upon him then. How vividly she recalled the whole, heart-breaking, baffling scene! Her own voice rang back to her, as she had challenged him, scornful and wild, her face flung upward so that the whole sky was in her eyes; she had felt it burning in them, sapphire, and cruel as only loveliness can be cruel. And ah!—there, over her left shoulder, with a thrill of fear and beauty, she had seen the tender crescent of the young May moon! Over her left shoulder—a luckless moon. The poet’s song grown bitter.

"A man's wife! I'm not made to be that kind of wife, Rolf! I'm tired of being a saint. I want to be loved—to have a lover, Rolf. I want you for my lover."

She had seized his hands, forcing his frowning eyes to her own. About them the tiny new poplar leaves had shaken like silver coins. Above them a star had come out, one, then two, pale and weak in the proud color of the sky. And still, destroyingly beautiful, had hung that silver slender spur of the moon of May! When he did not answer her she had gone on and on. . . .

"I've lived all winter with ghosts, Rolf. I can't go on with it. Now you must listen to me. I want more and more of life, Rolf—not denial. I must tell you this, dear—I *must*! Can't you see it all for yourself—as I see it? I can't go on living with your mother. I loathe—I loathe her vicious denial of life. Oh, I know she is a good woman, Rolf, and she is your mother—but I'm telling you that I shall loathe her unless you take me away from her. I can't stand her sense of sin any longer—I can't because I've never understood it. I never shall understand it. And I don't want to be old, Rolf, I want to be young with you. Please, Rolf! Look at me—look at me! Take me in your arms—now—out here—under the sky—as though—as though nothing mattered in all the world except our love, Rolf. Dearest—dear—kiss me—"

He had swayed a little toward her, like some blond warrior wounded and dreadful. He had put forth his hands as though he would have taken her uplifted face between them. Then his shoulders had grown rigid. He had smiled and let one hand rest lightly on her hair, almost as if he were asking her to forgive him for something.

"I think—I can never tell you—so that you will know what I mean. Let us go back to the house now, Marcia."

Some perverse devil had possessed her then. Nothing else could have made her taunt him with the name of Howard Masterson. She wanted to strike him standing there so cool and resolute above her. He would only have smiled at that, of course, and stood there still. But at the mention of Howard Masterson's name he had gone white, slag-gray—there was no color to describe his face. It had gone stone dead, save for the eyes. In their tawny gold lived the stricken terror of an animal. That look had made her glad, insanely glad. A terror-stricken animal will fight. Rolf, with that look in his eyes, would fight for her, fight to keep her, if only—she would tell him that Howard Masterson wanted her, had always wanted her—and was waiting for her to go to him. It would rouse him to madness . . . it would awaken something within him, set something free. . . .

But it had done nothing of the kind. She could not bear to think now of those eyes of his, following her when she had turned and left him. Rolf—Rolf! Had it been nerve-weariness—oh, who could tell what it was, really, that prompted a human being to commit such monstrous folly! If he had only reassured her—even a little.

She could not bear to think of his voice now, heavy, dully challenging. "You won't go away—to him, Marcia!" Over and over again. "You won't go away—to him!"

If he had only caught her up to him instead, and all but crushed her life out! But he had let her turn from him, let her stumble blindly away, groping, running, not knowing where she must go—but that she must not look back. . . .

It would not do to lie here any longer. As it was, she would be home only an hour or so before dawn. Perhaps Rolf would be out looking for her, thinking she had not really meant to go.

She stood up, then paused for a moment, resisting desperately a black surge of oblivion, an exquisite languor that pulled her down. Her mind seemed to clear abruptly. The purpled rim of the horizon lifted about her. The stars pointed down, blanched and unnaturally near.

She started once more toward Amaranth.

From near the town came the whistle of a freight train, a long-drawn, melancholy sound loping in echoes over and over the prairie to the outer source of darkness. How stark and simple night was, stripping the soul of false courage, manacling it, naked, to a shadow and whispering into its ears, like a whimsy, its few and direful truths.

A short distance more and she made her way down the pebbly grade to the shelter of a clump of dogwood and waited while the freight train passed—a solemn creature, she thought, lonely and cumbersome and panting as a decrepit dragon. How she had loved the plodding freight trains in the old days, and the patient red box cars waiting on the sidetracks in Bethune.

She climbed back up the grade, fatigue all but overpowering her. The balls of her feet flamed. Pain, like a demon, whipped at her shoulders and the back of her neck. But she could not give up here. Even after she reached home again, anything approaching collapse would be an alluring luxury which she must sternly deny herself. Dorcas Gunther must never learn of her folly. There would be some way to hide it from her. Rolf, she knew, would not have told his mother yet. His sensitive pride would prevent that. No, no

—this night would forever remain a secret between Rolf and herself. He could forgive, he could be generous, but Dorcas—never.

She had to struggle merely to keep her footing. Now and then tears gathered, but she was insensible to them until they fell, large and cold and startling, upon her burning cheeks. Once, abruptly, she came abreast of a heap of glowing embers beside a little creek that elbowed in toward the track. With fear-shrewd eyes she saw the forms of two or three tramps apparently sleeping about the fire. Ordinarily these casual denizens of summer would not have alarmed her. Now she walked stiffly on tiptoe until the campfire was sheathed over by distance.

Terror and joy swept her alternately. Her terror was a nameless thing, quite apart from any apprehensiveness she held concerning Rolf's reception of her when she returned. Her joy was an unreasoning thing that sent her running breathlessly through the dark like a truant child, running for shelter, for sanctuary, into the arms of the only living being she loved. Rolf Gunther—sanctuary? Her mind fluttered timidly away from that question. It was better, she had found on this mad night, to love than to be loved. She would learn to ask no more.

The town lay before her, at last, a faint star caught in the net of the misted valley. Like a scimitar of smoky silver the river curved about the flats, at the limits of the town. She would descend to the river and keep well into the fields until she neared home.

Once, before leaving the railway tracks, she looked behind her. Somewhere back there, where her feet had left their imprint in the soft ground, or where the stars glimmered out of the sky, lay her last folly, like the cap of youth.

She turned away and went down toward the town.

CHAPTER TWO

THE town slept with the resigned and trustful sleep of the very young and the very old. From the edge of the meadow land that bordered it on one side, Marcia could look down and see the two rows of lights, like a thinly studded cross, that marked the only two paved streets in Amaranth.

There was the meadow land to traverse now, before she could reach the slim white Lutheran church, with its six lean box-elder trees, standing so serenely there at the edge of the town. The dew was heavy on the sweet-grass in the meadow; it washed delicately at her skirts, drenching her shoes and stockings. The smell of sweet-grass belonged to the unutterably stirring things of life: to the memory of her mother, back beyond the all but forgotten years, singing, "Sweet and low, sweet and low, Wind of the western sea . . ."; to the memory of a night in early winter when she was twelve years old and had seen a hare, listening in the moonlight, on new-fallen snow; and to the sound of the autumn wind on the prairie. The scent stole over her like an exquisite nostalgia, the piercing intimation, only, of a longing for the unknown.

It was ironical, she reflected, that she should have chosen a route home that would oblige her to pass two churches, the Lutheran, with its bleak little graveyard where the first pioneers, Germans and Scandinavians, slept; and the Baptist, Dorcas Gunther's church, with its gray stone tower. She had to pass the house of Hector Aldous, too, the town banker, who owned half of Amaranth—and every one of its few hundred souls. The dew-saturated plumes of lilacs leaned from the Aldous hedge and touched her face; if they had only known, she thought, they would have drawn back from her as she passed. On the Aldous lawn the spiræa bushes whitened; the lawn itself, terraced and green, was smooth as the coil of a great wave.

There was a breathlessness about the street where the tall elms, meeting, appeared always to clasp their hands in piety. At the upper end, where the avenue rose against the hillside, stood the small theological school that had given the street its name. That was why people called it College Avenue, to distinguish it from that other paved thoroughfare, which it intersected, and which was known as Lundy Street, because Herb Lundy's store stood on the corner.

Down there, a little more than a block from the intersection, Marcia could see the tiny light that burned all night above Doctor Paul Brule's doorway. Her eyes narrowed with obscure emotion as they glimpsed the

light burning there with its steady, deliberate indifference. Doctor Paul, Rolf's best friend, disliked all women. She had sensed his dislike of her from the first time she had met him. If he were to find out about this night's recklessness he would only despise her the more, in ironical silence without comment. Her fingers crumpled convulsively as she thought of him. As Rolf's friend he might have helped them both. Rolf worshipped Doctor Paul.

One more block still, and then around the corner to the left—just twenty-eight paces to the gate before Dorcas Gunther's house. How often she had counted those steps! It had become a foolish habit which she had been powerless to break. She counted them now, each step an effort of despair. She grasped the pointed pickets at last and paused a moment to steady herself. Somehow, she must open that gate, with its frightful, tiny squeak like the cry of a startled mouse. That gate made of anyone a trespasser.

She was, unbelievably, through the gateway, treading on the soft lawn at the edge of the concrete walk, her eyes fixed upon the house. There was no light in the house. The dark Virginia creeper hung over the front of it, like a mask over a white face, the black eyes of the upper windows staring out from above. For a fleeting instant she had the singular conviction that there was nothing whatever in that house—that it was stark empty. The notion struck coldly upon her mind. It was moments before she could summon the courage to tiptoe up the veranda steps and with shaking fingers try the door.

What if the door were locked against her? But no—Rolf would never do that. Dorcas would do that—if she knew. But the old woman had gone to bed before Marcia and Rolf had left the house. Dorcas had two rooms of her own, her sitting room and her bedroom, both on the first floor, at the back of the house. She would never know whether anyone went out of the house, or came into it. Marcia caught the small knob of the screen door and tried it gently. It moved and the door swung open with a light twang of its wire spring. There on the porch, almost hidden in the shadows, was Dorcas's big chair where she had sat for a while before going to her room. Marcia looked at it as if she were surprised to find it there. It seemed so long since she had seen it last.

There was little danger of Dorcas hearing anyone entering quietly at the front door, even if she had been a light sleeper. But to Marcia, groping her way up the stairs, with their narrow strip of worn carpet, it seemed that every step woke shouting echoes through the house. She would find Rolf in their room, sitting before the window, probably, as he sometimes sat when he found it impossible to sleep. He would have heard her enter—unless—

Her pulses throbbed into a riot of uncertainty. At the landing she pressed against the balustrade for a moment to compose herself. She opened the door of their room. She did not have to call to discover that there was no one there. The dreadful volume of its silence, its emptiness, hurled itself upon her, crushing inward at her breast, and then withdrew into the room, disdainful, hard, unanswering.

The door made a foolish, bright "snick" behind her, as she entered and closed it too abruptly. The sound frightened her, but of course Dorcas could not have heard it. She crept farther into the room, removing her coat with icy hands. She would have to lie down for a minute or two, until the pain in her shoulders and limbs eased a little.

She lay face downward on the bed, her arms gathering the pillows involuntarily, her fingers plucking at them. The objects in the room met her feverish, roving eyes with an obstinate assertiveness projecting out of that blue and black plaited darkness that comes just before dawn. The furniture had taken on the dingy and abandoned look of things in a murky back room of a second-hand shop. The place was unbearable. She sat up and removed her shoes, found her soft-soled bedroom slippers, and drew them on.

She could not go on sitting there gazing at the window. She got up and opened the door quietly, then moved into the hall where she stood listening. She heard only the loud beating of her own heart. Groping her way downstairs again, she went to the door of Dorcas Gunther's room and listened without drawing a breath. Only the sound of the old woman's deep, slightly sonorous breathing came to her.

She drew back rigidly from the door, passing through the little hall that led to the dining room and thence to the living room, an alcove of which constituted Rolf's study. Rolf had once dreamed of becoming a minister. It had been his mother's fond ambition for him. But old man Gunther had died before Rolf had completed his courses, and the boy had taken over the small lumber business his father had built up during the years he had lived in Amaranth. Dorcas Gunther had bowed humbly to God's will.

Marcia moved silently through the rooms, fumbling past the furniture, her eyes seeking out each familiar object, as though here, or here, Rolf might conceivably be found, sitting or standing in the darkness, in his habitual vast, inarticulate silence. It was absurd to expect that she could find him in such a manner, she told herself desperately as she halted before the deep chair that stood by his walnut desk in the alcove. She ran her fingers along the back of the chair; the hard, smooth wood was a cold rebuff.

Suddenly a sob rose uncontrollably in her body, pressing intolerably out of breast and throat. She fled into the front hallway and made her way once more up the narrow stairs.

Removing her dress, she wrapped herself in a kimono and lay down again. She tried to think of where Rolf might have gone. Tramping the fields, probably, or sitting all night long with Paul Brule. It had been nothing but her own vanity that had prompted the thought that he might have gone to Bethune—to find Howard Masterson. She could not think that now. She had no vanity left. She lay shuddering until again that wave of fatigue swept over her like a drug.

The fading darkness breathed upon her like the night-terrors of childhood. Rolf would come in by dawn. She would hear him come up the stairway with his groping step. He never became accustomed to stairways, even in a half-light, no matter how often he had gone up and down them; it was an eccentricity of his of which she had grown fond during the few months she had known him. Perhaps she should have guarded against such sentimentality. There was no place for such in the house of Dorcas Gunther. . . . He would come in by dawn, and his eyes would search hers with that appealing, trapped look the very memory of which was an excruciating twist in her heart. If he had only been able, or willing, to talk to her sometimes, to unburden himself of the harrowing complexities of his spirit! Once or twice he had seemed to be on the verge of revealing himself to her, and then some gloomy inhibition had intervened. His solemnity sat grotesquely upon the beauty of his body, upon the illumined splendor of his face. It was like a somber cloud following and beshading with relentless fidelity some bright, running stream of the earth.

Her eyes were wide and burning now. She was staring at the window where the light was growing ashen. The stars were withering out of the sky. A cool, wet wind, freighted with the smell of lilac, took its precious passage through the open window, and touched upon her cheeks and hot temples. The window held her eyes fascinated. Soon a gaping whiteness would fill the room, sudden and strong and yet impalpable, and that would be day.

Fear seized her so that her teeth chattered crazily. Why in God's name could she not weep, before her throat split with tears? With a writhing, tempestuous motion she turned away from the window. On the wall above her bed, visible now in the gray light, hung the framed motto which Dorcas Gunther had embroidered and placed there, its two flaming words worked in red wool against a white background—"*Repent Ye!*"

Her slowly mounting fear, with its moments of retarding reassurance had suddenly become panic. A dozen explanations of Rolf's failure to return were each and all in sickening succession dispelled by the reminder that for Dorcas's sake, if for no other, he would have come back before dawn, had he been able to come. Would this intolerable waiting, this agonized wondering never come to an end?

She got from her bed and walked frantically about the room, pausing only to stare out of the window, to listen with straining ears at the door. Long, pale ribbons of lavender and flushed gray were unfurling through the garden. The oaks and elms were crested with liquid metals that dropped down and lay like thin bright flakes within the dark bosom of the trees.

Dorcas would be stirring soon. She rose always shortly after daylight, from long habit established in a sense of moral duty. This, of all mornings, Marcia thought, would find the old woman out of bed at a needlessly early hour, rousing the house with the sounds of her resolute, if difficult, endeavors. Rolf always left for the lumber-yard at eight. There would have to be some plausible story to tell Dorcas now. Marcia would have to practise some deception in order to gain time. . . .

There was movement in the house below. Dorcas had risen and was going about the kitchen.

Marcia hastily donned a house dress, her hands shaking unmanageably. She must not go on like this, she told herself, if she were to face Dorcas at all. She seated herself before her mirror and stared at her white face, the infinitesimal tracings of red remaining high in her cheeks, where her vivid color usually was; her eyes were bottomless black wells, the blue crowded out of them almost entirely. She uncoiled the black mass of her hair, that had become so wildly dishevelled. She would wash with cold water, do up her hair quickly, and go down to Dorcas with lips ready to frame the deception. She would tell the old woman anything, if need be, to keep her from asking questions. Later, if Rolf did not come—she put that thought from her with determination. If he did not come at once, she would hurry out of the house, on any pretext whatsoever, and go to Doctor Paul Brule.

Dorcas was bustling about the kitchen with all the appearance of haste she usually displayed in the preparation of a meal for her son. As Marcia entered, it struck her with a pang of intolerable irony that there might not be any necessity for haste. What was this black fear that persisted in haunting her now? She fought it off once more, realizing that it could be nothing more than the result of her nerve-shattering experience of the night.

The wizened, narrow back of the old woman, rigid as a wooden effigy in the stiffly starched, gray calico dress, was turned toward Marcia. Dorcas was stirring something in a saucepan on the range, the great coal range that was kept going day and night, in summer and winter. She did not turn, even to bid Marcia good morning. She would not. To Dorcas, the preparing of food superseded everything else in importance. To the angular lines of her mother-in-law's back, Marcia said, "Goodness, you *are* up early, mother!"

A withered shelf of chin showed over Dorcas's shoulder. The tight coil of hair at the back of her head revealed dark streaks, as a faded garment will show its original color in its seams.

"Rolf said last night that he had to be up early to meet that man from over Bass Lake way," she replied plaintively. "He's up, isn't he?"

Marcia feigned a sigh. "Really, mother, it's quite unnecessary for you to get up so early," she said. "Surely I can—"

But Dorcas interrupted curtly. "I've done for Rolf for thirty years and it won't send me to my grave any sooner to do for him now."

Behind the woman's back, Marcia closed her eyes with a sudden faint feeling. Dorcas was talking on, her voice, high and querulous, chipping at her words. "Not but what I'd have enjoyed an extra forty winks this morning, if it comes to that. I spent a bad night of it. Rolf said he'd fix the leak in that tap for the garden hose—just outside my window. He must have forgotten all about it. All night long, that steady drip, drip, drip on the cement walk just about drove me wild. I s'pose I *could* have got up and closed the window, but I just didn't. He'll have to attend to that this very day. I'm not going to put in another night like that one, I can tell you. Is that boy not getting up?"

"Why, mother, he is up," Marcia said cheerfully. "He went out a while ago. He suffered from a headache most of the night and thought a walk before breakfast would do him good. I wonder if we ate something for supper last night—I don't feel so well myself this morning."

She had gone to the kitchen table where the bread box stood, and had taken out the brown, bulging loaf of bread. Dorcas had made the bread. Things had gone on just the same in the Gunther household after Marcia's coming here. Marcia herself could make bread, light, flavorous bread such as she had made for her father and Ole Jensen, the section-hand who stayed with them in Bethune. But Dorcas had gone on making her own bread for her son.

Dorcas turned on her in surprise. “Why, mercy me, we had nothing but cold-slaw and fried potatoes and cold ham,” she said, sharply indignant. Marcia saw the old woman’s eyes narrow behind her silver-rimmed spectacles. “You *don’t* look very chipper this morning, that’s sure. I hope you’re not coming down with something now.”

“I’ll be all right, mother, don’t worry.” Marcia was doing her best to make her voice sound as it should. If she could only telephone to the lumber-yard, or to Paul Brule’s, without Dorcas hearing!

She had cut the bread and arranged it on a plate, ready for toasting. “I’ll make the toast as soon as you’re ready for it, mother,” she said, her voice trembling in spite of herself.

Dorcas moved about the kitchen like a small, self-sufficient bird. She was horribly like a bird, with that elusive bird-soul of another incarnation, Marcia had always thought. She was small and erect, her eyes dark, piercing and yet unfocussed, with the sharp, meaningless attention of a bird’s. Those eyes had the almost imperceptible, nervous wink of a pullet’s eyes, and at each tiny flash of the dry lids Dorcas Gunther’s head seemed to wobble slightly and readjust itself with resolute, feeble dignity back upon her shoulders.

“I’ll make the toast,” Dorcas replied with vigor. “The best *you* can do is go out and get some fresh air yourself. You look *green*!”

Again the small eyes narrowed resentfully and it struck Marcia with sudden intuition that Dorcas, deep in her mind, was turning over some secret, jealous thought.

“I’ll set the table first, at least,” Marcia ventured.

“There’s nothing to do but turn up the plates,” Dorcas informed her crisply.

Turn up the plates! This habit of Dorcas’s, of setting the table the night before, with the plates laid upside down!

Marcia’s mind hurdled over her usual resentment at Dorcas’s religiously fixed routine, and at the implication that she herself was an intruder in that routine. She had felt from the first that this household had expanded at the cost of no inconsiderable effort to include her, Rolf’s wife. Her mind, however, did not rest upon that this morning. Nor did she give thought, as she had done each morning of this trying spring, to the fact that breakfast at seven meant a half hour for Rolf to walk in the garden with Dorcas, examining new, dutifully risen growth, commenting upon this and that,

while Marcia cleared the table within the house and washed the dishes. She spent no rebellious moments reflecting upon the fact that although they rose at six, there had been scarcely an hour during the day that Rolf could devote to her. It had only been her unusually despondent mood that had moved him, the evening before, to go with her for that walk of theirs among the poplars.

"I think I *will* go out, then," Marcia said, with an effort at being casual. "I'll walk down toward the lumber-yard and probably meet Rolf."

"Well, if it was me," Dorcas observed, "I'd get as much fresh air picking the weeds out of that lettuce patch in the garden. I never saw the like, the way they keep coming up for this time of year."

But Marcia was out of the door. Another instant within the sound of Dorcas Gunther's voice and her nerves would have given way under the strain. But where could she go, now that she was out of the house? Her brain was in chaos, revolving around and around a small blank area at the very center of thought.

The fragile pink of the morning sifted down through the new leaves of the trees; the morning floated, tender and unbearably precious. It had the frangible delicacy of glass too thin. It was the infinitely fine spinning of a spider's web, menaced with the silver weight of dew.

Marcia slipped swiftly about to the rear of the house. There, in the little garage behind the lilacs and the forsythias, stood Rolf's automobile, which had carried him about on his business trips to the neighboring towns and farms. In cans on a shelf stood the remains of the sober dark blue enamel with which he had recently restored its freshness. Beneath the shelf hung a row of tools graduating tidily according to size. At the rear of the garage stood a work-bench, a long table and a pile of lumber. In this nook Rolf had spent many rainy afternoons fashioning shelves, plant stands and racks for his mother. His hands were full of a smooth skill; he could make an ingratiating wooden doll for a neighbor's child, or an intricate frame for one of his mother's samplers. From the briary stalks of an ancient rose tree that had died and had been dug out of the garden, he had fashioned a handkerchief box for Marcia, deftly intertwining the slender branches; the box gave off still a delicately sad and earthy odor.

Her hope that Rolf might have, unbelievably, gone to Bethune died sorely. She looked back at the house, inscrutable fear running wild within her. She would not tell Dorcas yet.

Not until she was out in the street, empty of any morning sight or sound except the flash and turn of wings and sun-pierced leaves, and the voices of birds like tinkling chains through the air, could she decide upon where she should go. There was little choice for her. She would go either to the lumber-yard, down on the flats by the river—or to Paul Brule's place. She hesitated at the thought of going to the yard. Essinger, Rolf's foreman, would be putting in his appearance there in a few minutes and if Rolf was not to be found her coming to seek him would be inexplicable. She determined to see Doctor Paul. She quickened her pace almost to a run as she hurried down the street.

Through a haze of insensibility to her surroundings, the beauty of the morning cried out to her. Immaculately the modest dwellings of Amaranth rose out of their snug gardens, clean and polished as toys for delicate children. The town seemed to have shrunk to a miniature, to have crept under crystal. She felt that she herself had grown out of all proportion and was stalking grotesquely through the amenities of the morning, visible from every tiny, glittering window-pane.

A farmer's wagon was clattering down the avenue toward Lundy Street. From the hillside, near the college, a dog barked. Westward, away from the avenue, a small boy was running with a shining milk pail in his hand, the swing, flash, swing of the pail coming like a signal through the warm light.

Fearfully she slipped through the gateway before Doctor Paul's trim bungalow. She would not ring the bell—there would seem to be something peremptory about that. She would simply knock.

She lifted her hand to the door. The sound of her knocking assailed her distraught senses like some thunderous beating upon the portals of a sepulcher. Then she waited through an eternity of silence.

CHAPTER THREE

HAD it not been for Paul Brule's voice, Marcia had often thought, she would never have found anything likeable in Rolf's best friend, the doctor. His voice was strong and deep, like Rolf's, but it had something more, too. Marcia had wondered much about his voice for days after she had first met him. It was dark with mystery. It had been mellowed in foreign places where Paul Brule had striven to mould his accents to fit a dozen alien tongues. Marcia liked it best when he talked of strange cities he had seen, whose streets and market places he had known, whose byways he had ventured into, and whose nights and days he spoke of in a way that made her think of perfume, or of poems, or of someone singing an old song.

Paul Brule himself had almost spoiled their first meeting. He had come, only a few days after Rolf had brought her from Bethune, to offer his congratulations and to meet Rolf Gunther's bride. He had talked very little that night, sitting slumped down in his chair after the manner of a man whose mind was heavy with melancholy.

Before he left, however, he had brightened suddenly and had taken from his pocket a small piece of green jade, carved exquisitely and mounted in a slender rim of gold. "Just a little token," he had said then, handing it to Rolf. "I had it mounted so you could wear it for a charm. Keep it in remembrance of our friendship. You were so sudden about this that I didn't have time to look for an appropriate gift for the bride."

Rolf had accepted the gift, a little shame-faced and self-conscious. "You don't have to drop a man just because he goes and gets himself married, Paul." But Paul Brule had not replied to that. He had turned instead to Dorcas Gunther, who had left her chair and was standing beside Rolf, eager to see what Paul had given him. "Just a little thing carved from jade by one of the students in a mission in Honan, Mrs. Gunther," he had explained.

A few minutes later, however, talking casually with Marcia, he had said quite irrelevantly, "That trinket, by the way—just between you and me, of course—dates back to the Ming dynasty. The man from whom I bought it—stole it." She had flushed a little, perhaps from resentment that he should have chosen her to share his little deception, perhaps from vexation that he had not told Rolf the truth. It had seemed to her at the time that Paul Brule was a little contemptuous of Rolf, but in that she had been mistaken. There was no contempt in Doctor Paul, only an obscure sort of humor. Curiously like Hugh Vorse in that humor of his, she discovered.

Marcia had never told Rolf the truth about the trinket. Nor had she been able to understand just why she had not told him. Some vague feeling, perhaps, that she had been entrusted with a secret.

She had never been able to account for her feeling for Paul Brule after that night. The trivial secret had risen like a thick wall between her and the doctor. He and Rolf had become closer friends than ever, but Marcia had never quite recovered from the effects of their first meeting.

Doctor Paul Brule himself opened the door in response to her knock. He employed an old railway cook as servant, but the man was both lame and indolent. Brule was in a heavy black dressing gown as he stood, shadowed by his low, dark veranda, and frowned down at her. His frown meant nothing, Marcia reflected. Paul Brule, by no means a mild-visaged man at best, wore a perpetual threatening scowl.

"Doctor Paul," she said quickly, "isn't Rolf here?"

His look squeezed her heart into a tight little knot.

"Certainly not," he said curtly.

There was something he knew. Marcia was sure of that from his manner. Though he was stern in his way, he was not ordinarily so brusque with her. Even a call at this early hour would surely not have vexed him so.

"But he *has* been here, hasn't he?" she persisted.

"Late last night, yes. What's wrong? Here—come inside."

He swung the door back and permitted her to enter. She preceded him into the study where the light was kept burning always throughout the night, a subdued light under a rich, golden-brown shade. It was only a pale glow now in the fresh light of the morning that streamed in through the window. The study itself was a warm brown depth that showed fine facets of books and leather.

In spite of Brule's abrupt reply to her question, Marcia could not quite free herself of the hope that she might find Rolf here. She looked quickly about the room, then swung around and faced Brule, her hands darting nervously out toward him.

"Then—he really isn't here?" she said in a voice that startled her with its shrillness.

"He was here about midnight," Brule told her, "for a couple of hours, I should say. I walked home with him when he left. Have you—been home?"

The merciless blood swept up over her throat and cheeks and temples. Brule's eyes, beneath his heavy brows, were dark and without pity. For moments they stood, face to face, without speaking.

"You know, then?" The words did little more than take shape on her lips. "Rolf told you?"

Brule's lips twitched, deepening the long hollows in his cheeks. "Yes—he told me."

Suddenly she hated him, with a rebellious, bitter hatred, for his feelingless detachment. Why could he not say something instead of standing there uttering maddening monosyllables? She wrung her hands and went toward him, searching his face closely. Perhaps he was torturing her deliberately, luxuriating a little in the fact that her suffering was only the just reward of her own foolishness. He was capable of that, she thought.

"But don't you understand?" she pleaded. "I came home—long before dawn—and he wasn't there. He hadn't been in bed, at all. Where is he, Doctor Brule, where is he? You know—you *must* know. Don't torture me. Can't you see what I've been through? Tell me where Rolf is."

Paul Brule's face darkened angrily. It made him look suddenly old, although he was only a year or so older than Rolf. She shrank back from him.

"I've told you all I know," he said surlily. "I don't know where he is. But I'm not worried about him—and you have no reason to be. Rolf is quite capable of looking after himself. But why should you go looking for him? You left him, didn't you?"

She sank into a chair. Her eyes traveled desperately up over Brule's black silk robe. He was like some mad priest, she thought, witholding absolution. A ferocious, inhuman priest, towering over her in his black cassock.

From far down in her throat her voice issued, toneless, faltering. But her eyes held Paul Brule's eyes, and she knew that he was listening to her.

"I know what you are thinking of me," she murmured. "You think I ran away from Rolf—deserted him—"

"I confess it looks a little like that to me," Brule interrupted. As he spoke, he slipped his cigarette case from a pocket of his gown and opened it.

"But I didn't, I tell you—I didn't!" Marcia protested. "There has never been anyone else but Rolf. I told him last night that we couldn't—that *I*

couldn't live unless—unless things were different. But I didn't know what I was saying. I know now. I know I can go on—with him—if he'll only—"

"A little experience is a wonderful thing sometimes, isn't it?" Brule observed.

The sight of him standing there coolly smoking his cigarette and delivering calm judgment at a time like this was more than Marcia could stand.

"You can't be such a fool—you can't!" she broke out stormily. "You can't help knowing how impossible it has been for me to live in the same house with Dorcas Gunther. I don't belong there."

"Then why didn't you stay where you did belong? Why did you go to live with her?"

"Because I loved Rolf," Marcia told him simply. "Besides, I didn't know what it would be like. I didn't know she'd be watching me every day—every hour—like a hawk. I didn't know she would keep on reminding me that I'm the daughter of a man who was an unbeliever—and a drunkard—and worse. But I've endured it for Rolf's sake. For him I went through that agony of conversion in the church last winter. Why do you think I've been able to endure Dorcas Gunther's long prayers and Bible readings three times a day—and her fear of the devil—and her sense of sin—and all her talk about faith and repentance and salvation—and the whole thing? Why? For Rolf. I used to have some respect for such things—in spite of what they say about my father—but I've come to despise them, hate them—loathe them!"

Paul Brule lifted one hand in a quiet gesture of patience. "Perhaps," he said, "I know more about all that than you give me credit for. Nevertheless," he added, as though he were weighing his words, his eyes not upon her but upon the thin blue cloud of smoke that lay like a floating curtain athwart an early sunbeam, "nevertheless, you have much to be grateful for, my girl."

"I have tried to be grateful," Marcia declared, "but what can you do—in a grave? Rolf had my piano brought up from Bethune and I have scarcely touched it. I've been afraid. I've tried to forget how to sing anything but hymns. I've tried to forget books and poetry and pictures. Can't you understand a little? I didn't think I could ever forget. But I can—I can forget everything—if only Rolf will love me—as I hoped he would. That's what I told him last night."

Her voice failed her completely and she lay back in the chair, exhausted.

Brule looked down at her for a moment in silence. He held his cigarette to his lips, took a last deep breath, then tossed it into a small tray on a table beside him, crunching it down with the end of his thumb.

"Yes," he said, as if to himself. "Then, why did you go to Masterson?"

Marcia straightened and gathered her hands stiffly in her lap. "Rolf told you that, too, did he?" she asked him dully.

"You seem to forget that Rolf and I have been friends ever since I came here two years ago," he reminded her. "Under the circumstances, it isn't hard to understand his telling me—though you probably think it none of my business to enquire into your motives concerning Masterson. If so, you may simply forget that I asked about it. My only concern in this whole affair is to make life a bit easier for both you and Rolf, if I can find any way of doing so. I don't think you will misunderstand that."

"I understand," she told him, "and I'm not ungrateful. But, you see—I didn't go to Howard Masterson."

"I understood Rolf to say—"

"I know. I told Rolf that I was going to him. I don't know why I told him. It was just that I knew Howard in Bethune. I took lessons from him on the piano—and he taught me to sing. He once told me he cared for me—and I think he did. But I couldn't care for him—like that. I wanted to make Rolf angry last night. I thought of Howard coming up here from Bethune every week to choir practice. I thought of him singing—and me. I thought—oh, I don't know what I thought, now. Can't you understand—*anything*?"

Suddenly she stood up, pushing back her hair with both hands. "I—I can't stay here, Doctor Paul. I've got to find Rolf. I've been away from the house long enough now. Dorcas will be wondering why we haven't come back. I told her Rolf went out for a walk early. I—I wish you could come with me. He must have gone down to the yard. Somehow—I can't tell you—I'm afraid. Something may have happened to him."

Brule regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. "Something *has* happened to him," he said at last, "something you will probably never be able to understand."

His manner frightened her. "What do you mean?" she asked him.

"I don't know that you would understand it if I told you," he went on. "What you women never seem to understand is that a man may marry a

woman for a better reason than the fact that he finds himself in love with her."

"I know no better reason," Marcia told him.

"Exactly. You forget that a man can find love—if that's what he wants—almost anywhere. You have been talking about salvation, Marcia. A man's salvation—and his damnation, too—in nine cases out of ten rests with some woman. That's not sentimentality, either. It's the unhappy truth. When I say that something has happened to Rolf Gunther, I mean that Rolf married you as a part of his own hope of salvation. I don't know any other word for it—nor any better. It happens that I know his case, and the word fits. When you told him you were going away with Masterson, Rolf lost the hope he had of saving his soul. I *know* it. Last night I looked on a man who thought himself damned—he said so. He was in a dangerous mood. I thought I had talked him out of it. Then I walked home with him. But the mood evidently came back. Now, you'd better get back home and wait there. He'll be back when he gets it thought through for himself. In the meantime, I'll get dressed and look around for him."

Her eyes dwelt upon him uncomprehendingly. But over her anxiety she saw something in Paul Brule's face that she had never seen there before. Something akin to compassion, she thought.

"I'm going with you—to look for him," she said emphatically. "I can't go back to that house, and to Dorcas Gunther, without him."

He turned suddenly and vanished, without a word, into an inner room.

Marcia waited by the window, her eyes wandering out over the dew-drenched grass of the lawn to the glistening hedge of pale carragana flooded with early sunlight. In an incredibly short time Brule was out of his room again, dressed as carefully as if he had taken an hour to put on his clothes. He was drawing on his gloves as he spoke to her.

"Wait out in front and I'll bring the car around. I think we'll run down to the yard."

It seemed to Marcia like an age before he put his roadster into the short driveway beside the house and swung down to where she waited for him at the edge of the lawn.

"I called his mother," he said when they were in the street at last. "She hasn't heard from him. It's scarcely his way of doing things."

Marcia wanted to ask him what Dorcas had said over the telephone, but she seemed to have lost courage even for that. She pressed her hands together in her lap and leaned forward tensely as the car hurried down the avenue. Paul Brule stared steadily before him, not speaking a word. As they drove into the flats beside the river and turned toward the lumber-yard, Marcia glanced once at his face and surprised there an expression that brought that faint feeling sweeping over her again. Her hands began to tremble violently so that she had to seize her fingers and twist them to keep from crying out.

"You should never have let him go last night," she said finally, unable any longer to bear Brule's silence.

But he said nothing in reply. He brought the car to a halt before the door of the tiny wooden structure that served Rolf for an office. Through the door, which stood open, they could see that no one was within.

"Wait here," Brule said. "I'll find Essinger."

He slipped quickly from his seat and hurried away through the gold-brown village of lumber piles. Marcia waited for only a moment in the car. She could not sit there. Voices were coming to her from the direction of a little wharf that Rolf and Essinger had built last summer, when Rolf had bought himself a canoe on one of his trips to Chicago. She got down from the car and hurried in the direction that Paul Brule had gone. Presently she emerged from behind a pile of lumber at a point that commanded an unobstructed view of the river and the little wharf. Down there, in the apricot-colored sunlight, was a strangely postured group of men—three—or was it four? Paul Brule was there—kneeling beside something on the ground. The men were stooping again . . . lifting . . . talking in low tones. Her eyes swam. . . .

Against the sheen of the water she caught a glimpse of Rolf's canoe, one end touching the shore where it had drifted, light and empty as a green leaf.

It was her cry that brought Paul Brule running to her. Her eyes fixed themselves upon him and indifferently they told her that his face was livid. Dully his voice came to her, never so stern, so sharply demanding.

"Stop it! Do you hear me! You can't let down now!" He spoke more softly then. "Essinger found him . . . near the edge . . . only three feet of water." He came close and caught her roughly or she would have fallen. "Listen, Marcia—Marcia Vorse! Rolf Gunther met with an accident, do you

understand! No one must know anything else—no one must *think* anything else. That must remain a secret between you and me. Understand?"

How could she understand? A secret! Her mind turned crazily about a trinket of green jade . . . carved in Honan . . . no, dating from the Ming dynasty. . . . Was that the secret?

Suddenly her body became a stiff stalk, broken at the root.

CHAPTER FOUR

In thin melancholy, its notes separate and pure as the beads of a rosary, as the words of an old song, as the tears of a familiar sorrow, came the angelus from the southern dwindling of the little town. As the last note failed and merged into the twilight sky of September that pierced the heart with its intimations, three chimes sounded from the northward, from the belfry of the Lutheran Church there. Three high and fragile echoes they were, faltering into the notes of the first bell like a frail hand laid within a dying.

Years ago, scrupulous Lutherans of Amaranth had protested against the introduction of this custom, scenting popery. But the two old men of God, fast friends for years, never known to have discussed their doctrinal differences together, had continued to ring out every evening upon the town their tranquil benediction, and the reassurance of each to the other that life was good. Old folk of Amaranth, in the stillness of their years, heard the bells and ceased their nodding, and with wryly tilted heads counted the strokes, muttering secretly about the slow march of the hours. A poet or two, in the College on the hill, had heard the bells weep in November dusks olive-colored with rain and dead, blown leaves. Young theologians, walking alone, had heard them doubt and wonder—and doubt again. Children, pausing in their greedy last hour of play, had waited for that sweet lull that follows a bell's ringing, when the air holds lightly a thousand small voices singing on and on to the far edges of the world. And tramps had cowered away from the sound of those bells, withdrawing into the shelter of the neatly squared piles in the lumber-yard down beside the railway track.

Marcia Gunther knew all these things about the bells. It was merely part of that knowledge of hers about things which she never shared with anyone in Amaranth. She shared her life with no one now—except, of course, with Rolf, who was closer to her in these days than her own life. She could talk to Rolf now, any time when she was alone and away from Dorcas. Once, when the catalpa tree was in white bloom in the garden, Dorcas had come out and found her there, resting against the tree, her lips moving in a whisper. Dorcas had spoken sharply to her then, her face tightly sealed, like a parchment that might bear fearful runes: "I declare! The way you carry on! Out here all alone—talking to yourself. It's enough to give anyone the creeps, the way you go on. It's no wonder people ask queer questions about you. They'll all be thinking you're out of your head, if you don't change. Come—inside, now—and rest on the veranda."

Dorcas had spoken reproachfully, but at such times no one could really reproach her. No one could come close enough to bring a reproach. Between her and the world she had known, shielding her now as he had never done in those other days, stood Rolf Gunther. She had gone in from the garden with Dorcas and had sat for a long time in the porch swing, but she had smiled to herself with her own gentle knowledge. After all, Dorcas owed her something now. Had she not cared for the old woman night and day for weeks after Rolf had been drowned. . . . Yes—drowned! That's what they all said.

The town was wide and murmurous as a flood of mist about her, at this hour. Gorgeous trees, darkening within, rode like islands through the flood. She thought of how, coming from the flat prairie-candor of Bethune—was it only a year since?—she had first looked upon Amaranth as a sort of interlude in the earth's life. Perhaps, she had fancied, when the earth here at a momentous crisis in its experience had stretched out like a smooth tide into the west, this little valley had curled itself inward, reticent as a shell. The coming of the town had been no violation of its reserve. It may even have been that the town was looking for just such a sanctuary where its shy consciousness would not be disquieted by the alarums of progress. Here was no echo of the stridor of those cities whose very names clanged with the structure of steel and stone beating down the structure of the earth. The shell of the valley heard only its own murmur, its own ancient music, of which it never tired, nor bade for change.

Marcia had found that one could walk in the white and isolating dream of falling snow, or under the hot blue blaze of the August sky, or in the wind or rain of any season, and be made intensely aware of the pause of life here. One listened spellbound to the instant of hesitation in the earth's pulse, to the sudden lapse in the wind; one waited, listening, for a footfall over some airy threshold, a footfall that never came. She had come to know, with the arrival of her first summer in Amaranth, that for her the town might have been but a whimsical afterthought of Death upon Life.

Her mind strove to veer away from its course, to cling to the tender, irrational mood that had been enfolding her. Perhaps its was madness, this ever-returning sense that Rolf was beside her, closer than he had ever been in life. Sometimes it frightened her, and then would follow the crucifying hours of knowledge that Rolf was dead, dead. She beat the thing back now, quickening her pace as though to escape, physically, from it. Before Dorcas she must always be unswervingly controlled.

A chill rash of perspiration broke out on her brow, and on the backs of her hands. But it was not from hurrying, she knew that, although it was no longer easy for her to hurry. She bore constantly on her heart the fear that, somehow, Dorcas Gunther would learn the truth about what had happened on that night in May, four months ago now, when Rolf had left her to face a world he could not face himself. The fear persecuted her. Before her eyes the old woman loomed up at times to a gigantic height, ready to beat down upon her with her thin, pointed knuckles, like steel studs. It had begun to make a coward of her, especially in the dark of her own room where her fancy was without the restraining effect of Dorcas's presence. It was not unreasonable to believe that one could die of remorse. One died, really, over and over again.

It was best to fill your mind with sound, square things, like the four outlying corners of Amaranth and all that they enclosed. She would always have the sense of having become acquainted with the town as the blind become acquainted with the raised letters on a page. She could point out, eastward from the avenue, the dozen or more homes of the well-to-do, guarded austerely by the belfry of the Baptist Church. She knew that in those self-conscious and mildly pompous dwellings on the hillside to the north, the professors and their families lived, the college forming the center of the cluster. To the westward lay the flats by the river and the squalid shacks of the squatters, and southward the Catholic Church with its uplifted cross, wearing its ivy like a surplice.

But of the people she knew nothing. She saw them as they saw her—through the curiously colored prism of hearsay. Rolf had told her of Hector Aldous, the banker, and of old Absolom Peck, the mayor, who had bought six sections of land in the county when it was only five dollars an acre. The Reverend Thomas Neering, Dorcas Gunther's minister, had money in his own right—or was it his wife's? Hepzibah Cropp, Mr. Neering's aunt, lived just across the way from the parsonage and was "queer." Each week Herb Lundy, who owned the large store on the corner, would approach Mr. Neering discreetly, and articles which poor Hepzibah had innocently taken a fancy to would be returned to the Lundy counters and show cases.

Of course, there was Nora Hanrahan, who lived in a rambling cottage on almost an acre of quaint garden just south of the College. Marcia *knew* Nora Hanrahan. She had known her, it seemed, the instant they had met on that afternoon a few days after Marcia had come to Amaranth. They had met at Nora's gateway, where Marcia had paused in her walking to pluck stealthily a drooping dahlia from a flowered border that led from the house to the

street, on either side of the narrow, well-kept walk. She did not know that she was being watched until a voice spoke from the porch and she looked up to see a sturdy woman of nearly forty stepping down to meet her. “You’re the girl Rolf Gunther has brought up from Bethune for a present to his mother,” the woman had greeted her with a friendly chuckle. “Well, I’m Nora Hanrahan, the town gadabout. Come along in. I’d like to talk to you.” They had talked and laughed and drunk tea together for an hour before Marcia realized that the afternoon was gone. She had hurried away then, with an armful of asters to grace the table for Rolf’s supper. Dorcas had shrugged her shoulders at the sight of the brightly-colored blooms and had said nothing when Marcia spoke of Nora Hanrahan. But the next morning the flowers were gone from the table. The simple glass bowl that had held them was empty and had been put back in its place on the sideboard. It was then that Marcia had learned that it was better not to ask any questions of Dorcas Gunther.

Marcia had seen little of Nora Hanrahan since the spring. Such warmth of human companionship was not for her—she needed no one to remind her of that. And Nora had not forced her friendship upon her.

Marcia drew in her sharpened breath and knew that she must walk erect, inconspicuously. From behind the unlighted windows of the avenue eyes would be upon her, the eyes of the respectable people of Amaranth, who were undoubtedly wondering still, after almost a year, how poor Rolf Gunther had come to marry Marcia Vorse, out of Bethune, that iniquitous town. No sympathy for her would allay that wonder, to which now had been given the added zest of incredulity. The months had slipped away and expectations had not been realized. The vulgar surmise had been amiss.

She walked faster, squaring her shoulders, shifting her parcels from one arm to the other. The whole town would know by now, she reflected. Herb Lundy’s wife, that very afternoon in the store, had asked her point-blank and Marcia had replied simply, without evasion. Mrs. Lundy’s telephone served purposes more interesting than the receiving of orders for flour and sugar and pearl buttons.

The avenue began to lift gently now. To the right, at the next corner—those twenty-eight paces down the narrow wooden sidewalk—and there was the House again. Always, always, wherever she went, or whatever she did—this endless coming back again to the house. It had become a nightmare.

When she came to the corner she relaxed a little. She had passed beyond the prying eyes. She walked more slowly. An unreasoning fear of stumbling had seized her of late every time she set foot upon that ill-kept walk. She would have to pick her steps carefully.

There flashed into her mind again the dialogue that had taken place between herself and Mrs. Lundy. She had managed somehow, at the time, to keep from flaring with anger, scorn. Now the back of her neck burned.

"Your poor soul! You ought to try a little baking-soda, with hot water, first thing in the morning, honey," the woman had whispered, hoarsely discreet, her eyes rolling about the store as though their sockets were oiled. An old farmer had eased himself against the opposite counter, leaning on an elbow, one red, scaly hand folded over the other, had eyed her slowly up and down, and shifted quid. The delivery boy had detained a crate of eggs in mid-air and surveyed her with gross physiological curiosity.

It was the resulting humiliation, perhaps, that had goaded her into buying this finer nainsook, five cents more the yard than Dorcas had said would be sufficient to pay for it. Five cents more the yard—fifty cents instead of forty-five. She quailed a little now as she thought of Dorcas's face, at the slow, deliberate tightening of her expression when she should hear of the fifty cents.

A gentle faintness swept over her, almost imperceptible. She told herself that it was this new thing that was with her like an elusive yet powerful presence. Old Doctor Schemmel, to whom she had gone, had told her not to be alarmed at such symptoms. She knew this faintness, however, had come upon her at the thought of Dorcas. That growing feeling mingled of fear and hatred might kill her some day, she thought, might come upon her suddenly and strangle her.

Here was the hedge now. And the wrought-iron gate with its spear-head pickets. She opened it painstakingly and closed it behind her as though it were something easily broken. Dorcas had only to hear a latch click ever so gently to have ready a sharp reminder of Marcia's unfortunate upbringing.

She faced the house and saw it again as she had seen it for the first time nearly a year ago. Cream brick it was, the screened veranda in front and the entire left side of the building matted with Virginia creeper. She stared at it. Now and again, as upon that first time, the vine seemed to crawl and crawl, tendril over tiny tendril, spreading from a deep central force like sea-foam on sand, and gaining way with its delicate, relentless grasp. The vine ran faintly pink in this light; the suggestion was sinister.

Dorcas sat within the sifted dusk of the veranda. She wore a white wool scarf, so long that her feet, on a green felt footstool, were wrapped in one end of it. Her stout cane leaned against her chair, ready to hand. She did not speak as Marcia entered. Her face was turned toward the screen beyond which the catalpa tree stood.

"I'm back, mother," Marcia said wearily, drawing her breath in with difficulty. Her throat and breast felt sore, as though she had been running against the wind.

By way of coming to life, Dorcas drew a faint sigh. "I see," she remarked shortly. She did not turn her head from its awkward position toward the screen.

"I've been away longer than I thought I'd be," Marcia went on, seating herself for a moment on the edge of a porch chair and laying her parcels in her lap. "I just can't hurry, though. It seems the least effort—"

Still Dorcas did not move her head. She cleared her throat faintly, fastidiously, as though dislodging from it some constricting malice. "Well," she said, "I had *my* work to do when I was like you—and I *did* it. I did it without the help you have, too."

Marcia lifted her eyes slowly and looked at Dorcas Gunther. She was hard, and cold, and gray, like the setting in of winter. Her eyebrows were short and black above her restless, restless eyes. Her mouth was a compressed, uneasy line. Her thin hands lay always still, now, folded tightly in her lap. She was bitter, she was obstinate, she was senselessly cruel, and yet she was pathetic, too, when one paused generously to think of how she had suffered, was suffering even now. Rolf had gone from Dorcas forever—but Rolf still lived for this girl he had brought into the house as his wife. That mystical possession gnawed relentlessly at Dorcas Gunther's heart, Marcia knew. And on that day when Marcia had returned from Doctor Schemmell's and had told her what was to be, the old woman's feelings had flamed so suddenly, though she was still bedridden, that Marcia had hurried from the house to escape her violence.

"Do you think you ought to sit here any longer, mother?" Marcia asked as she prepared to get up again and take her parcels into the house. She strove to keep her voice gentle as she spoke. She must not let that tide of anger and impatience come over her again. It was especially bad for her just now. It always left her weak afterwards. She gathered up her parcels and got to her feet. "It has been warm, but there's a little chill in the air now that the sun has gone."

When she received no reply she went into the house and laid the small packages of groceries on the table in the kitchen. Then she passed into the dining room, switched on a wall-bracket there, and unwrapped the packages containing the gingham for the aprons, and the nainsook. She glanced once through the square arch with its green velour curtains. The front door was still open, as she had left it. Dorcas had not come in. She knew the old woman was sitting out there listening to the undoing of the parcels. She could feel it. She thought of the cat she and her father had had at home in Bethune, that could hear from the attic a parcel of meat being untied in the kitchen.

She spread the gingham out on the table. It had a good smell, substantial, friendly, reassuring. Four yards of plain blue, four of pink pin-check. She would trim each apron with pipings of the other. Blue on pink—pink on blue. Her father used to sew gingham dresses for her. Actually. It was incredible now, as many things were that had seemed only natural then. She picked up the nainsook and rolled it in with the gingham, laying the bundle on the hood of the sewing machine where it stood between the two rows of potted geraniums in the bay window.

The window was open an inch or two and through it a light breeze entered and made the marquisette curtain yawn gently. The air caressed her hands. It was cool and moist as newly turned soil. She became giddy from the life-smell of it. Her fingers clenched and opened, as though to seize the thing that was there, blowing in to her out of the soft gray dark. Reality, living, bitter-sweet, grave and beautiful reality of night in early autumn! Reality flowing into this house where only Death lurked! She closed her eyes and stood still, facing the window.

When she lifted her eyes presently and glanced sideways, scarcely turning her head, she saw Dorcas Gunther's shadow on the wall. A small and pinched shadow it was, trailing a fainter shadow like a long web—the wool scarf. Marcia felt the cold prickling of her skin over her whole body.

She turned and faced the old woman. "I didn't hear you come in," she murmured.

"No," Dorcas said, "you didn't. I don't know where your wits are. You didn't know I came into the house this morning, either, when you were playing the piano."

Marcia felt herself reddening. Her throat throbbed. It all was so ludicrous, so insane. What in the world had she done now?

"Why—yes, mother," she said, "I heard you come in from the garden. I knew—"

"You knew!" Dorcas interrupted her sharply. "What you don't seem to know is that hymns are written to be played and sung to the glory of God—not to be danced to."

Marcia remembered now. She had found a hymn-book open on the piano, a hymn-book—standing there so sober and erect where the sun streamed in through the window. As she started to play, the melody had seized her, as if it had been no hymn at all. She had made something else of it. It was the first time she had touched her piano since Rolf had died.

She stood aghast at the sheer frenzy in Dorcas Gunther's face. The woman was mad. She retreated a step before the bony, clenched fist, half-raised.

"The sun was streaming in through the window, mother," she explained hurriedly. "I felt—"

"Yes—you felt! I know what you felt!"

Of course, Marcia thought triumphantly, Dorcas did not know. She could not know that Marcia had felt Rolf's presence, close to her there, in the sun's radiance, all about her like the rapturous morning itself. What if she should tell Dorcas that now! What if she should tell her the whole truth about herself and Rolf—and how her own agony of remorse was alone responsible for the fact that she had stayed on in this house! What if she should tell her that some precious hope of atonement had alone kept her soul alive during these weeks!

Dorcas stubbornly pursued her thin complaint. "You'll have to forsake your old ways, Marcia Vorse! I'll have none of it while I'm alive to stop it. And now that brother Jonas is coming to live with us, there'll be no place here for such goings-on." She turned away and went to the kitchen where she began her vigorous preparations for supper.

Her brother Jonas! Rolf had told her something of old Jonas Todd. Dorcas had never spoken of him before in her hearing. Why had she said nothing about her plan to have her brother come to live with them? Nothing annoyed Marcia more than the old woman's habit of investing the most trivial things with an air of secrecy.

Without a word, Marcia began setting the table for supper. She must not let such petty things annoy her so. She laid the table with a white cloth, and in the center a bowl of purple asters which Dorcas had cut from her garden

that afternoon. Marcia thought once again of the great purple blooms that Nora Hanrahan had given her nearly a year ago. She wondered vaguely about Nora. . . . She would use the blue plates tonight, the ones Rolf had bought for her on his last trip down to Chicago. . . . She often thought it would be nice to talk with Nora again. Marcia had passed there, almost a week ago now, and had paused to look in at the gate. The doors were closed and the shades were drawn in the windows. . . . Two cups and two saucers on the left of Dorcas's place—and the little square of glazed tile, with the blue monk's head, for the teapot. . . . Sooner or later, of course, she would learn all about Nora's absence as she learned everything, from hearsay. . . . Perhaps she could help in the kitchen now. . . .

She stood back and surveyed the table absently. She placed Dorcas's chair—the one that had been Rolf's—more squarely in its place.

"I forgot to ask you about the nainsook."

Dorcas spoke suddenly from the kitchen. The voice startled Marcia, as it always did when she was not expecting it, in spite of the fact that it carried a note of pleasant interest—almost as if Dorcas might be thinking of buying nainsook herself.

"Yes, mother," Marcia said quietly as she entered the kitchen, "Mrs. Lundy had it. I got ten yards."

"What did you pay for it?"

There it was at last, Marcia thought. "Why—let me see." She was taking the bread from the box, her back turned toward Dorcas. She smiled secretly, with ridiculous daring. "It must have been forty-five—no, fifty cents a yard. Yes—it was fifty, because the gingham was thirty cents a yard, and that left —"

Some perverse devil had taken control of her mood. She could have chuckled from sheer delight at what she knew was passing in Dorcas's mind.

"You asked how much it was, didn't you, before you bought it?"

Dorcas's voice maintained that slender margin of generosity which barely gives another the benefit of a doubt. Marcia knew, however, that the old woman trembled on the very edge of amazement, of puny outrage.

"Oh, yes—of course I did."

Dorcas was standing beside her now, removing the slippery skins from new beets she had boiled that afternoon. The smell was nauseating—like

warm flesh. Marcia hurried into the dining room to place the bread on the table.

The old woman's voice followed her, edged with impatience now. "Well, then, you *must* have known it was fifty cents."

Marcia seized the back of the chair that had been Rolf's. She closed her eyes. Her daring, perverse mood had suddenly deserted her. She felt abruptly weary, as though some insidious drug were draining away her consciousness. It was odd how this experience had attacked her of late. She did not reply to Dorcas. She preferred to let herself drift, unresisting. The old woman's voice took up the plaint again—a querulous plaint, a plaint about fifty cents. But to Marcia's senses the sound became more and more distant.

". . . If I didn't think of things, I'd like to know where we'd be . . . I talk and talk, but I'm tired of talking . . . it fairly tuckers me out to be always on the lookout . . . getting nowhere for all my trouble. . . ."

All at once Marcia was clearly alert, excitement shaking her limbs. Something had happened, something extraordinary, something miraculous. She pressed her hands—her arms—vehemently about her body.

She turned and saw Dorcas standing in the doorway. The old woman was peering at her curiously—comprehendingly, too. She had ceased speaking, abruptly. In that moment, perhaps, whatever forgotten tenderness still remained in Dorcas Gunther's soul fluttered upward and deepened the expression in the small, sharp eyes that sought Marcia's face enquiringly.

Marcia had no need to speak.

"It's bad luck to feel life first at the full of the moon," Dorcas said in a low voice. "There's no cradle in the full moon."

Then she was gone—like a wraith.

Marcia moved slowly, quieting her heart, away from the table, into the hallway, up the stairs. From the open window of her room—her room and Rolf's—she could see the moon, now barely risen, ovate and blood red.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN she emerged out of the dusk of the avenue and came under the light that fell from the windows of Herb Lundy's store, the thought came to Marcia that in a small town on a Saturday evening in late April, there is an atmosphere of mildly exciting finality; as though there were to be no tomorrow, the world probably ending, in decorous mood, with the tremble of the first star. Here on the corner, it seemed, the straggling remnants of life had drawn in to spend their little hour together, talking and laughing in tiny challenge to their fate. The thought had come to her before, many, many times in the past three years, and she had shared her fancy with Rolf, listening with the intent ear of her inner mind—where she had come to live almost entirely now—for his response.

The voices dropped abruptly to silence and low whisperings when she came under the light from the windows. She knew they had seen her, those shadowy forms that stood together just beyond Herb Lundy's lights. She had no need to guess the meaning of their whispers. The town had it that Marcia Gunther had gone a little "queer." Dorcas had lost no opportunity to remind her that people asked about her now with embarrassing solicitude.

Yes, if you kept almost wholly to yourself, living in a dream, you probably *were* queer. If your heart held secrets you could not tell, heard voices that others could not hear, knew hours of sorrow and hours of gladness, too, that set you apart, kept you aloof. Three years had woven a mist about Marcia Gunther, within which she lived with the terrors and beauties that were secret to her own soul. From her strange enchantment, she viewed without resentment that curious little world that looked askance at her when she walked down the street, and whispered asides when she went to church sociables. Of late, indeed, she had grown curiously immune even to Dorcas, whose mock humility, whose smug penitence, whose fusty godliness had dropped into insignificance. Old Jonas, of course, had helped Marcia to readjust herself—he was one more in the house, at any rate, and bore his share of Dorcas's querulousness. Then, too, there was little Rolf whose mere presence seemed to render Marcia almost invulnerable to the old woman's truculence.

She hurried into the store, but not quickly enough to escape the sound of ill-repressed titters that followed her out of the shadows where she had heard the whisperings. A half dozen people stood about; Laura Prouty, buying something at the dry-goods counter where Mrs. Lundy was in attendance; Hess, the farmer who supplied milk to half the population of Amaranth,

getting his groceries from Herb Lundy, while two other farmers, with their backs to the counter, made the air blue with their reeking pipes. It seemed to Marcia that all eyes turned to her the moment she came through the doorway. Herb Lundy himself, his head lowered so that he could look over the rims of his glasses, peered at her as if she had been a stranger, then nodded curtly without speaking.

"Good evening, Marcia Gunther," Mrs. Lundy called. "Come on over here and talk to Laura and me. I'll be ready to get you what you want in a minute now."

Marcia seated herself on a stool beside Mrs. Prouty.

"We mentioned your name just a minute ago," Mrs. Lundy said. "Speak of angels, eh?"

"I often think devils are more prompt in that respect than angels," Marcia suggested.

The next moment she could have sworn that Laura Prouty flashed a very meaningful glance at Mrs. Lundy. But the woman behind the counter was busy measuring a piece of white cotton, counting off the yards aloud.

". . . five . . . six—and a half, you said?"

"Six and a half," Laura Prouty replied, then turned to Marcia. "I've been thinking of going down for an afternoon with Dorcas, but, my land, there isn't time for half the work a person has to do around the house."

"What would you do, then, if you had to spend half your day in a store?" Mrs. Lundy asked.

"I wouldn't do it, that's all. I just wouldn't. But how is Dorcas, Marcia?"

"Much better, now that the weather is warm and she has a chance to get out," Marcia replied.

"And the little fellow? Last time I saw him, I thought he was getting to look more and more like his father every day."

"He always was the living image of his father, poor wee dear," Mrs. Lundy added.

"I suppose that's natural enough," Marcia remarked, a little sharply. It was hard to be patient with women like Laura Prouty and Mrs. Lundy.

"I suppose so," Laura observed, "but most boys seem to favor the mother's side. Take mine, for example."

She must needs go into the problem, talking on and on, with only a momentary interruption here and there to answer some question of Mrs. Lundy's concerning what she was buying.

"And now, Marcia," Mrs. Lundy said finally, as Laura Prouty took her parcels and left, assuring Marcia that she was going to run in and see them all in a day or so.

Marcia gave her order briefly.

"Yes, we were speaking of you—not five minutes before you came through the door," Mrs. Lundy began, as if Marcia's order could not be filled unless there was something to talk about meanwhile.

"Dorcas tells me I come in for a good deal of talk," Marcia retorted, with a sudden reckless disregard for what she said.

"Oh, I don't mean anything like that, honey," Mrs. Lundy assured her. "I always say people who have nothing to do but talk about other people ought to stay at home and look to their own affairs. They'd have enough to do, too, if they did it. No, we were just saying how nice it was of you to take such an interest in that little Percival girl."

Hally Percival, who lived with her mother in a shack in the flats, had been coming to Marcia once a week for music lessons. Marcia recoiled instinctively at the thought that little Hally's name had even been mentioned by Mrs. Lundy and Laura Prouty.

"Hally is doing very well with her music," she replied, immediately on the defensive.

"She's a bright little thing, isn't she?" Mrs. Lundy remarked. "I'm glad you have the time—and the talent, too—to give her. If her mother was anything like what she ought to be—though I do say she's the best dressmaker we've had in Amaranth for many a day."

Something was coming now, Marcia thought. For one brief moment she debated with herself whether to change the subject at once or give the woman the opportunity she craved. But Mrs. Lundy was not one to hesitate.

"What's more," she went on, "she's one who pays cash for what she gets—or she don't ask for it. And that's more than a lot of others do—that *have* it, too. She hasn't owed us a cent since she came here a year ago. But—as the saying is—murder will out. There's a woman in Cleveland, a friend of Laura's, who has it on good authority that Mrs. Percival spent a term in the workhouse—or the woman's reformatory—or whatever it is they call it.

Laura says she knows now that Hally's mother never *was* married. Of course, I say there's lots of women that are married and ain't a whit better—nor maybe as good—the way they carry on nowadays. Laura Prouty always gets so roiled up over such things. She'd be for running her and the little girl out of the church and all that, but I said no, I didn't think it was the Christian way to act to a woman, no matter what she is. Though as far as that goes, a town like ours would be just as well off without such people. Living down there in the flats, too, and all alone. It *doesn't* look right. Why didn't she stay in the city where nothing would be thought of it?"

Marcia's voice was unsteady as she spoke. "Perhaps Mrs. Percival has her own reasons for wanting to live here, Mrs. Lundy. She's not the only one in Amaranth who—"

"You're right there, honey," Mrs. Lundy broke in. "I'd be sorry to think I helped to drive the nail into anybody's coffin, let alone a poor body that's making her way honestly—if she *is*, of course."

Marcia did not reply. She felt ridiculously like crying, and she had not cried for years. The image came to her, suddenly, of ten-year-old Hally Percival, with her dry, brown pigtail, and her thin little body curved over the piano, desperately seeking out the keys of "Sing Little Robin." Hally's mother, a mouselike little woman, with a narrow, worn face, took in sewing—and owed no one a penny. Marcia had met her first at a church festival and had heard all about Hally, who could never get enough of music. Well, the town was taking hold of Hally's mother, though the poor woman might very easily have felt the hands of the Laura Proutys and the Mrs. Lundys in other towns before coming to Amaranth. The trouble was that a woman never got used to having such hands take hold of her. If one only could!

When she could get her parcel she caught it up, paid for what she had bought, and hurried from the store.

In the comforting shadows of the avenue, she walked more slowly. There was no need for haste now; little Rolf had been asleep in his cot before she left the house. Dorcas would have gone to bed, too; only old Jonas would be puttering about the house, or sitting by himself in the darkness on the veranda.

A flutter of nervousness passed over her as she walked past Doctor Paul Brule's house somberly mewed up in the blue shadows of its cedars. Above the door the little light was already burning. The light had become a symbol to Marcia Gunther. Between her and Paul Brule a monstrous secret had lain for nearly four years now. It seemed to her that Paul Brule kept that light

above his door for her alone, to remind her of what she had done, to remind her of the compact they had made in order that the town should never know the truth, to remind her, too, that the heart's release is bought with bitterness. She did not struggle against her fate. The gloom into which she had withdrawn held its tortures of remorse, but it held its ecstasies, too.

For a year after that compact had been made between them, she had been unable to meet Paul Brule, to encounter the unrelenting stoniness of his eyes, to brook the elaborate courtesy with which he treated her, knowing all the while that in his heart he despised her. When she had sought the services of old Doctor Schemmel at the birth of little Rolf, Dorcas had all but turned her out of the house. But Marcia had made her excuses and had her way. The old doctor had died the following winter and Dorcas had taken it upon herself to summon Brule one morning in early spring when the baby awoke with the whooping-cough. He had come and sat beside the cot for more than an hour, his eyes fixed upon the child, the muscles of his face set hard in secret struggle. A victory had been won that morning, Marcia knew, though Paul Brule had left the house without speaking a word to her save what the occasion demanded. In the weeks that followed he had grown to love the infant son of his friend, Rolf Gunther.

Marcia always turned, after she had passed Brule's place at night, for one backward glance at the little light above the doorway. Some night, perhaps, she would pass that way and Paul Brule's light would not be burning. Some day, perhaps, her penitent years would reach an end.

Here was the street now, down which she must go. Here were the steps to count again, and here the hedge, a dense brush of clipped twigs, knobs of swollen buds clinging to them like snails. Here, too, was the wrought iron gate for her to open, and to close carefully, carefully. The spiræa bushes stood within the gate, and on the left, precisely in the center of the lawn, loomed the catalpa tree, wounded-looking from recent pruning. Dorcas had a passion for curbing growth, a passion for the prim patterns of denial.

Marcia took a step or two up the walk, then paused and looked back over her shoulder, beyond the closed gate. All of April stood there, young and wild and strange, shut out.

It was Monday morning. From her window, while she dressed little Rolf, Marcia could look down into the garden where old Jonas, on his hands and knees, was digging up young cabbage plants he had put into the ground on Saturday. He had set them out, apparently, contrary to orders from Dorcas as

to where they should go. He was patiently correcting his error now, although the ground was wet and soggy from the rain that had fallen during the night. The skies still hung gray and threatening. In the kitchen below, Dorcas was singing, her voice shrill and determined.

Rolf, standing on a chair and holding a rubber ball at arm's length while Marcia put him into his rompers, cocked his head to one side and frowned, listening. "Gran'mother singing?" he queried.

"Yes, dear," Marcia told him.

The boy thought for a while, his gold mesh of curls, so like that other Rolf's, tumbling down over his lowered eyes. "*Why* is gran'mother singing?" he demanded at last, tossing his head imperiously. Ah, that gesture! Marcia's heart shrank. That was herself, as she used to be.

"Because there are clouds in the sky, Tinker, and it's hard for the sun to shine through."

Paul Brule had called him Tinker after that first visit and they had all fallen into the habit, almost unconsciously.

"Will *that* make them go 'way?" he asked.

"Perhaps, dear. Singing makes you cheerful, and then you don't see the clouds."

"Cheerful?"

"Yes—happy—glad. Grandmother wants Tinker and mother and Uncle Jonas to be glad."

She picked him up, hugged him with the brief intensity against which he was already beginning to rebel, and set him upon his feet on the floor. "There, now, we'll go down to breakfast," she said.

"Can I go down to Lundy's store with Uncle Jonas, Mumfer? In his wheel-barrow? Can I?"

"If Uncle Jonas is going—and if he wants to take a little boy."

"Why haven't we got a store, Mumfer?"

"Only rich people have stores, Tinker."

"We're not rich, are we, Mumfer?"

"Oh—Mumfer, Mumfer, Mumfer!" Marcia cried, kissing him. "No, dear, we're not rich. Come along, now. Grandmother is waiting for you."

Dorcas was indeed waiting for them, sitting stiffly in her place, her wool shawl about her shoulders, her bony fingers beating a light and rapid tattoo on the edge of the table.

"I want to go with Uncle Jonas," Rolf said as he came running into the dining room.

"Come now, young man—none of that!" Dorcas commanded sharply. "Get to the table. Aren't you coming, Jonas?"

Jonas had come in from the garden and was washing his hands in the kitchen. As Dorcas spoke, he came pattering in, looking anxiously from Dorcas to Marcia, patting the back of one hand with the fingers of the other, shifting almost furtively about until he came to his place at the table and sat down. His clothes were redolent of soil and fertilizer.

"Have you got those plants all out of the ground yet, Jonas?" Dorcas asked as she dished up the porridge.

Jonas knit his brows and a cloud swept over his face. "That ground you have—it's too wet, too wet," he began, by way of explaining that the task was not yet complete.

"I could have had them up ten times since you started digging," Dorcas said. "But you always were so everlasting slow about your work. No wonder you never amounted to anything."

"Anything . . . anything," Jonas echoed. "I grow good truck, I do. But that ground you have—it's too wet for a man—"

"Well, eat your breakfast now."

Jonas was silent at once and began eating. His manner never failed to excite pity in Marcia. He seldom had anything to say, especially in the presence of Dorcas. He would sit in his chair by the hour when he was in the house in the evening, brooding apart, silent, starting now and then with a sudden lighting up of his face as if he were going to speak, then lapsing back at once into silence again.

"I was talking to Laura Prouty after the service last night," Dorcas observed when the meal was begun. "Both she and Mrs. Neering were asking why you didn't come back into the choir and help with the singing. The choir never has amounted to much since that man, Masterson, went off to Chicago. They're thinking of getting someone to come down from Bethune every week. Hector Aldous, it seems, has offered to pay for a man,

if the choir can be got together. Laura says they had it up the other day at the sewing circle. They'd like you to take hold until they get someone."

A piece of toast broke crisply between the old woman's fingers. Marcia, seeing it, knew that Dorcas had spoken with finality. She was, in effect, telling Marcia that she had come to a decision regarding the choir. It was futile to protest, and yet—the thought of going back there where nothing was without its dreadful memories!

"My voice isn't what it was, you know, mother," she said evasively.

"Why don't you say what you mean?" Dorcas retorted. "What you mean is that you just don't *want* to. Your voice is as good as ever it was. Why shouldn't it be? It's your heart that's not right. The Lord's chastening has done little for you, my girl."

"Oh, mother!" Marcia pleaded.

But Dorcas paid no heed to her. "What's more," she went on, "if you showed the right spirit, there's no reason why Hector Aldous shouldn't give you his money as well as pay it to someone from Bethune. The time will come—and very soon, too, I may as well tell you—when something will have to be done to bring in a little now and then if we're all going to go on living. My money won't last forever and Essinger says he won't be able to meet his next payment unless business is better."

Essinger had taken over the lumber-yard and had been making small quarterly payments ever since the autumn following Rolf's death.

"I've been thinking about that, mother," Marcia said. "I had no right to go on living here without helping. But I still have a little money of my own left in the bank and I've been thinking of getting a class together, now that Rolf doesn't need the attention he did."

"It wouldn't hurt you, then, to get back into the choir," Dorcas persisted. "It would give you a start again. The only pupil you have now is that Percival girl, whose mother can't afford to pay you a cent."

Little Hally Percival again! Hally came for her lesson on Monday afternoon. Marcia felt herself suddenly drained of her vitality.

"I have never asked Mrs. Percival for money," Marcia said. "What I have done for Hally—"

"And that's another thing, too. If all that Laura Prouty says is true, that girl's mother is a *case*."

"A *case*!" old Jonas chirped, his hands working nervously. It was not that Jonas had any desire to confirm what Dorcas had said, Marcia knew. He probably knew nothing of what Laura Prouty had revealed after service the night before. He was sensitive to growing excitement of any kind, especially so when Dorcas was the center of it. "A *case*!" he repeated. "It's very clear—the mother is a case!"

"Eat your breakfast, Jonas," Dorcas chided.

Little Rolf suddenly beat his saucer with his spoon. "Mumfer! Tinker wants some mum'lade, pretty pul-lease!"

"You mustn't do that with your spoon, Tinker," Marcia reprimanded him gently, her eyes darting quickly toward Dorcas, who was gazing at the window in an effort to appear elaborately indifferent to the child's noise. "And be careful, now, not to get it on your nice clean clothes." She drew his napkin up more snugly about his neck.

"And grandmother thinks her boy is too big now for baby talk," Dorcas spoke up. "I'd break him of that 'mumfer' if I were you, Marcia."

Marcia sighed. "He'll grow out of it soon enough," she said.

Rolf was eyeing his grandmother with shrewd directness. "I can say 'mother,' " he said with careful deliberateness.

Nothing more was said of Hally Percival or her mother during the remainder of the meal. When they had finished eating Dorcas took her reading spectacles and her Bible from their wonted place on the sideboard and began turning the leaves, running a crooked little-finger down each page. Marcia watched the turning leaves of the book as though she were spellbound.

Dorcas began to read. "*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal . . . and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing . . . and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long and is kind . . . thinketh no evil. . . .*"

Marcia heard the words as in a dream. Then they bowed their heads over the table while Dorcas prayed briefly—prayed for charity. When she had finished, there followed a momentary silence before Marcia lifted Rolf from his chair and set about at once clearing the table.

A fresh shower of rain had begun to fall, the heavy drops beating monotonously against the kitchen window panes. Marcia thought of Hally Percival, setting out for school in the flats by the river, her little tin dinner-pail swinging, her narrow shoulders huddled under the cape her mother had made over from an old overcoat Mrs. Neering had given her.

Dorcas entered the kitchen and busied herself for a moment about the stove. "Well," she said at last, "what are you going to do about the Percival girl? She'll be coming this afternoon again, won't she?"

In the one word "again" lurked all of the old woman's irritation at the lean child who had been coming each week throughout the winter and early spring, tracking snow and mud into Dorcas Gunther's immaculate hallway, setting her nerves on edge with finger exercises that penetrated through three closed doors.

"Why, mother," Marcia said slowly, appealingly, "she will, I suppose, if it isn't too stormy by the time school lets out. It wouldn't be quite fair to the little thing—"

"You might think of your own child, then," Dorcas interrupted testily, "even if you don't pay any heed to what I think or say. That breed is no good to have around an innocent child like Rolf. What's more, I won't *have* it!"

She brought the rubber tip of her cane down smartly upon the floor and turned back into the dining room.

Marcia, preparing to wash the dishes at the sink, turned her head involuntarily toward the window. The rain beat rhythmically upon the pane; she fixed her mind upon its thrumming, in an effort to shut Dorcas out of her mind.

CHAPTER SIX

JONAS stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room, his eyes blinking solemnly about his sagging, weather-beaten cheeks. He looked, Marcia thought with compassionate humor, like an ill-used bloodhound. Suddenly as her eyes met his he began to speak, his voice quaking like a wind in a rotten tree.

"Now, you see—where I come from—we don't have women like that." He looked behind him furtively to assure himself that Dorcas was not within hearing. "That woman—the one with the child—I don't mean you, now—but the other child. That woman is a case, right enough. *She* says so—isn't that so?" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Yes, Jonas, Dorcas says so," Marcia admitted.

"That's right. The reason I like you—you let a man talk. But you see, now, don't you—when a man is down, he gets up again—he knocks the dust off, eh?—and then he's all right again—isn't that so? But when a woman is down—that's different, eh? She never gets up—she stays where she is. I've seen it—with my own eyes, eh? That's what I mean, you see. This woman—is a *case*. That just about proves it as I see it, eh?"

Jonas's prattle was cut short suddenly by little Rolf who came from the inner part of the house and caught the old man's hands. Jonas frowned, then looked down, his face crinkling into a smile. "Of course, of course," he said. "Our little man, here, wants to know can he ride down with me when I go for the plants to Lundy's. And I said yes—when it clears. But what we don't know is—is that all right with the mother, eh?"

"If it does clear up, Jonas," Marcia said.

"Oh, it will, it will," Jonas declared. "Doesn't it always clear? Sooner or later, now, doesn't it? Of course it does! That proves it, eh?"

Rolf chuckled with delight and thrust his touselled head between the bony knees of Jonas. The old man caught him and swung him into the air, tossed him until he squealed with delicious terror. Romping with the boy seemed to fill Jonas with a gnomish daring. Some devil-may-care spirit of his youth returned and sat grotesquely upon him at such times. There was between him and little Rolf the droll bond of those who are half fay, the too-young who know nothing of realities, and the too-old who have ceased to care about them.

By early afternoon the rain had passed and the wind had risen. Marcia dressed Rolf warmly for his journey with Jonas. When the two were ready to set out, she decided to go with them, anywhere to get free from the house for an hour or so. She found Dorcas beside the window in her sitting room, turning the pages of a journal on gardening.

"I'm going out with Jonas and Tinker, mother," she announced. "Is there anything you'd like me to get you? Perhaps I could go by Mrs. Angermeyer's and get those back numbers she borrowed. You were saying the other night that you would like to get the plan for that rock garden."

Dorcas removed her glasses, leaned back against her chair with its white crocheted antimacassar, and closed her eyes. Pity for her, at that moment, swept Marcia. Old . . . so old, why could she not dwindle into the gentle, careless, sweet ways of the old? Then, abruptly, Dorcas opened her eyes.

"Never mind the magazines," she said. "If you want to do something useful, you might walk south to the Hess farm and pay the milk bill. I clean forgot to put the money out for him Saturday. He'll be leaving an empty pail tomorrow morning, if we're not careful. And you might as well tell him his milk is getting worse every day. It'll be nothing but water in another month."

Marcia glanced doubtfully at the clock on the small mantel.

"I'll scarcely have time to go so far, will I? Hally comes at—"

"The girl can wait, can't she?" Dorcas asked wearily, picking up her magazine.

"Yes, except that she comes so far and it makes her late getting home."

"She can wait," Dorcas said finally.

Marcia turned away.

At the gate Jonas and little Rolf were waiting for her, the boy sitting on the edge of the old man's wheel-barrow.

The rain had trailed away northward over the hills in a gray, tattered cavalcade of clouds, and pale sunshine wandered in patches over the wet, dark roofs of houses. Gusts of wind swept through the trees at intervals, and tiny silver showers arrowed through the sun. The sidewalk and the avenue pavement dried in islands. The air was bleak, as though it had revoked its pledge of summer.

"I'll go with you to the store, Jonas," Marcia said, "and leave you there. I'm going on to the Hess farm to pay the bill and speak to them about the

milk."

"Yes, yes—of course," Jonas replied above the complaining squeak of his wheel-barrow. "But you'll come back, eh? You're not thinking of—Lord bless my soul, no! What would the little man do *then*? Hear me, though—they've been *known* to do it, women have. Cleared out, they did—down where I came from—and never came back, neither."

He paused and lowered the wheel-barrow carefully until it rested on the sidewalk. Then he stood looking at her, tapping his fingers thoughtfully.

"What I want to know is—" For a moment he seemed unable to go on. He looked behind him as if he feared someone had been following them, then turned to Marcia again. "What I want to know—could you tell me, perhaps—*where* do they go to, these women that never come back, eh? Tell me that, now. They *never—come—back*!"

Marcia turned from him involuntarily and started slowly down the street. The old man picked up his wheel-barrow quickly and hurried till he came alongside her. "Can't you tell me that?" he demanded.

"We can never know, Jonas," Marcia replied.

"Would that man know—that doctor, now, that comes to the house—would he know? Or if he knew, would he tell, do you s'pose, eh?"

"Oh, Jonas—never ask him that," Marcia pleaded. "The doctor wouldn't know—and if he did he wouldn't tell us."

"No—of course—I might know he wouldn't. He's not one to let a man talk much, eh?"

They came to the corner at last and Marcia hurried away. It was a little more than a mile to the Hess place, south of the town. You took a rutted road that led to the left from the lower end of the avenue, then made your way through a grassy lane that lost itself finally in ploughed black fields and pasture lands spangled with small sloughs. At the end of the lane you bore to the right again and came upon the farm that spread itself over the face of the hill, and up over the crest into the level prairie beyond. The eastern slope was gentle and the Hess sheep grazed there. The top of the hill was roughly treed and whitish rocks gleamed through, here and there, like uncovered bones. The extreme western flank of the knoll became the bank of the Vermilion at one of its steepest points.

Marcia had walked along the crest of that hill and down through its ravines many times in the years she had lived in Amaranth. She knew the

ground well. Best of all she knew the ruins of the old house that stood on the north-western side of the hill, overlooking the river and the flats. The house had probably been the home of an early settler who had subsequently abandoned it to move into the shelter of the valley, but no one really knew much about the place. The walls were of stone and had withstood the ravages of the seasons extremely well. In the tiny slits of windows there could never have been a pane of glass. It had probably had a floor at one time, rough-hewn of timbers from the hill, but no trace of it was left now. It had a floor of hard beaten earth and a fireplace that yawned like a cavern.

Marcia gazed now across the face of the hill to where the gray stone walls stood naked to the spring wind. Her eyes narrowed at the thought of that house. For a few hundred dollars . . . she had managed to keep untouched more than half of what her father had left her. To live alone there, in that house on the hill, with the bold winds and the fierce rocks . . . with her son growing up . . . with Rolf, *her* Rolf, close to her heart through the hours of her solitude . . . but she must not think too much of that! Her shoulders twitched at the fear of herself that started suddenly within her. Living so, she would become . . . ah, what would she become?

The farmhouse where Emil and Hubert Hess lived on the flat land below the knoll stood whipped and white in the April wind. Behind it a poplar grove banked darkly against the sky. A huge steel-gray barn, with rounded roof, stood at a distance, with a red silo and other smaller buildings grouped about. The Hess brothers were prosperous bachelors, and churlish. It was Emil, the younger of the two, whom Marcia had seen on Saturday night, buying tobacco and groceries in Lundy's store.

Hubert Hess, the elder brother, a dour faced man of nearly fifty, met Marcia at the gate. The reins of two massive work-horses were wound about his wrists. The horses stood pounding thunderously at the ground.

"Say—it's a wild day for a young 'un like you to be out alone," he greeted Marcia. "What brings you here?"

"I came with the money for the milk, Mr. Hess," Marcia replied, handing him the money she had taken from the pocket of her coat.

"Yes, it was past due," Hess said shrewdly, taking the money in his clay-smeared hands.

"Your milk, Mr. Hess, has not been good lately," Marcia informed him at once.

Hubert Hess shrugged his shoulders. “It’s the off-season,” he said. “You can’t expect no better, with the cows comin’ in—and cows don’t do good on the first grass, either. You get good milk when the season’s good.”

Marcia decided to argue the point no further. “You own that old house up there on the hill, Mr. Hess, don’t you?” she asked.

The farmer looked at her dubiously, spat, drew his reins taut, and nodded. “It stands on my land, right enough,” he admitted.

“Would you ever think of selling it?”

“That?” Hess laughed, showing a brown ledge of teeth worn down by the constant pressure of a pipe. “Them ruins?” A sharp look came into his eyes then. “You thinkin’ of buyin’ it?”

Marcia assumed an air of indifference. “It might make a nice place for the summer,” she said.

“Yep—it would, too. I never thought o’ that.”

“It would take a lot of money to fix it up, though, so a person could live in it.”

Hess thought heavily for a few moments. “Them’s good walls,” he said. “None like ’em anywheres round here. I was thinkin’ o’ totin’ them stone down here for a place o’ my own some day, mebbe.”

The thought had probably never occurred to him, Marcia reflected. “Would you take fifty dollars for it, as it stands?” she asked him.

“M-m-m—well, of course—you wouldn’t be wantin’ the house and no land with it, eh?”

He regarded her with narrow eyes.

“That would depend,” Marcia said.

“With any ground it would be different.”

“The ground up there wouldn’t be worth much,” Marcia observed.

“Huh, young woman, is that so! There’s silt in them gullies on both sides o’ that old house that’d grow anything you ever seen,” Hubert Hess boasted. “I could get my thirty dollars an acre—yes, forty an acre—for ground like that if it was on the level. Of course, if *you’re* thinkin’ o’ buyin’, we might cut that down a bit.”

“It was just a notion of mine, Mr. Hess,” Marcia said hurriedly and turned away. “I guess I won’t want it, after all. Thank you. I must be getting back.”

She would have to hurry back if she would reach home in time to keep Hally from waiting. She would have to make some other arrangement for Hally. Dorcas had made herself clear enough at breakfast. It would be folly to defy the old woman and insist on having the child come to the house each week. She would have to meet her somewhere else—or no, that would be still worse, if Dorcas should find out about it. And Dorcas would, there could be no doubt of that. Why should everything be so difficult? More and more difficult every year? That was what came of living under the mantle of a lie. It was part of the punishment she had brought upon herself. It was only God’s chastening, as Dorcas would have put it, had she known.

In the road half way back to town, she met Emil Hess, driving another great team hitched to a disk-harrow. He looked down at her, grinned and tipped his cap. He turned his head so that he could continue looking at her after she had passed him. His head was inclined to one side in an appraising way that sent the blood rushing up through Marcia’s throat and cheeks. She hurried to get beyond the turn in the road where she would be hidden from his gaze.

When she reached the lower end of the avenue at last, she was warm and tired from hurrying in the wind. She caught the loose strands of her long hair that whipped wildly about her eyes, and tucked them back into place. She gave no thought to the curious glances that were cast at her as she went, almost running, along the avenue. The little, narrow image of Hally Percival, her light brown pigtail between her thin shoulder blades, ran before her, blurring her sight to everything else.

Dorcas, clad in a rusty coat that had been Rolf’s, was among her flower beds in front of the house when Marcia reached home. The sight of the coat, which the old woman had worn until it was in tatters about the cuffs, was only another part of Marcia’s punishment. Dorcas knew very well, had always known, how she felt about the coat. The first time the old woman had worn it—that autumn after—Marcia could never bear to think of it now! She had stifled a scream that time, and would have fallen, black wells drinking her up, had she not fought her weakness with all the strength of her being, because of her condition.

“Has Hally come, mother?” she asked as she entered the gate.

The old woman glanced up. “Oh, you’re back, are you? What did Hess say about the milk?”

Marcia told her. Dorcas got to her feet, knocking the loam from her fingers. She frowned, drawing in her lips.

“Then he could get along with half his customers, couldn’t he, if he hasn’t enough milk to go around?”

Marcia did not wait to discuss it. She was already up the steps and was hurrying into the house. She looked quickly about her. Hally was not there. She turned back and spoke to Dorcas again from the doorway.

“Hasn’t Hally come yet, mother?” she asked anxiously.

Dorcas straightened, raising her eyebrows. “Yes, she did,” she said, as though dismissing something of no importance. “I told her you wouldn’t be able to give her lessons any more, because you hadn’t been very well lately. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings more than I could help—and besides, you haven’t been well. So she just went on back home. You must have met her on the way—it isn’t two minutes since she left.”

Marcia did not pause to consider what she was doing then. She rushed from the house, into the street, and out upon the avenue. In the distance, almost as far as Lundy’s corner, a little figure was moving slowly down the street, the wind making a long pennant of a scarf that fluttered from her neck. Marcia raced after her until her breath caught in her throat. She came to a halt and put her hands to her mouth.

“Hal-*ly*! Hal-*ly*!” she called against the wind, but her voice seemed to be flung back at her. “Hal-*ly*—Hal-*ly*!”

But the little figure kept on and did not turn. Half a block away, on the opposite side of the street, three women turned and looked at her, startled. Right at hand, a couple of doors opened and heads were thrust out. Marcia turned and retraced her steps slowly, her hand pressed against the pain that stabbed her side. She went into the house without speaking to Dorcas, who was on her knees again among her flower beds. Stark fear prevented her from speaking, fear for what she herself might say, for what she might do. Upstairs she looked from her window and saw little Rolf in the garden with old Jonas.

In the close seclusion of her room she flung herself across the bed and wept.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the valley the heat was wet, gray as soaked sheep's wool. In the tiny park beside the depot where the rectangular bed of nasturtiums, four o'clocks, mignonette and baby's breath, inlaid with white-washed stones, spelled out the name of the town, a spiral sprinkler was throwing a toy rainbow over the grass. Tar bubbles stood out, a glistening sweat, on the pavement of Lundy Street. In the gutter a watermelon rind lay, curling at the ends, a rich, pink craft for innumerable flies and ants. Before the establishment of "Miss Little, Millinery and Notions," somebody had spilled a chocolate globe of ice cream from a cone, and a large black hound was licking it up, stretching his muzzle out toward it from a cautious distance. The blinds of awningless stores and houses were drawn half way, or all the way. Heat quivered in faint blue shelves before the eyes.

There was no one in sight except the man who attended the filling-station opposite Lundy's store. He was seated in the shade before his tiny office, drinking yellow pop from a bottle. No—there was Rosina Machlet, the housemaid in the home of Hector Aldous, hurrying down the avenue. It was said that Rosina was "going out" with Emil Hess now, though Mrs. Aldous was not in the habit of granting her help much freedom. There was something buttery about Rosina, that would not wash off.

Essinger had failed to make his quarterly payment and Marcia had gone down to the lumber-yard to ask him about it. It was the first time she had been in the yard since that morning in spring when she had gone down there with Paul Brule, to find Rolf. It was Dorcas's idea that she should go and speak to Essinger. Marcia had made every effort to avoid going, but the old woman had insisted finally and she had gone. The smell of the hot sun on the piles of lumber had been stifling. The rotten-sweet smell from the river had been intolerable. An indescribable loneliness had seized her as she wandered back through the hot streets. It was almost as if she had gone down there expecting Rolf to walk back with her or run her home in his car for supper. The mood clung to her in spite of all her efforts to shake it off. She could not escape the fancy that she had somehow just missed Rolf, that she would find him with Paul Brule and take him home with her from there.

When she reached Paul Brule's place she looked across the hedge and saw him seated on the porch of his bungalow, dressed impeccably in white flannels. In a low bamboo chair beside him sat Nora Hanrahan. Nora had come back, then, from the city, where she had gone more than a month ago. In another chair sat Andrew Tolliver, the Bethune editor whom Doctor Paul

counted among his friends. His shabby automobile was drawn up to the curb.

Marcia had met Tolliver here once or twice before, and his mild and bewildered and somewhat amused regard had annoyed, almost angered her. He was a ruddy, corpulent man with a friendly grin that was, she had thought, like an over-hearty slap on the back. She could readily imagine him standing with his arms about the shoulders of two of his cronies, vigorously bellowing out the bass of "Sweet Adeline." Doctor Paul played golf with him, went shooting with him, and, most incredible of all, spent evenings in his home in Bethune with him and his wife and his five children, reading everything from Homer to Yeats. Marcia knew that Paul Brule had told her of his intimacy with Tolliver because she resented the man; and she herself could not have told why she resented him. He was so affable, so happy. Perhaps that was why he irritated her. And yet—no, that was not the reason. It was rather because Paul liked him, she admitted, somewhat reluctantly.

The group on the veranda were drinking iced tea, from long green glass cylinders. For an instant, as though this had not been Doctor Paul's place at all, Marcia's heart quickened with pleasure at the sight of these people, so gracious a picture, so detached from the suffocating world she herself lived in. She glimpsed there the life she might have made her own if things had only been a little different. Her feeling of loneliness overwhelmed her. Why should she not have friends, understanding friends whom she could seek out and talk to when Dorcas Gunther's intolerance drove her from the house? Or was it in friendless solitude alone that you won peace for the soul?

Nora had always seemed beautiful to Marcia, but today there was something precious about her as well. She wore a sheer white gown with dusky roses at her waist, and her bronze hair swept in short waves high and clear away from her face and neck; her lovely red-brown eyes glowed. She saw Marcia and got up immediately with that inimitable motion of hers, at once languid and unrestrained. Doctor Paul and Tolliver followed her.

"Marcia! Marcia!" she called quickly. "Don't you dare go past without speaking to me." She hurried from the porch and Marcia waited before the gate. "I haven't heard a word about you for over a month," Nora went on as she came down the walk. "Drop in and have a cold drink with us. I've been wanting to talk to you, anyhow. Come along."

It may have been her lonely mood, it may have been the dread of going back there to be with Dorcas again, it may have been nothing more than Nora's frank, unsuspecting manner that tempted Marcia into trusting herself

just this once in the presence of one who wanted to be kind to her. She took the hand that Nora offered her and stepped down into the narrow walk beside her.

Paul Brule and Tolliver had reached them.

"Hullo, hullo!" Andrew Tolliver chuckled, his broad palm outstretched. "How-do, Mrs. Gunther! When are you coming over to sing for us again, eh? We sure do miss you."

Brule stood looking blankly down upon Marcia; she knew the deadly impersonalness of his gaze. It helped very little that Nora had slipped her arm about her waist.

"I'm afraid my singing days are over, Mr. Tolliver," Marcia replied succinctly, raising her head a little.

Tolliver exclaimed in protest, glancing at Brule with that odd gleam of troubled humor that she had seen in his face before when she had talked with him. He might as well have said, "What's the matter with this woman, anyhow?"

The editor from Bethune was bidding them a cheery goodbye; was getting into his car; waving back at them now, rumbling away.

"I like Tolliver," Brule mused as they turned back to the house, Nora silently urging Marcia as she half resisted. "He is so damned normal. Reassuring as the planets."

"But not so bright," Nora suggested.

"Oh, yes, quite," Doctor Paul corrected her. "You don't know Andrew." He smiled, and Marcia experienced a curious twinge of vexation.

On the veranda, when Brule drew forth a chair for her, his searching eyes rested upon her for a moment so intently that the color rose in her cheeks. It was almost as if he had said, "Let us forget, for the moment, who we are, eh?" Nora brought another glass and filled it with broken ice before she poured the tea into it. With a long spoon she stirred it gently, the ice clinking against the glass.

"There, now, cool off," she said, handing the drink to Marcia. "You look just about boiled out."

The cold glass was a shock against Marcia's hot palm, a delicious, sensuous shock. As she leaned back against the blue and green bamboo chair, for a fleeting moment a sensation of delight swept her. In an instant of

forgetting that this was Paul Brule's stronghold, her senses absorbed the cool veranda, the thin, green glasses on the table, Nora Hanrahan's slender bronze pumps, so restful, so at ease; and Paul Brule's hands, clean and friendly as—well, as cool, clean sheets, she thought. Then, as Brule's eyes met hers with their veiled, withdrawn look, she shrank back into herself again. Not for long, she realized, could Paul forget. The brief moment of pleasure was gone, leaving a sense of guilt in its stead.

"Well, how did you leave that boy of mine?" he asked.

"Helping Jonas to pull weeds from the tomato patch," Marcia said with a smile. "I had to make a trip down to the lumber-yard for mother."

Brule stirred the ice about in his glass. "Essinger causing any trouble?" he asked.

"He's having a hard time, I'm afraid," Marcia replied. "He says business has been very slow lately."

Brule was thoughtful for a moment. "I'll have a talk with him tomorrow," he said. "I've told him before that he had to keep abreast of his payments. He can get the money from Aldous, if he has to."

Marcia did not reply. She knew that Paul Brule's interest in the matter did not include her.

"But what in the world sent you down there on a day like this, my dear?" Nora Hanrahan asked. "Wouldn't tomorrow or the day after have been just as good?"

Brule apparently noticed Marcia's embarrassment. "Nora," he said, before Marcia had time to reply, "the world we live in is not all organized on your plan—or mine, either, for that matter."

"*My* world is," Nora Hanrahan retorted.

"That may account for its being such a small world," Brule laughed.

"If it wasn't any bigger than a postage stamp, I'd rather live in my own world than live in a whole continent if I couldn't call my soul my own. I may have a few regrets to live down, Paul Brule, but I'll never have to regret selling my life out to someone else. I may save my soul, or I may lose it, but it will be *my* soul."

"There you are!" Paul said, tossing his hands up by way of dismissing the subject.

“And there I intend to stay,” Nora replied. “The Lord himself couldn’t force me to walk all the way down to the lumber-yard and back again through these streets on a day like this.”

Paul Brule laughed aloud. Marcia had not heard that laugh for years. “The Lord couldn’t, Nora,” he said, “but Dorcas Gunther could!” Then he broke into laughter again.

Paul Brule had never held any delusions concerning Dorcas Gunther. Marcia had always known that. But he could look on with complacency while Marcia’s life became dwarfed and twisted under the old woman’s blighting intolerance. He could even sit back now and laugh about it.

Nora turned to Marcia. “By the way, Marcia,” she said, “I brought back some interesting piano studies from the city this time—and a couple of song cycles that I’m simply silly about. I’ve been playing at them—and singing at them for the past two weeks, off and on, but they’re beyond me. Couldn’t I get you to come over and try them? They’re awfully interesting. Besides, I’m always so low for a few days after I come back from the city. Come over for a while this evening. Do you think you can?”

The inflection in Nora’s voice was almost a plea. Marcia looked at her and surprised an odd expression in her eyes. Could it be that Nora Hanrahan was pitying her? It was not impossible, after what Paul Brule had said. The thought made her feel suddenly uncouth in her dark voile dress, under those searching eyes of Nora. Her lips curved with a faint anger.

“*Do* come,” Nora urged.

It occurred to Marcia then that perhaps Nora Hanrahan, too, was lonely —Nora Hanrahan, who was so self-sufficient in her little world. Marcia’s annoyance vanished.

“I’d like to come,” she replied, “but it would have to be after Tinker has gone to sleep. About nine, perhaps.”

“Fine. And we’ll have a regular old chin-fest, eh? I haven’t had a decent chance to talk to you since the day I caught you stealing my flowers.”

They talked on then about Nora’s visit to the city, until Marcia announced finally that Dorcas would be expecting her home. She bade goodbye to Brule and went away, Nora accompanying her as far as the gate.

“At nine, then,” Nora reminded her as Marcia hurried away.

“At nine,” Marcia replied.

In Dorcas Gunther's living room, Marcia found Laura Prouty and her mother, old Mrs. Angermeyer, who wore black glasses to protect her eyes from the sun. The shades were half-drawn, so that Marcia had to narrow her eyes to recognize the visitors.

"You're back," Dorcas greeted her.

"What's left of me, mother," she smiled as she turned to the visitors, lingering a moment for the sake of appearing agreeable.

Presently she hurried to the kitchen to put on a kettle of fresh water for tea. She was glad for any excuse to take her out of the living room. Something quite out of the ordinary must have occurred in town to have brought the two women calling together in this fashion. There had been a suppressed look of excitement about Laura, too, Marcia reflected. She stepped to the back door and glanced out at Rolf playing in the shade under the patient vigilance of old Jonas. Then she turned back and began cutting bread for sandwiches, the rattle of gossip reaching her, meanwhile, from the inner room. She would have to go in and sit with them, at least until the water came to a boil. It was always like sitting among scarecrows in a field that had been stripped of harvest.

The two callers looked up at her eagerly as she came back into the room. Old Mrs. Angermeyer had pushed her black glasses up above her brows and sat placidly with her hands folded athwart her vast person. Laura Prouty sat near the open door where a light breeze played. Dorcas was in a low rocker, moving gently back and forth, her thin hands folded in her lap.

A ponderous silence had settled upon them all. Marcia sat down casually near the archway between the living room and the dining room. "I'll have tea for you in a minute," she said. "You may have it iced, if you like it that way. It has been such a warm day. . . ."

"I never could see what people got out of iced tea," Mrs. Angermeyer protested. "Tea isn't tea unless it's hot, the way it was meant to be. It's like this business of serving soup cold, like some of them are doing now. Just to be different, I say. If a thing's meant to be hot, let it *be* hot, and if it's meant to be cold, let it be *cold*."

"Give mother hers hot, Marcia," Laura Prouty broke in, uncovering her long teeth in an ingratiating smile. "If you take *yours* iced, I'll have mine that way. Otherwise, don't bother special for me."

"Mother?" Marcia turned to Dorcas. "Will you have yours hot, too?"

"Any way at all, my child," Dorcas replied almost sweetly.

Marcia smiled ironically to herself at the amiability Dorcas chose at this moment to display. Between her and old Mrs. Angermeyer there had always been a sharp but silent antagonism, in which the latter had never been a match for the more nimble-witted Dorcas.

"I think I hear the kettle boiling," Marcia said and, with an inclusive smile, left them.

When she returned with a tray bearing tea and sandwiches, Laura Prouty was talking about Rosina Machlet.

"Of course, it's Mrs. Aldous's own affair," she was saying, "but these girls don't know how to act when they do get out, half of them. Not but what Emil Hess is good enough in his way. He'd make a good catch for Rosina, with all that land and stock of his. And Rosina would make him a good wife, too."

"And they've been going around long enough now to be married," Mrs. Angermeyer put in. "When a couple begins to get talked about, it's high time they did something about it."

"Will you have cream?" Marcia asked Laura Prouty as she paused before her and lowered the tray.

"No, thank you—not with tea. Of course, mother, people will talk about such things, even when there's not a grain of truth in what they say."

Mrs. Angermeyer took the cup that Marcia gave her and helped herself to the sandwiches. "People don't talk unless there's some reason for it," she observed. "There's no smoke where there's no fire."

"There's many a big fire started with small kindling, though," Dorcas chirped up, rocking herself a little more energetically.

Marcia set the tray on a small table and carried a cup of tea to Dorcas. "I have hot water in the little pitcher, mother," she said, "if it's too strong for you."

"It's all right, child," Dorcas replied gently.

Marcia moved away to a chair that stood beside the piano.

"Aren't you going to have anything with us, Marcia?" Laura Prouty asked. "After going to all the trouble of fixing it for the rest of us—"

"I had some at Doctor Paul's just now," Marcia replied. "I was passing there and Nora Hanrahan called me in."

“I heard she was back,” Laura remarked. “She got in on last night’s train, I believe.”

“What ever takes that one down to the city so often, I’d like to know,” Mrs. Angermeyer said.

Laura laughed nicely. “Now, now, mother,” she chided gently. “People go down to the city often.”

“Well, it didn’t take her long to get round to see Paul Brule when she did get back,” Laura’s mother observed. “I don’t understand them two, *that* I don’t. You can talk as you like about Emil and Rosina, but the doctor and this Hanrahan woman act more like they were married—or ought to be—than any two people I ever knew. Who was it was saying the other day that Paul Brule has a wife somewhere that he hasn’t seen for years?”

“Whoever it was,” Dorcas said testily, “must have had a lot to talk about. My son and Doctor Paul were close friends from the day the doctor landed here, you might say, and never a word was said about any wife of Paul Brule’s—in *my* hearing, at any rate.”

“And then again,” Mrs. Angermeyer argued, “you might not have heard everything those two talked about, either.”

“My son never kept any secrets from his mother,” Dorcas retorted sharply. “As for this Hanrahan woman, I know nothing about her, and don’t want to know.”

“No more do I,” Laura Prouty remarked. “If it comes to that, I don’t even know whether she’s a *Miss* or a *Mrs.* Hanrahan—and nobody else knows but herself, so far as I’ve been able to find out.”

“Laura tells me Mrs. Percival has left town, Marcia,” Dorcas put in abruptly, apparently wishing to change the subject.

“Left town—to stay?” Marcia exclaimed.

“Cleared out and took her young one with her,” Laura Prouty assured her. “Mrs. Lundy says she paid up everything, and all that, so I guess she doesn’t intend to come back.”

“There’s a case of a woman who couldn’t stand what her neighbors had to say about her,” Mrs. Angermeyer said. “I had *my* idea about her all along. If a person has a clear conscience, she isn’t going to sneak out of town without a word to anyone, you might say.”

Marcia heard nothing of what the old woman was saying. She could think only of little Hally Percival and her gray husk of a mother. In Mrs. Percival she saw herself, as she might easily be, were it not for the false opinions she permitted people to have of her. How quickly she could change that! She saw herself hounded from one small prairie town to another, little Rolf her only companion, her transgression following, following, like a panting thing in her tracks.

Then, Marcia heard herself speak as though in a dream. She felt the eyes of Dorcas aghast upon her as her voice stumbled on and on. She saw Laura Prouty's long cheeks redden, and she saw the outraged trembling of old Mrs. Angermeyer's chin. But she went on serenely to the end.

"I'm not surprised that little Hally's mother left. She left because she wasn't strong enough to stay and work while women like you, Laura Prouty—and your mother, here—flayed her with your tongues. She couldn't bear up under it. But I—I wouldn't go, I'll tell you. I'd stay—no matter what I had done—and no matter what you had to say about me. I'd stay until I starved to death rather than give you the satisfaction of thinking you had run me out of town. I've heard you women—and the other women in town—talk about her when she wasn't listening—and I've seen you come to church—and sing hymns and listen to sermons—and make prayers—and I've felt like getting up and telling you what I thought of you. You've run Hally's mother out of town—Hally's mother, who never did wrong to any of you, who worked hard for the few dollars she got out of you, who paid her own way and asked nothing of any of you except, perhaps, a fair chance. You ran her out—and I tell you, she was better than any of you! I'm glad she's gone—glad! Some place in the world she may find people who are worthy of her, good enough to be her friends, Christian enough for her to associate with. She couldn't find them here. She was—too good—for you!"

Tears choked her voice. Dorcas had maintained throughout a frozen silence. Laura Prouty and her mother had begun a voluble protest several times, but Marcia had scarcely heard them. In the tense silence that followed her outburst, Mrs. Prouty got up slowly from her chair and prepared to leave. There was a sweet, cutting edge to her voice as she turned to Dorcas.

"We must be getting along now, Mother Gunther." Marcia fled to the kitchen to avoid having to say goodbye to the callers. She heard Laura Prouty's voice, low and strained. "I'm sorry we mentioned the woman, at all. I had no idea Marcia felt so about her. But, of course, poor Marcia hasn't been well. We all understand."

Marcia closed the door to shut out the sound of their voices. It had been awkward for the women, she realized, more awkward for them than for her. Later, of course, there would be Dorcas. But none of them mattered to her as she felt now. She could think only of the lean, dry, brown little woman, and her little Hally, beaten away to some other town to start, desperately, anew. Perhaps Hally did not know why they moved so often. Would the day ever come, she asked herself, when little Rolf would spend his unhappy hours wondering, wondering?

When the women were gone, Dorcas did not say a word to Marcia. She came to the doorway between the dining room and the kitchen, glanced out once at Marcia, then turned back and went to her own room, closing the door behind her. Marcia heard the sharp click of the key in the lock. She knew what that meant. Dorcas would remain in her room all evening, steeping her heart in the bitterness of the fancied wrong that had been done her in her own house, too outraged for utterance.

Marcia went at once to the task of preparing supper. Ordinarily she would not have thought of leaving the house tonight. As it was, she determined to let nothing interfere with her spending an hour with Nora Hanrahan, whatever the consequences. Something she could not control had broken loose within her when she had talked to Laura Prouty. She could not bring herself to regret it now. She had tasted rebellion for the first time in years—and the taste was sweet. She would never turn her back upon the fight, now that she had struck the first blow. Let Paul Brule—let them all think what they liked. She was sick to death of her make-believe.

As she set the table with the red and white checked "everyday" cloth, she thought of the table she and Rolf—the Rolf who was so close to her now—might have sat down to. A table set on an airy veranda, a cherry table, perhaps, with lace doilies, with slender silver, with a green glass bowl in the center filled with daffodils. Ah, Rolf, Rolf. . . . She could feel the wild blood burning in her cheeks, the vivid life shining out of her eyes.

She would have to bring herself now to knocking upon Dorcas Gunther's door. There was no doubt in her own mind as to the nature of the response she would get. But she knew also that Dorcas, in her perverse mood, would be waiting for that knock.

Noiselessly Marcia stole to the old woman's door. To her knock, and then her soft call, Dorcas gave no answer. But listening, Marcia could hear from within the room the steady rocking, to and fro, to and fro, of Dorcas Gunther's chair.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TWILIGHT was deepening within the white boughs of the flowering catalpa tree, and under the stiff, varnished green banks of the hedge, and at the roots of the spiræa bushes where the dark soil lay. Marcia thought, standing for a moment on the steps of the veranda, that the light now was more a sound than a color—a suspended sound, as though somewhere behind the brushwood over there, west of the town, a gong of red brass had been struck and then muted. After a while there would be a gong of black brass and then, at starlight, one of strange, unfathomable green. Ah, life, life, how madly, how cruelly it raced along your pulses!

Nora's rambling house stood in the northern part of town, not far from the college. As Marcia reached the gate, she stopped still. A flower bordered path led up to the spacious, careless veranda. The door was wide open and lights within showed color and friendly warmth. Even as she stood there, Nora came to the door and looked out.

"Hello!" she called gaily, coming half way down the path to meet her. "I've been waiting for you. You looked almost as if you had decided you had come to the wrong place."

"I just wanted to admire your place a little in this light," Marcia said.

"Let's not go in for a while," Nora suggested. "Here—we'll sit on the steps and watch it grow dark. There's a moon tonight, too." She took a cushion from a chair on the veranda and tossed it down on one of the steps. "There, make yourself comfortable."

Marcia placed the cushion and sat down. Nora brought one for herself and dropped it upon a lower step, then stood down and looked at Marcia, her appraising, half-amused smile lighting her face. Marcia looked up at her—an engaging picture in the soft light. Nora's lashes curved back sharply from her dark eyes, giving her look a certain opulence, a certain naïve greed. It was a child's look, though Nora must have been on the brink of forty. She was curved, deep-fleshed, generous. Her ankles, curiously smooth and small under silk the color of amber, seemed boneless, unobtrusive. Perhaps, some day, Nora Hanrahan would be too voluptuous. But her body would always be a luxury about her spirit, until death. She was clad in a cool green dress that Laura Prouty would certainly have frowned upon as immodest. Marcia thought suddenly of her own drab, unlovely clothes. She realized with sharp dismay that it was probably the first time she had given thought to her own appearance in three years. Her mind spun. Was she, indeed, becoming odd,

as these friends of Dorcas Gunther's had been saying? Perhaps—but what of it? She owed nothing to life. Rather—ah, indeed, rather it was to death that she owed so much, so much.

Nora seated herself comfortably, with her back to the stone balustrade, and clasped her hands about one knee. "Now, you must talk," she said. "I've been dying to talk to you for months and months."

They talked of Dorcas and Jonas and little Rolf, of Hally Percival and her mother, of old Doctor Schemmell who had died, and of Paul Brule who had but recently performed a very delicate operation on the throat of a patient in the hospital in Bethune. A very remarkable man was Doctor Paul, who might have gone from Amaranth in answer to any one of a dozen calls that had come to him from the city hospitals in the past year alone. Why didn't he go, Marcia wondered secretly, so that she might not have to look again into those relentless eyes of his? It was strange, too, she thought, that Paul Brule had never married. Or perhaps . . . she might ask Nora about that, since they were in a mood for gossip anyhow.

"I thought you must have known," Nora replied in mild surprise. "I'm sure Paul used to talk to Rolf about it."

"You have forgotten Rolf," Marcia said.

Nora was silent for a moment, her eyes lifted toward the gateway on either side of which the lilac trees were a deeper dusk within the dusk. "Paul has been married for years," she said at last. "He was married a year after he left college."

The announcement, strangely enough, brought little surprise to Marcia. It should have startled her, she reflected, awakened her curiosity, roused her to ask questions of Nora concerning Paul Brule's wife. Had eagerness died within her? She scarcely heard Nora's deep murmur urging her to secrecy concerning Brule. Her mind was absorbed with the thought that Rolf must have known of Paul's marriage . . . *must* have known—and had never told her. Was it in some such way as this, then, that she would come at last to know the man she had married? Would the years bring to her just such little hints as this to remind her always of her own heartless impatience with the man she had loved?

"Shall we go in and look over the music?" Nora suggested at last when it had grown quite dark.

Marcia rose and followed her indoors.

Nora's house was a variegation of rich disorder and calm peace. There were nooks toward which Marcia looked longingly as ideal spots where one could hide away with a book and be lost to life for hours. There were other corners flaming riotously with color, shawls and cushions and rugs, and vases and gaudy nick-nacks from all over the world. But it was the long, cool, shining room that held Nora's grand piano that hypnotized Marcia.

She had never before been here in the evening. The bland, persuasive shadows, deep blues and long, sliding purples, like the colors of oil seen upon dark water, moved her so that she could scarcely breathe. It was a room such as this that she had dreamed of when she was a little girl—a room such as this that she would one day sing in, with someone—someone she cared for—standing listening, back in the flushed darkness.

Nora slipped her arm about Marcia and led her to the piano. "Look over these things for a minute," she said in a low voice. "I had a girl come up from the flats this morning and she's very green—she's likely to put almost anything into the sandwiches. I'll be right back."

"You're not making all this fuss over me, I hope," Marcia said, wondering a little at the importance Nora was evidently attaching to her visit.

"Shush! There's no fuss at all," Nora assured her. "Sit down now and look over some of those songs."

There was something in Nora's manner that disturbed Marcia as she seated herself and curved her fingers thoughtfully over the keys, her head bowed. Then, her self-possession restored, she glanced up at the music before her.

Nora came into the room noiselessly and sat back among the shadows. "Now, Marcia," she said softly, "just one little song, please."

Marcia scarcely heard her. She was back once more in the section-house beside the railway tracks in Bethune, before her life had become a staring ruin against the sun. But never, it seemed to her, even in those days, had she sung as she sang now. She was swept upward by some inner abandon, as though her voice possessed her and used her for its instrument. The room trembled about her with the violent beauty of the song.

My dreams go back to Drumadoon,
Where all my youth passed by,
My magic youth, my tragic youth,
That fired the sunset sky. . . .

When she had done she felt suddenly spent, crumpled. She got up abruptly from the piano and moved toward Nora, where she lay back among the shadows. A light sound caused her to look down the room. Framed in the front doorway Paul Brule stood, in white flannel trousers and coat of navy blue, his dark head a flawless contour against the outer darkness. Marcia's cheeks flamed with her old fear and resentment.

"May I come in?" he asked. "I heard the music from down the street and couldn't resist the temptation to give you a call."

"Come along in, Paul," Nora called with a casual air that Marcia felt, somehow, was meant to deceive. Paul Brule's coming, she could not help thinking, had been no accident in Nora's plans for the evening.

He came into the room, dark and lean and scowling as ever, his toppled shoulders slouching before him, and dropped into a chair under a light over which a sheer scarf of bizarre coloring had been thrown for a shade. Marcia had found a place on the divan beside Nora.

Brule took his cigarette case from his pocket and helped himself lazily. "This is Nora's idea of being oriental, or something," he told Marcia with a laugh as he tapped his cigarette lightly against his palm. "The problem is to find a place to sit down on that isn't already occupied by some obscene cushion."

"I know it seems vulgar to you, Paul," Nora replied complacently, "but I *am* vulgar—at least a part of me is—and there are times when I demand the setting of a muscle-dancer in a ten-cent circus tent."

"At any rate, Marcia, your song was the first thing that has really got under my thick hide since I came to this God-forsaken retreat of the indignantly righteous five years ago—or is it six?"

"I didn't think I could sing—any more," Marcia said, melancholy stealing back upon her heart like a physical pain.

In a window that stood open near her a camel bell hung, the light breeze from without moving it to a plaintive tinkle. Through the open window Marcia could look out into Nora's rose garden, a wilderness of beauty in the moonlight. The white flowing tide of the moon lapped uncannily through the garden, washing up like drowned faces the fullblown, pale roses. The smell of them steeped in dew was a poignant thrust to the senses. Marcia almost shrank from their intemperate beauty.

Nora leaned toward her and touched her hair. "Paul, did you ever see anything shine with life the way this head does?" she demanded. "Look—

along the top of it—isn't that pure sapphire in this light?"

Brule did not reply. He took his cigarette from his lips and looked narrowly along it to some point beyond, a habit he had. Marcia flushed and clasped her hands, the long slender hands of a boy-musician, about her knees.

"You know, my dear," Nora said gently, "I think you would look remarkably well with your hair cut. It's so long—and I should think rather unmanageable, isn't it? Let me take you down to the city with me next time I go and have it done. What do you think, Paul?"

It was impossible for Marcia to check the flood of color that rushed up over her throat and cheeks. She contrived to smile but her lips felt stiff. She fumbled at her hair to replace an unruly strand that had shaken loose. She had scarcely more than glanced into her mirror when she had put up her hair before leaving the house. What need was there, after all? She could not help the feeling of annoyance that rose within her at the thought of Nora's solicitude.

"I'm no judge in such matters," Brule replied to Nora, his manner a little curt.

"It's my humble opinion that you would be much more pleasant company if you had a drink, Paul Brule," Nora replied, and getting up at once, vanished into the kitchen.

Brule tossed his cigarette away, half-smoked, and took a fresh one immediately.

"Nora thinks a drink will cure a man of almost anything," he remarked as he lit the cigarette and dropped the match into the ash-tray beside him. "You know, Marcia," he went on, shifting his long body irritably, "I've been wanting to have you come into the office and have a talk with me. I would have sent for you long ago only I was pretty sure you wouldn't respond to the invitation."

His manner was very direct and Marcia determined to meet him without flinching. "That was why you came here tonight, wasn't it? You knew I couldn't very well escape."

Brule frowned darkly. "I never try to sidestep the truth," he replied. "It would probably be quite useless with you anyhow. You knew, the moment you saw me in the doorway there, that I hadn't just dropped in by accident. I may as well make a clean breast of it. When Nora told me you were coming

up to look over some of her music, I invited myself along. I'm quite capable of a little strategy, now and then, if the end justifies it."

As Marcia looked at him, a rush of anger such as she had not felt for months swept her. "Can there possibly be anything for you to say to me?" she asked.

"In my opinion—yes," he said. "I've watched you closely for four years, now—ever since that morning when you and I resolved to keep a certain secret from the rest of the world." Marcia started, then felt the blood ebbing out of her heart. Paul Brule had never spoken of their secret after that tragic May morning four years ago. "It probably hurts you to have me mention it now," he went on. "But—well, I intend to hurt you."

"I don't think you can do more than you have already done," Marcia retorted.

Paul Brule seemed not to have heard her. "I have watched you, I say, for four years—suffering remorse—doing penance—making a little hell for yourself and shutting yourself in. You think you are paying the price of your error. What you are really doing is losing your interest in living, letting yourself go to pieces, physically and morally, living a selfish, self-centered existence concerned only with your own little difficulties and never giving a thought to anyone else."

Marcia sat rigid while he talked, his words coming with increasing rapidity, impatience. She laughed with sudden, uncontrollable bitterness. Was this some kind of belated compassion Paul Brule was feeling for her?

"You don't mean, by any chance," she said huskily, "that you are beginning to feel sorry for me, do you? That would be too—funny!"

Brule flushed darkly, then sat up abruptly and flung his cigarette aside. He was about to speak when Nora entered with a glass in her hand. He looked up at her quickly. "Don't come in—just yet," he said, cutting his words sharply.

"Let me give you this, Paul," Nora said, coming toward him. "I have work to do in the kitchen. Lottie has absolutely ruined the sandwiches."

She handed Brule the drink, smiled at Marcia, and went back into the kitchen. Brule held the tall amber glass up to the light for a moment, then took a quick, nervous sip from it.

"I have not asked myself whether or not I am beginning to feel sorry for you," he said at last, "nor am I going to waste time on it now. What I am

interested in is the fact that I have been a party to all this misery you have been heaping upon yourself. I've listened to wagging tongues and kept the truth hidden. But I'll be party to it no longer. I have no intention of telling anything to this damned little world of ours. But I am telling you that you are necessary to Rolf Gunther's son, if no other argument appeals to you, and I'm not going to look on quietly and see you go to the dogs. You're going to get out—take walks—see things—talk to people—work up an interest in something outside yourself—pull yourself together, or—"

"Or go crazy—that's what you mean!" Marcia flashed.

He looked at her, his eyes cold and blank, gray-green as an early spring hillside, and as utterly bleak. "Precisely," he said.

She threw her head back, her insolent laughter ringing out at him. Her eyes swept him with burning contempt. "Well—what of it? What if I do? I wouldn't have thought that you could be as stupid as all the rest of the town. I could understand you for despising me for what I did—Rolf was your friend before he knew me. I want you to despise me. I want you to hate me, if you like. But I don't want your pity. You may look after the health of Rolf Gunther's son, but I'll look after my own. If I go mad—well, I'll *go* mad!"

Nora Hanrahan had entered from the kitchen and was standing looking at her. "Why, Marcia, dear!" she said, her rich voice gentle and soothing.

Marcia sprang to her feet. "I mean every word of it," she said. "You pretended you wanted me to come here tonight to try over some new music. You knew—"

"Marcia, Marcia, dear—that wasn't the way of it at all. I did want you to play and sing for me. Paul's coming was an afterthought, dear. Please don't be angry."

"It doesn't matter—one way or the other," Marcia replied. "I thought you would understand a little. Instead of that, the two of you are going to try to make me over." She paused to draw a long, quivering breath, and Brule, who had been leaning forward with an elbow on one knee, watching her through narrowed eyes, started to speak. But Marcia flung herself toward him, tempestuously. "Why should you want to make me over? This is what you wanted me to become, isn't it? This is the atonement you wanted me to suffer, isn't it? Tell them the truth about me. Let's have no more secrets. I'm sick of it. Tell the town that *I—I* killed Rolf Gunther! Tell them! Tell them, too, that I've died a thousand times, over and over—but that I have a life of my own, a precious thing, that none of you can touch." Her voice rose to a

wavering pitch, but still the words came, clear and precise. “Tell them that—but leave me alone—to myself. . . . I don’t ask another thing from any of you.”

She turned and ran blindly out of the room, out of Nora Hanrahan’s house and all of its smooth, insouciant sophistication.

Again, after the long years, she was standing before the wrought iron gate of Dorcas Gunther’s place, gathering courage to enter. Again she was lifting the latch cautiously and treading with aching feet the narrow border of grass along the walk, so that Dorcas should not hear her. Again? No—not again! This was the first time she was entering so. She was returning from Bethune, and surely, surely, within that dark house Rolf Gunther would be waiting for her, to take her back to him, to forgive her and comfort her, as he would a runaway child. Her heart beat wildly at the illusion. Then, as reality returned, with her first footfall upon the threshold, her throat tightened with tears. He was not there . . . would never be there, to take her into his arms and soothe away her fright. There would be only Dorcas, as there had been. . . .

There was a sound in the unlighted hallway—the muted sound of the rubber ferrule of Dorcas Gunther’s cane, feeling its way along the floor. Where was Jonas? In bed, of course, long ago. Terror of the old woman enveloped her. She clenched her teeth to regain her self-control. Groping along the wall, she found the switch and flashed on the light.

Dorcas stood at the end of the hall, fully clothed. She was bowed slightly forward, as though to see better, and a white lace shawl was gathered about her shoulders. She was waiting, her head nodding just perceptibly, but rapidly, as it did when she was greatly wrought up over something. Her lips were tightly pursed.

“Where have you been?” she asked, drawing herself up suddenly.

Marcia had entered the house in fear—a fear born of the fact that she did not quite know what awaited her. At the sound of the old woman’s voice, fear left her. Here, instead of her vague dread, was something tangible, something visible, limited, definite. She could regard it calmly.

“I said,” Dorcas repeated with growing emotion, “where have you been? Or is that too much for me to ask?”

“Certainly not, mother,” Marcia replied. “I have been up to see Nora Hanrahan.”

The sense of smothering there in the close hallway came over Marcia so strongly that she turned away and went through the living room into the dining room. There she turned on another light and sank into a chair before the oak table. She fixed her eyes on the embroidered doily that decked the table's center; a little to one side of the doily stood a cut-glass bowl of fruit, apples, oranges, bananas—two of each. She reached over and adjusted the bowl so that it stood in the precise center of the doily.

Then Dorcas entered. She took a chair beside the window and placed her cane upright on the floor before her. "I thought you knew what I felt about that Hanrahan woman," she said coldly. "If you don't, I'll tell you now. I'll not have you going there. She's not fit company for you."

"Just what do you consider fit company for me, mother?" Marcia asked.

Dorcas frowned querulously. "You ask me that?" she exclaimed. "Haven't you lived in this house long enough to know better than to spend your evenings with a strumpet! I suppose Paul Brule was there, too."

"He was," Marcia admitted.

"Yes. I thought so. Well, what Paul Brule does is his own business. It's past me what he sees in her—a man that has no use for even decent women. But that's his business, too. It's my business to see that you behave yourself as you ought. You'll stay away from there—hear me?"

"I hear you, mother," Marcia said. As she spoke, she reached forward to the bowl of fruit and took an apple from it. She broke it in two in her hands, looked steadily at the core. How vivid everything seemed, how stark and exciting! Even an apple seed, satiny and brown.

"Yes—you *hear* me! But you'll *heed* me, too, or I'll not have you in the house. You've been going on lately as though you're out of your senses. I don't know what Laura Prouty will think of the way you talked to her this afternoon."

Marcia laughed briefly. "I think I know," she said. "But what Laura Prouty thinks will never hurt me."

Dorcas rapped with her cane on the floor. "Whatever has come over you?" she demanded.

"Nothing, mother," Marcia replied. "Something *did* come over me—when I came here to live—but I'm shaking it off now. I'm tired of living a lie."

"Then repent your ways!" Dorcas exclaimed.

Marcia's face went white. "Repent—repent!" she echoed. "*Repent!*" The word tore itself out of her throat. "What do you know of repentance? What have you ever had to repent?"

"Are you mad, girl?" Dorcas stood up now, her lace shawl fluttering away from her shoulders.

"You have a right to think so," Marcia said evenly. "I have been mad. But I'm sane now, and I tell you, you know nothing of repentance. I've known nothing else for four years. I've asked God—*your* God—to forgive me—every day I've asked it—and all day—till I'm tired asking. I don't want God's forgiveness! I only want Rolf—my Rolf—to forgive me!"

"What is this you're saying?" Dorcas shrilled. "What have you done?"

Marcia's eyes fixed themselves on the bowl in the center of the table. A curved facet of glass held a little arc of rainbow, its colors clear and strong and unwavering. "You ask me what I have done? I'll tell you. I—killed Rolf." Her voice was steady now, so steady that she wondered at it. How easy it was, after all, to do the impossible!

Her eyes beheld Dorcas, like a flimsy crone. The old woman seemed to waver uncertainly. She was grotesque, like some worn garment on the line, in a fitful wind. She was trying to speak, but could not.

"I've kept it to myself—for four years," Marcia said. "But I can't stand it any longer. That night—I ran away from him—to Bethune—to another man. I told him I was going. But I didn't go—all the way. I came back—when it was too late. Rolf was gone. That's all."

Dorcas seemed to recover herself suddenly. "You ran away—from my boy? You left him for another man?" The old voice was like a dry shred of fury. It was dreadful. It was unbearable. She asked the question again bending forward across the table toward Marcia—across the table with its white doily.

Marcia nodded. She could not speak now. Her tongue was dead. Dorcas was coming around the table to her.

There was a soft sound of movement in the hallway. Marcia looked up and saw old Jonas standing on the threshold, tapping the back of one hand nervously with the fingers of the other. He darted into the room, like a wraith, and put himself between the two women.

"Now—let *me* talk! Let *me* talk!" he said quickly. "I heard it all—every bit of it—lying there in the room."

Dorcas seemed to discover suddenly that Jonas was standing before her doing his best to talk.

"Go to your bed, Jonas!" she ordered.

"And what *I* say is—*let—me—talk!*" he insisted, his thin voice rising shrilly, his fingers clasped tensely, his face aflame with some unearthly fire.

"Put her from the house, Jonas," Dorcas commanded, "put her from the house—before I forget my God!"

"Let me—*talk!*" Jonas pleaded in the voice of a child about to cry.

Dorcas stepped back, staring at him in awful silence.

"Now—you see—here's a case for this man who comes here," Jonas went on, free at last to speak his mind. "I mean this—this doctor. Now, isn't it? He's awake nights. I know. I've seen his light there. Now, if I was to tell him—there's somebody sick here—you see?—he'd come—just like that, eh? Of course he would. *I* know—eh?"

He looked from one woman to the other, tapping away quickly with his fingers.

Dorcas looked past him, her eyes piercing Marcia where she sat behind Jonas. "You'll leave my house, Marcia Vorse," she said, lifting her cane in a threatening gesture. "You and your son, do you hear?"

"But—but how can she do that?" Jonas argued futilely.

"I'll go," Marcia said.

"I'll see no more of you," Dorcas added, unheeding to the pleas of the old man.

"But—but what house will take her—tell me that!"

Dorcas Gunther moved away unsteadily toward the door that opened on the hallway.

Jonas leaned over Marcia, rubbing his hands despairingly. "But what—where—you see—"

"Don't try to be kind to me tonight, Jonas," Marcia reproved him. "I couldn't stand it."

"Eh? Well—that's true—that's true!" Jonas admitted.

From the hallway came the sound of the rubber ferrule on Dorcas Gunther's cane, taking its small adventure along the dark floor.

CHAPTER NINE

ALMOST, on a day like this, on this stony hillside above the town, Marcia could believe that she was fourteen still, and the daughter of the free-thinker of Bethune. Almost, lying back so on the hot, singing earth, she could discern once more through half-open eyes, not the thick, white, cumulus clouds of summer, but in the blue, rich plains of the sky great stallions standing, their white necks arched as in a dream.

Almost, eyes closed now, she could hear her father murmur, "*The Isles of Greece, the Isles of Greece, Where burning Sappho loved and sung!*" And then, after a silence, strongly and cheerfully, "Marcia, your father is that most pitiful of failures—an average man."

Almost. But there was young Rolf's small laughter, slipping down the air to her, bright and secret as water. She turned her face upward to the glistening rock above her where he lay flat on his back, as golden as a young faun, and as naked. His laughter was her laughter, as it used to be; but his body, even at three and a half, was the free and perfect body of Rolf Gunther, that other Rolf.

Her gaze grew longer, down into the snug heart of Amaranth, green and dark as a thicket, with the occasional white or yellow or red of a house or a barn shining out of it like plump fruit. Almost on a level with her eyes, against the hill at the opposite end of the town, stood the College, with its grove of sycamores drawn closely about it, a scholarly cloak above which its gray old head peered out, resolute and stern. On the slope below her, hidden from her sight now by the straggling brush of poplar and birch that partly sheltered it, stood the old stone house, like an ancient, kindly crone, that had taken her and her child in, one memorable day a few short weeks ago.

The intervening time had been too crowded with physical labor for her mind to indulge in many misgivings. There had been the repairing of the three rooms of the "castle," as Jonas called the old house, and very limited means with which to accomplish it. For her materials Marcia had gone to an old second-hand dealer in the flats, scorning to go to Essinger for aid. She had learned grimly how to bicker and bargain, and derived even a bleak sort of amusement out of haggling over a penny. From poor old Jonas, only, had she taken help without giving remuneration. He had laid a floor, remodeled the windows, and planed the wooden boards of the walls to a smoothness that was like satin, then stained them a golden brown. He had tightened every crevice in the walls, had repaired the old chimney, which was still

standing, and set in a new door. Now, in open defiance of Dorcas, who had learned at last the reason for his long absences from home, he was clearing the ground about the dooryard. Dorcas would be careful not to make difficulties for herself where Jonas was concerned. Marcia divined that the obstinate pride in Dorcas would be outraged before the whole town if the old man should leave the house—perchance to take up his abode within reach of Marcia and the boy.

Again her glance wandered down the valley. Off to the right, on the fertile ground under the knoll, was the Hess farm, the rounded roof of the big barn just visible past the shoulder of the hill. She had used no inconsiderable strategy in her dealings with Hubert Hess and his younger brother. For less than a hundred dollars she had obtained the "ruins" and a plot of ground that measured almost five acres.

Marcia sat up, clasping her hands about her knees and letting her head fall forward upon her arm. The physical and emotional strain of the summer was taking its toll. Weariness had hollowed her out so that she had no resistance to offer when the desolate moods came upon her. In the hot drone of the air she could hear now, not her father's voice, but that other voice, so low, so earnest, whose sound shook her spirit with vehement pain. Rolf . . . Rolf—only a dim voice now, haunting the corridors of the heart.

Here, on this rock-studded crest, on the three or four occasions when she had come up from the house with little Rolf, she had found that it was possible to sing. In Dorcas Gunther's house she had thought, sometimes, scarcely caring, that the fountain of her voice had probably dried entirely. That night at Nora Hanrahan's had surprised her utterly. Now, as she released her voice softly in an old song her father had taught her, she listened as someone apart. She knew the sound to be beautiful. That voice of hers, Hugh Vorse had declared, would one day trouble kings. She laughed a little now, thinking how it had gone instead. How madly, how gloriously, she had fallen in love with Rolf Gunther, the world forgotten, the troubling of kings forgotten!

Looking around and upward, she saw the boy with his hands over his eyes.

"My sweet, my too beautiful!" she murmured aloud, remembering darkly the day when Dorcas Gunther had foretold no good would come to the child whose first stirring was felt in the full of the moon. . . . "There's no cradle in the full moon." . . . Marcia had thought of those words, fearfully, many times of late—even as she had thought of them, praying desperately

for strength against her own morbid dread, before the child was born. It was her love for Rolf and her desire for his child that had shielded her, in those days, from the fear of the old woman's heartless superstition.

Only a few weeks ago, she had had a recurrence of her fear. A day or two after her flight from Dorcas Gunther's house, while she and little Rolf were living in Quigley's Boarding House beside the railway station, a heavy cold had settled on the boy's lungs and had yielded but stubbornly to Doctor Paul's treatment. After they had gone to live on the hill, Brule had ordered a daily sun bath in the open air with a view to clearing up the infection and stiffening the little fellow's resistance.

"Tinker, boy! Come down here!"

The child closed his eyes tightly and his round face grew puck-like with amusement. "I can't hear you, Mumfer! See—I can't hear you."

"You don't hear with your eyes, Tinker. Come down, now. You've had enough of that strong sun."

He rolled over and crawled down to her on all fours. He grunted at her sudden, fierce hug, and pushed her away with firm dignity. The hurt of him was already the hurt of Rolf as he had been in life, unattainable, always removed from her by that shy inhibition that was like an inborn mistrust of her. Because the child *was* Rolf, the hurt of him was already there.

He pointed upward, squinting. "There's people in the clounds, Mumfer," he said.

"Not *clounds*, Tinker—*clouds*."

"Tinker says *clounds*," he insisted roguishly. "There's people in the clounds."

Marcia smiled. "Yes, yes, Tinker. And we have very silly imaginations, you and I, darling. But come, now—into your clothes!"

"No, Mumfer—a little minute. What's imagshun?"

"It's a cardinal sin, Tinker—that's what it is," she said with a laugh.

"A wha-at?"

"Imagination is—is funny thoughts. Here, now—Mr. Right goes in first."

"Mr. Right!" He steadied himself carefully for a moment, placed a hand on her shoulder, and lifted his right foot.

“Tell me more ‘bout Grampa Vorse,” he said suddenly, ignoring the underwear she held out before him. “Tell ‘bout his mouth organ.”

Marcia smiled at him reprovingly. He knew how to change the subject abruptly when he was being urged to do something he disliked. He had a few minutes of grace left, anyhow, Marcia reflected. Doctor Paul had recommended at least twenty minutes each day.

“Grampa Vorse,” she repeated, in the dreamy tone the boy loved, “Grampa Vorse had the most beautiful mouth organ in all the world. He got it when he was a very young man and was traveling in a land across the sea. It was red and silver and it had tiny little stags carved on it.”

“Stags?”

“Yes. You remember those animals—with the big horns—like trees on their heads—in your animal book, Tinker? You remember?”

“Uh-huh!”

“Well, Grampa Vorse had two tiny stags carved on his mouth organ. And he used to tell me, when I was a very little girl, that the stags would stand up on their hind legs and dance if I could learn to play on the mouth organ. So I used to try and try—and nearly burst trying—but never *once* could I make those stags dance for me.”

“And did they dance for Grampa Vorse?”

Marcia looked a long time at the child before she replied. “Yes,” she said at last, her voice lower. “I think they did dance for Grampa Vorse.”

“But did you see them?”

She could not go on. The boy was staring at her with his great, gold-brown eyes, dewy and wondering. Ah, Tinker . . . the innocent joy of make-believe! She forced herself to look into those eyes and smile. They were exactly the color of the gold of the bumble-bee’s body, plushy and shimmering—that other Rolf’s eyes.

“I wish I had a mouth organ—with stags on it,” he said finally, his eyes wandering out across the valley.

“Now we’ve got to go, Tinker,” Marcia told him. “Come—into your things!”

She bent to pick up his clothing and he was off like a tawny streak, flying down the hillside, curving down into the gully, out of her sight—no, not out of her sight. As she ran after him and saw him again, there he was,

halted in sudden surprise before the equally amazed figure of a man. Flushing with annoyance and embarrassment, Marcia shaded her eyes and saw that the man was Emil Hess. Emil drew his mouth to one side slowly, his jaw low, his eyes narrowing upward from Rolf to Marcia.

She summoned the strength to call Rolf sharply to come back to her. The boy, however, paid no heed to her summons until Emil, with a loud laugh, started toward him. Rolf turned at once and scrambled back up the slope, the farmer following close behind him until they both came almost within reach of Marcia. Then Emil stood back while the boy ran and flung himself against Marcia's knees, clasping his two arms about her in childish terror.

She picked Rolf up in her arms and looked past his touselled head at Emil Hess. Though she had gone every morning to the Hess place for her milk, since coming to live on the hill, she had seen very little of Emil, All her dealings had been with the elder, Hubert, save on those days when she had gone to them to talk over the purchase of the old house and its plot of ground. She had always withdrawn instinctively from the looks the younger man gave her. But what she saw in Emil Hess's face now frightened her. A curious expression had come into the man's eyes. She colored with anger at the unwarranted meaning of that look, unwilling to admit to herself that she read it aright.

His jaw squirmed knowingly in a sort of smile. "Say, don't you get all-fired lonesome up there on the hill o' nights?" he asked. "How about a feller payin' you an' the little one a visit once in a while? Just friendly-like, eh?"

Marcia turned away from him, shaking her head and contriving to smile lest he should see how thoroughly afraid of him she was. "I have no time for callers, Mr. Hess," she said. "I am really much too busy."

"Just the same, a fellow—" he began, but Marcia had already hurried away, her cheeks flaming, tears of anger starting from her eyes. How thankful she was that she owed neither him nor his brother a cent!

Back once more at the little heap of clothes, Marcia changed her mind about scolding Rolf. He was willing enough to be dressed now. He anxiously drew on his things, looking behind him now and then, still trembling from his adventure.

Together, presently, they walked carefully down the slope toward the house, picking their way among the stones and the stunted gooseberry bushes that grew there. Marcia became thoughtful, swinging her hat in one

hand, in the other holding the moist fingers of Rolf. She could not help glancing about her uneasily from time to time for any sign of Emil Hess.

The sun brushed the river below, floated upon it like some bright, insubstantial barge. Trees, round-contoured, bordered the water to the very edge of the town. Through the flats, with their blackish huts—through the town—and beyond, flowed the river—past the lower end of the college campus where it lost itself finally within the humble forest of brushwood and poplar trees. It was down there that she and Rolf had walked in that bright winter night before her conversion and he had told her about her undiscovered God.

And now—she was hurrying with a horrid sense of dread and mingled shame, away from the leering eyes of a boorish farmer, hurrying with clumsy furtiveness, as an outcast hurries. Loneliness such as she had never known descended upon her there in the broad light of the summer afternoon. A degrading, shameful loneliness that exposed her to unguessable humiliations.

She walked more slowly as she reached the grassy ravine half way down the hill. The heat of the afternoon was more oppressive here and the boy had asked to be carried. Standing upon a scarp of stone that jutted out of the hillside, she raised her eyes above Rolf's gold, damp head. The sultry August wind moved like indolent fingers through her hair where it clung and curled at her temples. Her searching gaze, directed toward the house that was her domain, was met by the sight of two figures at work on that rocky patch of ground to the left. Jonas was down there, and beside him—the tall, spare figure of Paul Brule.

At first an eager relief filled her at sight of him. It seemed that he had just come when she had most bitterly felt the need of someone stronger and more secure than herself. She was to have taken little Rolf down to him the day before, but the boy was looking so well that she had not thought it necessary. He had come out, undoubtedly, to see why she had not kept the appointment. Finding him down there annoyed her, irritated her. There was something so inexorable, so unrelenting in his adherence to a plan. Inescapable—that was Paul Brule, Marcia thought.

His coat and hat had been thrown aside and his blue shirt was open at the throat, his sleeves rolled up above his elbows. Grub-hook in hand, he was helping old Jonas dig the earth away from a great boulder that had withstood the old man's stubborn efforts for days. With pick and shovel Jonas had pitted his strength, day after day, against the jealous strength of the earth,

striving to wrest out of its dark and ancient cradle the stone that had lain there for centuries. The old man was tragically, heroically like an aged and crooked ant wrestling with a crumb that mocked its powers.

Marcia picked her way down to the house and on level ground set Rolf upon his feet. Brule glanced up and saw her. He laid the grub-hook aside and came toward her. She noted the peculiar weaving motion of his forward-thrust shoulders and head; in the motion was the nervousness of intense vitality. The shoulders were lean and powerful and his characteristic stoop gave them a threatening look that was enhanced by his continual scowl. It was no wonder, she thought coldly, that he had so admired Rolf Gunther. There had been between the two the mutual bond of physical excellence. They had been remarkably made for a fine friendship.

The boy had run forward to meet him, Doctor Paul caught him, swung him up, then held him at arm's length and looked at him, frowning.

"How's the big man?" he asked, setting Rolf down again. "Getting lots of sun? Let's feel the old muscle. Make it big—big! Fine!"

He straightened up and regarded Marcia with his direct, and yet somehow obscure, look.

"You didn't get down to see me yesterday," he said abruptly. "I took it upon myself to come up."

Marcia smiled ironically, fanning her hot cheeks with her hat. "I think he's all well again," she said. At the sound of her voice, Jonas peered up at her, his head on one side. "Oh, Jonas—come in and rest a while," she called. "That stone can wait."

But Jonas, with an impatient pawing at the air with his great hand, resumed his task, deigning not even to reply.

Marcia seated herself on the doorstep of the old house and Brule sat down on a fallen tree trunk close by, taking Rolf upon his knee.

"Well—have you satisfied your curiosity?" she asked, brushing her damp hair back from her forehead.

At that Brule chuckled humorously. He took his pipe from a back pocket, filled it from an oiled silk tobacco pouch which he unrolled with great care and tenderness, and then struck a match against a stone at his feet.

"Somewhat," he replied, drawing deeply at his pipe. He flipped the match away. "I've spent a half hour down there with Jonas and had a good

workout. That's worth something. At least, I'm finally convinced that you really intend to go on living up here."

"Really? It has taken quite a while to convince you, hasn't it?"

"Conviction is not always a matter of time," he said with a half smile. "In this instance, at any rate, time has had little to do with it. A woman may strike a pose—dramatize herself for a while—but she doesn't usually put in all the work you've done around the place here unless she really means it. I can't help feeling you are serious about it all."

"As for the work," Marcia said, "Jonas has really done most of that. He has been altogether too good to me. There's very little left to do now that I can't do myself. At any rate—I'll *do* it." She spoke with low intensity, as though she were talking to herself.

Brule glanced at her obliquely. "How do you expect to live?" he asked bluntly.

For a moment she did not reply. She felt no impulse to take offense at his question. She lifted her head with a challenging gesture that was to become as much a part of her as her own eyes.

"I think I have worked that out pretty well," she responded finally. "We won't need much to live on—Tinker and I—and we haven't quite come to our last dollar. I've been around town a little in the last month—and down to Bethune a couple of times. It will be easier than I thought to get a small class in piano—enough to live on, if I'm careful. Besides—there are other things I can do—housework—and sewing. Old Mrs. Angermeyer spoke to me about sewing just the other day. There'll be a way to live."

She ended bitterly, looking away from Brule. He nodded, then took his pipe from his mouth and sat staring at its polished bowl.

"Of course," he observed after a pause, "there'll be a way to live. I never really doubted that. There always is a way, it seems. But I can't quite get used to the idea of your living up here alone with the boy. Perhaps that's only my old-fashioned way of looking at things, however."

Marcia continued looking away from him. "Alone? You forget," she said. "I am not alone."

A lie . . . a proud lie, proud and desperate. But Paul Brule should never have a moment's opportunity to pity her. He should never be permitted to add pity to his blame of her.

He regarded her curiously. Then he frowned and cleared his throat. “Look here, Marcia,” he said sharply, “you’re on dangerous ground. I catch your meaning, of course, but you *are* alone, damn it—and you’ll find that out very soon, if you haven’t done so already. What’s more, you’ll discover that you simply can’t go through with it.”

She turned her eyes upon him deeply. “What makes you think I can’t?”

“Think? I *know* it,” he replied. “I’ve tried it.”

She did not retort to that. There was something in his voice and manner that forbade response of any kind.

“One of these days,” he went on presently, “you’ll find that there is nothing in life half so precious as a little human companionship—somebody’s voice to—”

“And you ask me to look for that—in Amaranth?” Marcia interrupted.

“You probably realize that I’m not asking anything of you,” he said roughly. “If it isn’t to be found—in Amaranth—why in the devil don’t you get out?” He was becoming exasperated with her.

“Perhaps I’m spellbound,” she replied gently. “There is something keeping me here—in Amaranth. I’m not going to run away from what I have done. Perhaps you can’t understand that.”

“Nobody knows anything about that yet, except Dorcas Gunther—”

She smiled. “They will. And when they find out about it, I want to be here. They can’t run me out with talking about me. I’m not another Mrs. Percival—not yet. Let them think what they like—and say what they like. I’ll still be here. I’ve got over my fear of people. What you don’t seem to understand is that all this doesn’t matter to me. What does matter—” she drew a deep, hard breath, “—is that I’ve got to live out something—something in myself. I would have to do that if there was no world at all. Up here—isolated in this way—I can live it out—if I’m left alone.”

Brule was silent for a long time. His eyes were upon the touselled head of the boy, beginning to nod now against his shoulder. He got up quietly and carried him into the house, stalking past Marcia in the doorway. She rose and followed him and laid her hat on the rude table with its cheap, colorful cover. Brule put Rolf down upon the couch that stood in the corner of the room, then turned and faced Marcia, crossing his arms before him.

“You’ll manage—in your own way,” he said in a quiet voice. “You’ll just have to have your own way, in any event. I can see that. For a while, at least.

It takes some people a long time to learn that one's own way isn't so very precious a thing, after all. But we all learn. I had hoped you might have learned by this."

"I—"

"Let's not go into that. You'll go on having your way until you break under it. Some day the whole town will know what you have told Dorcas Gunther. She'll tell it—in her own good time. You know that as well as I. Even that may not be enough to break this stupid, stubborn will of yours. I don't know. But I'll tell you what will do it if nothing else does. The day will come when Tinker will come home from school—if he lives through the winter here—and call you to account for what the youngsters have told him. You seem to forget that life makes its demands of us—even of you."

Marcia's face blanched. She pressed back against the table to steady herself.

"There are some things you have no right to say to me," she said slowly, with difficulty controlling her voice.

He smiled satirically down at her. "We may differ very sharply on that point," he said. "My own opinion is that there is a great deal I shall have to say to you, still."

He swung himself out of the door, relighting his pipe as he went. Marcia, from her place beside the table, watched him through the open doorway. When he reached the place where Jonas still labored in the earth, he paused for a moment to watch him, smiling sardonically. Then he dropped his hand down and swept up his hat and coat. With a word to Jonas he moved off down the slope and was presently lost to her sight.

CHAPTER TEN

THE days with their stern demands were already weaving over the past a mantle of forgetfulness of Dorcas and the life in the Gunther house. There would always be memory, of course, springing up at you like a derisive jack-in-the-box, out of anywhere. There was the day when she had gone to the Nordland farm to give young George his lesson and had found the boy in the shed beside the barn, helping with the dressing of a freshly killed pig. Marcia, glancing in, had been overcome, not at the sight itself, but at the pungent odor of blood . . . the reek of hot beets being peeled in Dorcas Gunther's kitchen. There would always be memory.

But even memory softens with time. Marcia had grown into the mood of the stony earth of the knoll as though it had been predestined that she should one day become part of its experience. Her hands had become moulded to its homely uses, had grown firm and enduring as its weathered vines and roots. Her eyes looked out from it with its own dream in them, a dream of fear and of brooding passion, and interludes of peace that were like death. The knoll, offering her a refuge, demanded in return that her spirit should become as its spirit, hard and aloof and alone; estranged from her own kind that dwelt in the valley.

Already the inhabitants in the flats looked at her askance and with an expression of almost superstitious mistrust in their eyes when she came down from the hillside, the wind whipping her skirt smooth against her limbs, slashing her black hair into wild locks about her cheeks, and blowing at the boy she led as though he had been a fairy child. The eyes followed her with wonderment and doubt all the way to the door of Karl Stormo, the Norwegian truck farmer, whose daughter Haldis was looked upon with curiosity because it was she who cared for Marcia Gunther's boy on days when Marcia went into the town to work. Old Jens Stormo, Karl's aged father, who knew things others did not know, out of the mists of his Norse lore had said that the woman on the hill was a Valkyrie and that her rare singing on nights of rain or very clear starlight was an omen that bore hearkening to. These things Jonas had told Marcia, coming as he did now and then up through the flats to the "castle."

But she gave little thought to the stories Jonas carried to her. Work out of doors that she could do only because her will drove her, was making her body firm and elastic as a slender boy's, and was bringing a certain serenity to her mind. Dragging wood down from the hillside, carrying water from the spring, going to the mud-flats of the river with Jonas and fetching in a cart

that he had brought her the rich fertilizer for the gully slopes—these things were leaving their mark. Sometimes, her arms loaded with brushwood, she would pause against the sky on the hill's crest, wondering. If she were to go on like this until she was old . . . would there be any beauty left in her then? And for whom would that beauty still live?

Standing so, sometimes, with evening approaching and the world dissolving below her, she would be overcome suddenly by fear of the winter—fear of all the winters that were to be. She was reminded then of what Paul Brule had told her. . . . The yearning for companionship would come upon her—would break her stubborn will—he knew because he had tried it. . . . Paul Brule had tried it! She could never think of that without smiling, a little ironically. What could he know of the loneliness that had been hers for more than four years? Utterly alone she was. Young still, and alone, growing into a witch here on this tiny patch of hillside. Hurrying from people's gaze by day . . . huddling before a fire at night . . . nursing her fear, her remorse, her inescapable loneliness. It came upon her suddenly at such times that she could not go on with it, whatever her obstinate will might dictate. Sin or no sin—death or no death—repentance or none—she could not endure this terror! Rolf was dead, dead and at peace. She was alive, terribly, like one great pain.

There were other days, however, when all fear left her, when the future was a vital hope that sent her singing to the work that awaited her. There were mornings when she went to the Hess farm for milk and saw the sun bursting raggedly through the mist on the horizon, and the dew glistening in the close-cropped grass where small groups of sheep huddled away from her with staring, inane and timid eyes as she approached. She could laugh at the aloof, poised heads of some of them, so full of meaningless dignity. Ah, it was good to be alive, with sheep grazing on a brown hill, and all the distance gentle and sweet.

There were slumbering afternoons, too, that were steeped in the honey of Indian Summer, when she walked with little Rolf through the ravines that crept back from the old house, and over the stony crest where the crazy spheres of tumbleweed withered free from their moorings and were delivered to the wind, and then, down the gentler slope of the other side to the swampy ground that flanked the prairie, where the wild cranberry bushes reddened up out of the brown, soft earth. When the fruit ripened, Marcia gathered and put away enough cranberries for her own use through the winter, and sold a quantity of the best to Herb Lundy. On the slopes of the ravines, the little wild grapes, blue-black and sweeter than sunlight, had

fallen readily into her hands from their drying stems. Lundy gave her a fair price for her grape conserve and jelly, and on the shelves of the pantry beside the little kitchen in the "castle" stood cosy rows of jars and glasses that would last her and the boy the year through.

After the first light frost, she and Rolf roved through the brushwood, the child running ahead, Marcia pausing now and then to close her eyes and listen in the sunny avenues of silence. There would come, as reward, the crisp sigh of a painted leaf, teetering on the air, or the swift passing of a bird, its cry shrill with excitement, panic. The air was brushed with sadness, as with a color. Young birches stood against the brown of a hill, and they were slender and clear as pipes of ivory. Here would be a hazel thicket, with Rolf scrambling into its dense heart for the hazelnuts in their frilled hoods; and here the ripe black-haws would feel across Marcia's shoulder and lie heavy in her palm with the dark gloss of a jewel or a dark bird's feather. And she would stand and gaze southward and see the crimson brushwood, like summer looking back over its shoulder as it fled.

There were moonless nights now that smelt of autumn rain and leaves rotting in bright, sodden drifts down the ravines. Off across the valley the red cones of straw stacks burned at dark intervals, giving a spacious gloom and mystery to the prairie. Sometimes fogs opaque and curious as an opal submerged the valley so that the hill was an island, precariously, venturously afloat. And sometimes nights were clear and hard with a wind that seemed to sweep earth and stars and moaning wood along one vast path to a crystalline destiny somewhere in space.

It was a strange, rich time, with melancholy running deeply under it, like a stream under the earth, and high over, like a threening wind.

On an afternoon that threatened rain, Marcia sat at her piano with Harriet Neering, the wilful and intelligent daughter of the Reverend Mr. Neering, who walked out from town twice a week for her lesson. Harriet was friendly and earnest about her work, and Marcia had always looked forward to her coming. Although she brought news of what was going on in the town—of how Nora Hanrahan had left, almost a month ago now, and was spending a few weeks abroad—of how it was thought that Emil Hess would marry Rosina Machlet before Christmas—and of how Paul Brule had just returned from another trip to Chicago—the girl showed not the slightest interest in the town's petty gossip. There was a challenging air about Harriet that had won Marcia from the first and the girl often lingered until dusk to drink tea, and talk.

The lesson finished, Marcia had sung a couple of simple songs to Harriet's accompaniment, when the door was thrown open suddenly and Haldis Stormo, out of breath from hurrying up the slope, came into the house.

Marcia turned to her. "Why—what's wrong, Haldis?" she asked.

"It's ma," the girl panted, glancing at Harriet as she came and stood before Marcia. "She ran a nail in her hand last Monday, and now it looks just awful. She started crying and it scared me to death Mis' Gunther. Won't you please come down and see it?"

Marcia hurriedly flung a wrap over her shoulders and left the house with Harriet, Haldis and little Rolf following her down the hill toward the flats. At the gateway in front of the Stormo place, Marcia left Harriet and hurried into the house. Old Jens Stormo, seated before the stove, directed her to an inner room where she found Haldis's mother, sitting on the edge of the bed, rocking back and forth and moaning with pain.

With only a word of greeting, Marcia took the hand and removed the crude poultice that covered it. The hand was swollen badly. Marcia replaced the poultice.

"This is something for the doctor, Mrs. Stormo," she said.

"No, no!" the woman protested quickly. "We have no money for doctors. It'll get well."

Marcia turned away without replying. At the gate she found Harriet waiting for her. Leaving Rolf with Haldis she started down the street, Harriet beside her.

"I'm going to call Doctor Brule," she said. "She has a terrible hand."

At the corner of the straggling street she took leave of Harriet and made her way quickly in the direction of the lumber-yard. There would be a telephone in Essinger's office. She gave no thought to the curious look Essinger turned upon her as she stepped into the doorway of the little office and asked his permission to telephone the doctor. Paul Brule himself answered the call. He had just returned from an emergency case in the hospital at Bethune, to which he had been summoned the night before, but he promised to come at once. Marcia thanked Essinger and hurried away.

Back once more at the Stormo place, she bundled the children out of doors for quiet and left them in the care of Haldis while she heated water and prepared for Brule's coming. When she opened the door to him a short

time later and led him into the room where Mrs. Stormo awaited him, a feeling of warmth and gratitude came over Marcia. His face looked tired and drawn, but in his eyes and in the forward thrust of his shoulders was the eagerness that seemed never to fail him. It was this impersonal and tireless sympathy for others that informed his character. Sympathy for everyone, Marcia thought, except for her—and she asked for none.

When he came out of the room at last he drew her to one side.

"Stormo is at work, I suppose," he said.

"Yes."

"How many youngsters?"

"Seven—no, eight."

"Good Lord! Page Margaret Sanger!" he exclaimed softly, without a smile. "That big girl out there—"

"Haldis," Marcia told him.

"She's the oldest, isn't she?"

"Yes."

He was silent for a moment, his eyes upon the youngsters who were clambering about his car that stood in front of the house.

"That hand is in bad shape," he said presently. "Looks like a case of lymphangitis—that red streak up the arm. Old Daddy Schemmel would have taken the arm off and saved the woman's life."

"Oh, Doctor Paul, it isn't as serious as that!" Marcia exclaimed in a whisper.

But Brule was thinking aloud, paying no heed to her fears. "You might better take a chance on letting her die than amputating an arm. Well, we'll see. Another day or two." Suddenly he turned on Marcia. "Call the girl in."

Marcia went to the door and summoned Haldis.

"How old are you?" Brule asked the girl.

"Sixteen," Haldis replied.

"Well, Haldis, you're a big girl. Your mother is going to be very sick for a couple of weeks. You wouldn't want to lose your mother, would you?"

The girl shook her head, the tears starting from her eyes.

"All right, then, Haldis," Brule went on quickly. "You will do just what I tell you. Mrs. Gunther is going to stay here tonight. Tomorrow I want you to take the four youngest and Mrs. Gunther's little boy up to her house and stay there with them—all day. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"At night you'll come down and let Mrs. Gunther go home for a little rest. Next day—the same thing. We've all got to do our best. If we don't things may be very bad. You understand all that, Haldis?"

"Yes, sir."

He turned to Marcia. "Keep Mrs. Stormo in bed. Complete rest. Keep her warm. I'll leave some bichloride of mercury—I'll show you."

For a few minutes then he instructed her carefully in the details of preparing and applying the antiseptic dressings for the hand. When he was through he looked at her across the table, shrugged his shoulders, and took his cigarette case from his pocket. For a moment he sat tapping a cigarette thoughtfully against the palm of his hand.

"Well—I have commandeered you for this job," he said finally. "We'll just take hold of the thing and see it through—together, eh?"

For a fraction of a second their eyes met curiously. Marcia was conscious of a faint flush creeping over her cheeks. She had the disturbing sense of secrecy which she had experienced—years ago, now—over the jade charm that Paul Brule had given to Rolf. Then he smiled a little, his gray, arrestingly clear eyes twinkling under the dark ledge of his brows.

"I'll do what I can," Marcia told him.

"It will mean the loss of a few days' earnings, won't it?" he observed. "Perhaps I could—"

"I shall manage," she interrupted him.

He picked up his case and then stood looking at her quizzically.

"I don't think I ever said so before," he remarked evenly, "but you have the most beautiful hands I've ever seen."

He turned abruptly away then, spoke to Mrs. Stormo through the bedroom doorway, waved a farewell to old Jens, and went out. Following him, Marcia stood in the doorway and watched him get into his car. Because of the drawn look she had seen in his face and the tired line of his shoulders now as he took the wheel, she had an impulse to run out into the gateway

and make him promise to take some sleep before he did anything else. But something within her checked the impulse. As Brule put the car into the street, he turned once and waved his hand in a careless gesture. Marcia turned back into the house and closed the door.

On the following afternoon when Marcia looked from the window to see the Reverend Mr. Neering entering at the gate, his seamed and anxious countenance suffused with a kindly glow, she could scarcely refrain from laughing. The good man and all the world to which he belonged had been stricken wholly from her mind during those hours she had spent in the Stormo house.

"Well, well, Marcia," Mr. Neering breathed gently as she admitted him, "it does my heart good to see you. Tell me, how is Sister Stormo?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid," Marcia told him. "I'll know more about it when Doctor Brule comes this evening."

"Of course, of course. Well, I thought I'd drop in and find out for myself. Harriet told me about it when she came home yesterday, but I had no idea it could be so serious until I talked with the doctor on the telephone this morning. Is she in much pain?"

"She fell asleep a few minutes ago, but she was awake all last night."

"Oh, dear! Well, I won't disturb her, of course. You know, nothing has pleased me more for a long time than when the doctor told me you were going to stay here and help him till the trouble was over."

He unbuttoned the double-breasted storm coat which fitted snugly over his chest. "The fact is, Marcia, we've all missed you since you withdrew from us. I had hoped we might be able to induce you to come back to us again. We need you, Marcia, we really do. We need each other, don't we?"

Marcia could not resist the sincerity of his manner. And yet, words failed her when she strove to reply.

"Of course we do!" he went on. "Er-r-rmph! I know—I think I know how you feel. I was distressed when I learned of the trouble between you and your mother-in-law. But such things will happen, of course. We're all human, aren't we? When passion sways us, Marcia, we forget that God intended us to love one another. Oh, I forget, too!"

"I'm afraid the trouble between me and Mrs. Gunther is not of that kind, Mr. Neering," Marcia said.

"Of course, of course—we're all given to thinking—"

"Have you spoken to her about it?" Marcia asked.

"Oh, bless me, no! My wife and I have talked about it—just ourselves—we never indulge in gossip. We've prayed about it, too. Don't you think we could find a way—"

Marcia cleared her throat. "I am sorry, Mr. Neering," she interrupted. "I would do almost anything for you and Mrs. Neering—you have always been very kind to me. But—the truth is—Mrs. Gunther could never forgive me—and I could never ask her to forgive me."

"Well, well—of course—we'll not talk about it now. I'm going to go on hoping—and praying. It'll come out all right in the end. I have no fear of that." He laid a hand gently on her shoulder and smiled. "You say you would do almost anything for us. Suppose I put you to the test?"

"Anything—I can," Marcia replied, a little doubtfully.

"We are celebrating our annual Thanksgiving festival a week from Thursday," he announced promptly. "We want you to sing."

He smiled at her, his kindly round face lighting up hopefully. Marcia's lips twitched. She had not been quite prepared for this.

"I'll have to think about it, Mr. Neering," she said.

He clasped his hands enthusiastically. "Ah! I knew you would!" he declared. "I told my wife you would."

She might have protested had it not been for the sound of Paul Brule's car coming to a halt before the house.

"I'll be going," Mr. Neering said at once. "And give our good wishes to Sister Stormo. She'll be in our prayers, night and morning, until she recovers. I'll come again in a day or so. Goodbye, Marcia, and God bless you for what you are doing."

He left immediately, pausing before the door for a few words with the doctor. When Brule came in at last and laid his hat and coat aside, he glanced through the window at the retreating figure of the little minister.

"With a man like him for shepherd," he remarked, "I don't see how the fold can be so depressing."

As he spoke, Mrs. Stormo's moan came to them from the inner room, and Brule went in at once. Marcia followed and stood beside him while he removed the dressing from the swollen hand and examined the arm above it. He said nothing until he had made a thorough examination, then he looked

at Marcia and went out into the front room. Marcia remained a moment to speak soothingly to Mrs. Stormo. When she joined Brule finally he had taken a number of instruments from his case and was laying them out side by side on a white towel he had spread on the table.

"Put these into a pan and let them boil," he said. "We'll have to open that arm and get a free discharge or this thing is going to give us a licking."

During the next hour Marcia was to learn something of what it meant to do battle for a human life. She saw in Paul Brule a tenderness and an indomitable will that amazed and humbled her. She attended as he worked silently, deftly, and the dingy room in which Mrs. Stormo lay became suddenly a kind of sanctuary. When it was all over at last and she watched Brule drive away it was with the feeling that she had been privileged to glimpse something in a fellow human-being that was very nearly godlike.

It was not until after she had reached home that night that she realized how much the afternoon's experience had cost her. She had put Tinker to sleep in her bed and had tucked in the four Stormo children who were staying with her and were already asleep on the couch and on an improvised bed in the living room. She was worn out, physically and mentally, but she could not force herself to lie down. One of her moods of fear had suddenly come over her. Outside the rain had begun to fall. She sat in a chair before the kitchen fire, her hands rigid in her lap, and moment after moment did not stir. It seemed to her then that she had never before been utterly alone.

She got to her feet suddenly, the blood pounding at the pith of her body. There was someone at the door. On her way through the living-room she glanced through the window to make sure she could see the light of the Stormo place below the hill.

She slid the bolt and opened the door only an inch, but she was not prepared for the strong hand that flung the door back, almost in her face. She was not prepared, either, for the great foot that set itself nimbly within the doorway.

Emil Hess stepped into the room, his raincoat dripping, the hair on his bare head plastered about his temples. His eyes gleamed small and eager as he looked about the room. Marcia held herself firmly in hand.

"Didn't I tell you I'd visit you some night?" he said huskily. "No harm in that, is there?"

Marcia knew he had been drinking. She stepped back from him, avoiding his eyes.

"Nice place you got here, eh, Miss Marcia?" he went on. "Piano—and everything, huh? Who'd 'a' thought the old ruins could be fixed up to look like this, eh?"

He proceeded farther into the room, stood in the middle of the floor and leered about him, swaying slightly. Marcia stepped swiftly to the fireplace, grasped the heavy iron tongs, and fled to the door. She threw the door wide. Emil flung his body about toward her, his hands swinging loosely at his sides.

"Will you get out, Mr. Hess, please?" Marcia said quietly. "I did not invite you here."

With a surprised laugh he came up to her, then paused and frowned sullenly at the tongs which she held clenched in her hands.

"You don't mean that," he said. "You couldn't hit the best friend you've got."

He swung forward suddenly, sweeping an arm toward her.

The iron sprang through the air. Like a large log, the form of Emil Hess faltered for a moment, then hurtled outward across the threshold. The rain came in emptily upon Marcia's face. She caught the door and closed it, sliding the bolt into place with hands that were numb.

For many minutes she sat on the floor, leaning her weight against the door and listening. She heard Hess at last groping to his feet, scrambling over the pebbles in the dooryard, blundering away in the darkness, cursing foully as he went.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HUGH VORSE used to say that it was a sly trick of God's to give a man work to do—it kept him from asking questions that God couldn't answer. Marcia often thought of that these days. And yet, in spite of her work, the questions would force themselves upon her. What had given Emil Hess the courage to come into her house? Was it because he had been drinking? Or had his companions in town egged him on? Could it be possible that she had fallen so far in the opinion of others that even Emil Hess saw no barrier to his coming to visit her? Again and again she recalled that day on the hillside when little Rolf had scampered away and she had found herself facing Hess with the naked boy between them. Was this all but a part of the humiliation she must suffer before she became the mistress of her own soul?

Vanity and hurt pride prevented her from speaking to Paul Brule of the experience of that night. If such was to be her portion in life, she would meet it alone.

Vague reports came to her almost daily now of how the eyes of the town had gradually centered upon the struggle which she and Doctor Paul were making together to save the life of a woman in the flats. Harriet Neering came with a hamper of food and old Jonas wandered down one day bringing an armful of asters and dahlias and a basket of home-cooked dainties from Dorcas.

"It's for the woman that's sick here," Jonas informed Marcia. "That's what *she* said—though there couldn't be any harm in you taking a little for yourself, eh? Could there, now? Not as I see it."

"None whatever, Jonas," Marcia conceded, though she knew very well what restrictions Dorcas Gunther had placed upon her charity. "You haven't been up to the castle for a long time."

Jonas began tapping the back of one hand nervously with the fingers of the other. "No—no—you see—it's like this with her. She's a queer woman. You know that, eh? I can't get away now—not like I used to."

"I know, Jonas," Marcia replied. "It's all right, too. I'm getting along very well now."

"S'pose I came out—to the castle—let's say I did. I'd find digging to do—and she says there's enough digging to do at home."

"And so there is, Jonas."

"But that ain't all, neither," the old man hastened to add. "S'pose I got back to the house one day and found *she* wasn't there, eh? Where would I look for her? Back where I come from, now—a man could look all his life and not find a woman—once she leaves. Take yourself, now. You left, didn't you? Eh? But I found you—you and the little man. Well—the women ain't all like that, though. A man never knows."

"Is Dorcas well?" Marcia asked.

"That's another thing. I say she can't be long for the world. She used to talk—and when there's talk, there's something for a man to listen to. But when *she* does nothing but read the Book all day—a man can't figger it out, see? There's too much quiet in a house like that. What's a man to do but go to the street and wait there—for someone to talk to, eh? And there—they won't talk to a man—except that doctor, you know. He'll talk, all right—and he'll let me talk, too."

Marcia left him to answer a call from Mrs. Stormo, and when she returned the old fellow had gone. Poor old Jonas, with his wandering wit that would never find rest in life's hurly-burly!

There came a day when Paul Brule was forced to confess to Marcia that their fight had reached its crisis. . . . "We ought to know for sure in another twenty-four hours." . . . He had muttered the words to her as they stood together in the doorway after an hour's work in the room that had become cheerless to Marcia now, in spite of her efforts to brighten it up with flowers from the townspeople and with small inventions of her own. There could be no sleep for her that night, and on the following day she moved about the house on tiptoe lest she should disturb the fitful moments of sleep that came to the woman in the inner room. Perhaps it was only her own fierce desire for victory that made Marcia think those precious moments of rest were less broken now. At any rate she awaited Paul Brule's visit with a fluttering of new hope.

Early in the afternoon Laura Prouty and her mother called. The door to Mrs. Stormo's room was open and the women would have stalked into it at once had Marcia not protested.

"Doctor Brule has asked that no one should see Mrs. Stormo for a day or so," she explained.

"I'd think it would do the woman good to see an outsider once in a while," Mrs. Angermeyer observed.

“Now, mother,” Laura Prouty said, smiling glassily at Marcia, “you mustn’t go against the doctor’s orders.”

“I don’t intend to. Though for that matter, it’s my experience that half the orders doctors make are poppy-cock. About as good as their prescriptions. But how is the woman?”

“Mrs. Stormo has had a very hard time of it,” Marcia said. “I’m hoping she may be over the worst—she seems a little easier today—but we won’t know until the doctor calls.”

“Well, I must say,” Laura remarked, “I don’t remember when the town was so worked up over anything. You and Doctor Paul have been the talk of the town—you especially. You have become the town’s Florence Nightingale, Marcia.”

“After what I *was*—” Marcia began, a little acidly.

“You must get over thinking about that, Marcia,” Laura put it. “Not many young brides suffer the disappointment you had to suffer.”

“Pooh!” Mrs. Angermeyer exclaimed. “It would try anyone’s wits to live a week in the same house with Dorcas Gunther.”

“Mother!” Laura protested, then smiled knowingly at Marcia.

“Well—” Mrs. Angermeyer began, but her reply was cut off abruptly by the entrance of Paul Brule, who came in without knocking, glanced at the women with a curt nod, and went directly past them into the other room.

Mrs. Angermeyer kept an ill-tempered silence while her daughter spoke in a whisper. “And it’s so good to think you’re going to help us out on Thanksgiving, Marcia. Mr. Neering told the committee last night that you would sing for us.”

The announcement brought a mild surprise to Marcia. There was no place in her mind now for anything except the thought that Paul Brule was there, in the other room, preparing to make the only statement that could mean anything to her now.

When Brule emerged at last, Marcia searched his face quickly and could have cried aloud with relief. He came over to her and smiled.

“It’s licked!” he said briefly, then turned to Laura Prouty and her mother. “This girl deserves a medal, Mrs. Prouty, and you can tell them I said so.”

“I’m sure, I’m sure!” Laura declared vivaciously. “But you haven’t been shirking your duty either, Doctor Paul. Marcia has done a good thing in

coming here—we've just been talking about it."

"How good," Brule said, "you will never know."

"It's been good for her, too," Laura remarked with vigor.

Brule eyed her for a moment before he replied. Then he cleared his throat and observed, "We can leave that for Marcia to say."

Marcia felt the embarrassment his remark had created. She hastened to relieve it. "They want me to sing at their Thanksgiving entertainment, Doctor Paul," she said. "It's—it's going to be held in the church, of course."

His eyes looked into hers and they were suddenly hard and unfeeling. It was as if in a moment he had forgotten all they had been through together during those two weeks in the Stormo house.

"You can decide that yourself, surely," he said. "I understand you have done a good deal of singing. What is there so—so out of the ordinary about it?"

How had she ever thought of him as anything but ruthless and unimaginative? On this, of all days, he might have shown her an atom of friendship. Always, when she felt most the need of understanding, some devilish mood possessed him. Was it that his love for Rolf Gunther arose at such times and made of him a mocking satyr in her presence? Or was there something else, some cruel mystery in his own life that no one else knew? She had sometimes thought of that, recalling what Nora Hanrahan had told her. Ah, Nora! She was careening all over Europe now, eluding her own particular devil.

An old white dress, dyed black, with cream lace at the throat and wrists, could be made to look beautiful if your eyes were darkly defiant enough, and your cheeks like two crimson petals, Marcia thought as she surveyed herself in the glass. Impulse had always been the jester and the jailer in her life—very well, Doctor Paul, let it be so. She would sing—forgetting everything—closing her mind to all the past that would surround her within those church walls—she would sing as she had never sung before, let Paul Brule and Dorcas Gunther both be there to hear her, if they chose. She would not be alone. Somewhere, near and friendly . . . no, she must not give way to that thought. Spellbound—spellbound she was, of course, thinking thus with her heart, with all her lost love, when her mind told her better. Hugh Vorse had never done that—had never fumbled desperately for something his cold brain told him was not there. . . . Or had he, perhaps,

unknown to her? . . . Well, Paul Brule, then . . . cold and clear . . . hard and merciless, too. She hung about her neck a string of turquoise beads that her father had given her on her fourteenth birthday. They rose and fell with her agitated breathing.

There was Haldis Stormo now, come to spend the night with little Rolf . . . Dear, shy Haldis! How grateful she was now that her mother was able to move about the house once more. Marcia went to the door and opened it. The girl entered the living room, looked up at Marcia, then fell back a step, her hands clasped together in wonder, her lips parted.

"Oh, Mis' Gunther!"

Marcia laughed, put her arms about the girl's shoulder, and kissed her cheek. "Do you like my hair like this, Haldis? Don't you think I look a little —well, a little wild with it brushed back this way?"

Haldis swallowed, her hand at her throat. "You are—just *beautiful*!" she breathed.

Later, on her way down the slope, her cloak wrapped snugly about her and her scarf pushed back so that her hair was exposed to the misty night, Marcia took courage as she thought of Haldis Stormo's admiration. Perhaps, if she could keep on thinking of that, she would be able to hide her desperate fear of those people who would be staring up at her from the pews. Even if Dorcas Gunther should be there . . . an apprehensive chill rippled over her.

Automobiles stood in the streets about the church and in the light from the entry Marcia saw people moving in and out of the door. She slipped quickly around to the Sunday-school entrance where she had always gone in for choir practice—how very long ago it seemed. She had to make her way through a noisy group of youths who had gathered in the shadows at the side of the church. When she opened the door and stepped over the threshold she knew that she was no longer afraid. She was Marcia Vorse again, fighting for survival in a hostile world. Very well, once again, let it be so. Straight and cool she pushed open a swinging door . . . that stubborn door with its covering of green baize held in place by brass tacks.

In the large Sunday-school room a dozen women were still busy with clattering dishes while as many men were removing the improvised tables and setting the chairs back in their places. There had been a dinner, to which Mr. Neering had invited Marcia, but she had not felt quite equal to that. It was enough now that she had to walk past them all to get to the vestry where Harriet Neering would be waiting for her. In the glance she cast about her,

however, she saw that Dorcas Gunther was not among the women there, nor was old Jonas with the men. Could it be possible that Dorcas had remained at home rather than listen to Marcia's singing? Mrs. Aldous was there—and Herb Lundy's wife—and Mrs. Neering with them, the three working together near the door through which Marcia had to pass to reach the vestry.

"Why, here's Marcia Gunther!" Mrs. Lundy exclaimed as Marcia came toward them. "I declare you look five years younger than the last time I saw you."

Mrs. Aldous bowed pleasantly—she knew how to be cordial and distant in the same gesture. Behind her, Rosina Machlet was approaching, carrying a bundle in her arms. Marcia moved away instinctively—the sight of Rosina had brought Emil Hess to mind. But Mrs. Neering laid a hand on her arm.

"It was good of you to come, Marcia," she said softly. "It will be like old times to have you back. And—who can tell?—it may mean a blessing to you. The Lord does not forsake his own."

There was something so warm, so utterly sincere in the little woman's manner that Marcia forgot at once the presence of Rosina and the train of unpleasant thoughts her appearance suggested.

"Thank you, Mrs. Neering," she said. "Is Harriet in the vestry?"

"Yes—go right in. The others are there, too. I think they're about ready to begin the program."

In spite of her courage, it seemed to Marcia that hours passed while she sat awaiting her turn to appear. She had chosen a couple of simple, secular songs which she and Harriet had rehearsed together many times during the past weeks. She had never been more confident of herself than she was now as she sat and listened to the applause that reached her from the main body of the church at the conclusion of each number on the program. Once when the door opened she had looked out and caught a glimpse of the people in the pews. The place was crowded to the doors. A thrill of excitement passed through her . . . "One day that voice will trouble kings!" . . . She smiled as she recalled her father's words. Kings waiting to hear her sing! It could not be so very different, after all, perhaps. And then she fell to wondering vaguely whether Paul Brule might be waiting out there—waiting, perhaps, to hear her sing. But no—that would not be like Paul Brule.

When she was called at last, she laid her cloak aside and went out. She saw Harriet seated at the piano on the pulpit platform, behind the little railing with its curtain of dark red wool. Harriet was smiling, her face

flushed and excited. Marcia mounted the four steps to the platform where Mr. Neering stood bowing and smiling while the people in the pews applauded. The people themselves were never more than a vague blur to her. She kept her eyes level and unseeing and listened while Harriet played the few bars of introduction to the song. Then she sang, her voice flowing out into the tense quiet, flutelike and serene and true.

When the song was done she lingered a moment to bow, then turned away as a wave of applause rose toward her. She had taken only a step, however, when she felt Mr. Neering's hand upon her arm.

"You can't go, you can't go!" he said, his voice rising above the clamor.

She smiled at him and returned to her place near the piano. Harriet had already begun to play softly. Again Marcia looked out over the faces that were still a confused blur before her.

It was intuition rather than sight that informed her then that the figure of an old woman had risen there in the center of the church and had come into the aisle, a shrunken figure hobbling forward supported by a cane. It was some other sense rather than hearing that conveyed the shock of that shrill voice, crying above the sound of the piano, turning every head in the audience in electric unison.

"Stop! No more of that! I'll not sit here and listen any longer to a desecration of the Lord's house!"

The living body of people in the church might instantly have turned to stone. For a moment there was not a breath audible, not the faintest stir. Then, before Marcia's eyes, a flurry of shapes closed about the form of Dorcas Gunther in the aisle and moved toward the back of the church. In that terrible moment, it seemed to Marcia that the form of Dorcas shrank entirely out of sight, vanished horribly, supernaturally. A humming of voices had begun, over which the old woman's voice was only a whimpering complaint, her words lost in the confusion.

Behind her, Marcia could hear the agitated whisper of Harriet Neering. With her frozen senses she realized that the girl was urging her to leave the platform. But her body was numb; she could only stand staring wildly out over the crowd. Then Harriet was at her side, drawing her away.

She was in the vestry again, throwing her cloak about her, hearing nothing of what Harriet was trying to say to her. When she had wound her scarf about her head she opened the door leading to the Sunday-school

room. To Harriet's efforts at comforting her she could only smile blankly. Then she turned away.

Halfway to the outer door, she halted before the sturdy form of Rosina Machlet. Marcia glanced quickly about her, as if she expected someone to come to her assistance and help her get away. There was no one in the room except herself and Rosina. The girl was saying something—angrily—spitefully.

"I've been waitin' here to talk to you, Marcia Gunther," she was saying in a high voice. "I want to tell you you better not go takin' Emil away from me."

"Rosina!" Marcia pleaded, and tried to get past her.

"You listen to me," the girl ordered, seizing Marcia's arms. "You may be good-lookin' an' smart an' all, but Emil an' me was promised. Since you went to live up there he hasn't hardly looked at me. An' you don't need to think I don't know about him goin' to see you. He told me himself. I could of spoilt things for you when *you* got married, if I wanted to. I could of told things that would of—"

"Please, Rosina," Marcia pleaded once more. "Let me go."

"But I was too decent," Rosina went on. "I knew how to mind my own business, I did. I didn't tell what I could of told about Rolf Gunther an' his goin's on. I never blabbed, like I could of. You thought he was a saint—like everybody else did. Now—I'll tell you—"

The green door swung open and Marcia saw Paul Brule standing there beckoning her to come away. But Rosina was talking—stammering incoherently.

"I wasn't good enough for Rolf Gunther—not for him to marry me, I wasn't. But I was good enough for what he wanted me for—"

"Shut up, Rosina!" Brule had come into the room and was standing beside them now.

The girl started suddenly, then put her hands to her face and burst into tears. Marcia, with a bewildered look at Brule, put her arm about Rosina's shoulder, and spoke soothingly to her. Marcia's mind felt amazingly cool and clear. The world, time and events and emotions, seemed to take on a curious fluidity, coiling and flowing, laving about her. Incomprehensible things were becoming lucid in that moving welter. In an instant she

encompassed her own lifetime, and Rolf's. She saw something—with great clarity—as though she had been alone, looking off a mountain at a star.

They were walking together now, Marcia and Paul Brule, down a street at the corner of which an arc light loomed, a fine rain threading against it. Brule had spoken but once since they had left the church—"I could take you home in the car, but it will do us both good to walk. I want you to shake off that nonsense back there." He had shaken her gently, but she had said nothing in response.

Through the flats they went, hurrying along in silence, and entered a road where the ditches showed a powdered white in the darkness. Brule began talking again.

"We may as well face the facts, Marcia. The old woman will tell the whole story now. She'll have to, to save her face—after what happened tonight. The whole town will have it tomorrow."

"It doesn't really matter—now," Marcia said. "I really think it will be a relief."

"If you keep your sense of humor through it all," Brule observed. "Just forget what that Machlet girl told you. She lost her head completely. She was hysterical—didn't know what she was saying."

Marcia smiled faintly, her eyes tracing the obscure margin of the hill above them. "I'm not so sure of that," she said, more to herself than to him. "I think she was telling the truth. Didn't you tell me once that a man marries a woman—sometimes—to save his own soul? Wasn't that what you said—the morning we talked about Rolf?"

"Something like that," Brule admitted.

"I know you did. It's true—it's true! I never understood before. I was blind—stupid—childish. I should have known—should have understood him. But I was brought up all wrong, you see. I never had that—that consciousness of evil—or whatever it is. My father never let me think like that—oh, I don't know how to explain what I mean."

"I think I understand you," Brule said, and she thought there was an uneasy note in his voice. "You are not to blame—perhaps no one is ever to blame—"

"Blame! I am more to blame than ever for my own childish stupidity. I should—have—known!"

“Have it your own way, then,” he replied gruffly. “You’ll probably come to your senses when you’ve had a good healthy cry over the evening’s experience.”

He made a low baffled exclamation and then was abruptly silent. Marcia only vaguely sensed his amazement. They climbed the slope in silence and entered the house.

Brule waited only until Haldis Stormo was ready to return home. With his hand on the door, he looked at Marcia where she stood beside the table, the light from the fireplace playing on her face.

“When you hear the yelp of the pack,” he said with a half smile, “you might just let me know.” When she did not reply, he added, “Incidentally—you were beautiful tonight—and your voice was a poem.”

She laughed a little, and the ache in her throat relented.

“I shall try to remember that—when I hear the yelp of the pack,” she replied.

When Brule and Haldis had gone, Marcia made herself a cup of tea and sat down at the table in the little kitchen. She was tempted to waken Rolf so that she would not be so intensely alone. How solitary a human being was, even at best, locked in this curious tenement of flesh and blood! How utterly alone the man she had married must have been! Oh, Rolf, Rolf, forever lost!

Suddenly she got up and went to the window that looked toward the town. Down there the lights were drawn into pointed conclave. A few barbs of sleet struck the window, scratching diagonally along the pane. Tomorrow, perhaps, it would be winter.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALL about her now, as far as the eye could follow the circle, were the hard white hills of winter. The sun was upon them, turning them to facets of crystal. In the blinding glitter Marcia felt suspended and alone. The valley out of which she had just emerged might have fallen out of existence behind her, for all she knew. She glanced back to make sure that the sled she was pulling up the path was really there, with its two buckets of water securely in place.

It was when she turned her eyes once more toward the gray house on the hillside that she saw a woman coming toward her casting a blue shadow across the path. Marcia narrowed her eyes against the sunlight and made a shade of her hands above her brows. The woman was Nora Hanrahan, come back again to Amaranth, like a breath from some remote summer. Marcia's heart rushed excitedly out toward her; then, almost before her hands had made that impulsive forward gesture, she drew herself back, on guard. But her eyes smiled upward, and she saw that behind Nora, with little Rolf on his shoulders, Paul Brule was coming out of the house.

"Welcome me home, Marcia!" Nora cried as she ran down the path with her arms outstretched. "Say you're glad to see me again, quick!"

Marcia felt the warm blood in her cheeks suddenly sting against the cold. She smiled with confusion, accepting Nora's quick kiss. Brule came down, set Rolf in the path, then seized the sled rope out of her hands and pushed her on ahead of him with Nora Hanrahan.

"Come on, Tinker, give us a pull!" he called to the boy.

Marcia laughed as she looked back over her shoulder at Brule and Rolf tugging together at the rope. But uppermost in her mind was the painfully disturbing thought that Paul Brule and Nora Hanrahan had been in her house while she had been down at Stormos'. It did not matter so much about Brule, she thought—he had been up occasionally during the past weeks and knew only too well how she lived. But that Nora Hanrahan should have been there . . . looking about the living room . . . perhaps even the kitchen!

"It's great to be back, Marcia," Nora was saying, tucking her arm more securely into Marcia's own. "Paul, the wretch, insists I'm crazy to come back here at this time of year—perhaps get pneumonia or something and die."

“I’m inclined to agree with him,” Marcia replied, “but the real mystery is why anyone should want to come back here at all—unless it was absolutely necessary. Some of us have to stay here, but you—”

“I believe I’ve been away too long,” Nora said. “You’ve been getting along so well without me, you two, that I’m not—”

“Disillusion!” Brule put it. “Lord, how it hurts to find out that the world can get along without us, eh, Nora?”

Disillusion! Marcia had almost forgotten that hurt, so long ago it seemed since the world had gone its way without her. But to sit through the long winter evenings, stricken with a sense of failure, facing always the bewildering knowledge that the past could never be redeemed, that atonement was but a hapless invention of cowards, a make-believe—had he ever known the hurt of that?

“Disillusion?” Nora replied. “I won’t admit it. I still believe in Santa Claus, Paul—reindeer, bells, sled and all the trimmings! What do you want, anyhow? Isn’t this shining world just glorious!”

Marcia wondered suddenly if she had become unreasonable living alone here with her thoughts. Probably. The very sound of Nora Hanrahan’s voice irritated her now.

“You’ll run off at your first attack of chilblains,” Brule retorted.

“Be careful over this bump,” Marcia warned, “unless you want to go back down for another supply of water.”

They had reached the house now, and Marcia sent Nora and Rolf in by the front door while she and Brule went around to the kitchen at the side. Brule carried the buckets of water indoors and set them on the table beside the window, then turned abruptly to Marcia and swept her with sharp scrutiny.

“Of course you’ll go right on with it,” he said curtly, in a low voice, “but you’re going to go under at this job. How often do you go down there for water?”

Marcia smiled lightly and gave a small toss to her head.

“I melt snow for everything but drinking and cooking,” she said. “Anyhow, I like to walk down there and back. And I’m really getting on splendidly. Come—let’s go inside.”

“Just plain stubborn!” Brule commented.

"And—thanks, awfully, for your help."

She had said that, oh, so lightly, as though help of any kind really meant very little to her. As she entered the living room with Brule, she was at her wits' end to think of something she could serve her visitors for tea. When one lived from day to day with just enough in the house for oneself and a little boy, a visit from a woman like Nora Hanrahan became a serious problem. Especially when one had grown accustomed to the simplest necessaries. What one ate and wore, after all, was largely habit. She could make some biscuits, of course, and she had a little tea left still of the last half pound she had bought. And then there were the jellies she had put away in the fall. She would manage somehow. If she had only the least sense of humor she might take Nora into the secret of her miserable impecuniousness. Paul Brule knew, of course. He could not help knowing, though he had never spoken of it. Why could she not tell them, laughingly, that she would have to take a look at her pantry to see whether she had enough of everything to make a pan of baking-powder biscuits? Why could she not confide to them her fear that the few shreds of tea still left on the shelf in the kitchen might not quite make three cups? It would have been in some such mood that her father, light-hearted Hugh Vorse, would have treated the whole thing. She herself might once have done so. But not now. Pain had made her heavy-minded, humorless.

Nora had curled up on the couch and was looking about the room cheerfully. "Really, you *are* snug here, Marcia! I had no idea that the place could be kept so warm. And these braided mats—did you make them yourself?"

"Mrs. Stormo has been teaching me," Marcia told her, seating herself at the other end of the couch. "It's quite simple and it has given me something to do in the evenings when I had nothing to read."

Brule sat on a chair against the wall with Rolf perched on his knees. "Go and get that parcel over there on the table—under my coat," he ordered the boy, "and take it to your mother."

Rolf clambered down and scampered away to get the parcel. Marcia's eyes followed him with misgivings. They had brought her something, then. Her old nervousness came over her. She frowned a little, her lips twitching into a smile, as Rolf came to her with the parcel.

"What can it be, Tinker-boy?" she cried, lifting her hands.

"Is it for me, Mumfer?" he asked.

“More disillusion!” Brule laughed. “No, Tinker—that’s for your mother. I always keep your surprises in my pockets. Come back here and I’ll settle with you later.”

Marcia felt Nora’s eyes upon her with a hungry sort of warmth. As she took the parcel from Rolf, she glanced up and saw that Brule’s look was entirely defenseless. He was smiling with one side of his face as he always did when he was embarrassed or secretly pleased. She removed the wrappings hastily and found a volume of William Blake, beautifully bound, and beneath it a music case of fine leather, containing a selection of a dozen or more new songs.

“You told me once that your father used to love William Blake,” Nora said in a matter-of-fact tone, “and the songs—I picked what seemed to me particularly like you. I hope you’ll sing them—and like them.”

“Let me see, Mumfer,” Rolf pleaded.

“Come on, Tinker old kid,” Brule called out. “Let your mother look over those songs and decide which to sing first. You and I don’t sing.”

“Doctor Paul wants you, dear,” Marcia said, when the boy hesitated.

She could not look up. She could not trust herself to raise her eyes—not for a moment or two. She was too perilously close to tears. It was too sensitive, too fine of Nora, to bring her something that was not useful. She might have brought something to eat, or to wear; oatmeal, or underclothing, Marcia thought with sudden hysterical humor. With a quick gesture she flicked her handkerchief at the corners of her eyes. Then she got to her feet, smiling at Nora.

“Don’t expect me to thank you,” she said breathlessly. “At least, not for a minute or two.” She carried her gifts to the top of the piano, then turned and looked from Brule to Nora, one hand nervously rubbing her flushed cheek. “You two amuse yourselves for a few minutes,” she said. “I want to fix a little tea for us. Nora—why don’t you go over some of the songs and give me an idea of what they’re like. I’ve never heard a single one of them.”

Nora uncoiled herself from the couch and went to the piano.

In the kitchen where she hurriedly prepared the biscuits for the oven, Marcia listened to the plaintive notes of the first song, and happiness broke over her like a physical radiance. Nora’s voice took up the song at last, after she had played it once, and Marcia heard the words . . . “My life has crept so long on a broken wing . . . that I come to be grateful at last for a little thing . . .” Grateful at last for a little thing! Ah, if she could only tell them!

The afternoon passed, and Marcia, trying over the new songs and serving tea and light biscuits and jelly to Brule and Nora, almost forgot that she was in any way different from them. Nora told, with impish color of her adventures abroad, and suggested to Brule that she might give a tea for the ladies of Amaranth—certain ladies in particular—and devote an afternoon to telling them of her escapades in Rome and Nice and London.

"Wouldn't Laura Prouty love to hear me tell of riding through Rome with a bottle of wine in each hand, drinking to ancient heroes at every street corner?"

Even Paul Brule became glamorous as he told of strange corners of the world where days were never reckoned and nights were like exotic blossoms on a slowly moving stream. It was at such rare moments as these that Marcia felt she had never known Paul. They were the moments in which he seemed to forget that he had ever despised, hated her. They were the moments when secrets were born between them . . . such secrets as had to do with a bit of carved green jade, or the face of one who had died, or the heart's long search for peace.

Before she left, Nora wrung from Marcia a promise to bring little Rolf to a Christmas party she was giving for some of the children from the flats. There would be a few others there as well, Nora assured her; Paul, of course, and his friend Andrew Tolliver from Bethune, and a Miss Innis, a singing teacher from the city, and perhaps one of the new professors at the college, a young fellow who had come there in the fall to teach English.

Marcia, with the excitement of the past hour still upon her, was stirred at the thought of meeting people with whom she would find something in common. But after they had gone, and the white and blue of the valley below had rippled over them in the dusk, Marcia stood alone in the large room of the old house, reproaching herself in mind and heart. It was not Nora and Paul and all their pleasant friends who were calling to her, drawing her away from her self-inflicted isolation. It was life that was calling her—that same terrible passion for existence that she had destroyed in the man she had loved.

She sat down weakly in the chair before the crumbling fire. A log fell apart—like bright clasped hands falling apart. Little Rolf was playing in the kitchen with a new ball Brule had brought him.

"I'm bewitched—I'm bewitched!" she said over and over, in terror.

Bewitched . . . she would never be released from these shackles of remorse. Never. Perhaps, after all, Dorcas Gunther's religion had actually taken effect. On her, Marcia Vorse, who had never known the ten commandments until she had become a part of the Gunther household. Perhaps her imagination, never strained with such things in childhood, had been particularly rich soil for what Dorcas had striven to implant there. Remorse, repentance . . . God! It was all enchantment, a horrible enchantment that offered her mind and heart no hope of escape. They had said Rolf Gunther was dead. He was not dead, he was more alive now than when she had known him. He was here, touching her hair, her throat, kissing her hands . . .

She rose in blank terror and moved to the couch. She lay down and pressed her hands over her face.

She would not go to Nora Hanrahan's Christmas party.

When spring came that year, Marcia looked back upon that winter with calm and wondering eyes, as one does who has survived an incredible illness. She thought sometimes that little Rolf might almost have grown into her body again, so closely had she held him to her of nights that he might not feel the cold. She had always had food for him in plenty, though she herself had sometimes gone without. For she had sworn to herself that on the day when the child should suffer want, she would admit defeat and take whatever course was open to her to provide for him. Her hands, lying upon the keys of the piano, had become thin and of a transparent delicacy that sometimes startled her. Sometimes, too, in passing a mirror, she would see her eyes rove across the glass like blown torches.

But now the earth in the gullies was breaking into warm, moist rifts, and faintly at midday you could see the warm air quiver above it as though invisible hands were there laying upon it a benediction. The snows from the upper reaches of the knoll melted and made miniature caverns in the drifts, and here and there freshets rose and ran noisy and ice-clear down to the spring below. The creek swelled, and all night long Marcia could hear the watery din of it, its excited pompous fanfare.

With the snow all gone it was not hard to imagine on a soft afternoon that the knoll heaved and stretched and settled, and then glanced impudently about to see what disturbance it had caused. For the earth had most certainly loosened about the great stones, and soft pads of old moss had swelled and dropped away, as though they had been shaken from their gray moorings.

Morning after tender morning all the distance was as grave as rain. Then, suddenly, it seemed that there was no more loneliness on the slope that led upward to the prairies, for the smooth light of April was filled with a maze of wings, and the dark was filled with the peace that follows a bird's singing.

She watched the earth carefully for the day when it would be right for the first planting. Old Jonas Todd stole up when he could and gave her generously of his wisdom about the soil. Her mornings were presently full of hoeing and spraying and weeding and in May when Jonas toiled up the hillside and looked down the side of the ravine that lay facing the south, he patted his hands and smiled without a word, turned half away as though to go, then looked back once more at the fresh green area that lay there, patted his hands again and smiled.

Twice a week now, when she went to Quigley's Boarding House to give a lesson to Vera Deal, the engineer's daughter, Marcia took Rolf with her. The boy had grown up suddenly, it seemed, and was beginning to assume a manly air of protectiveness toward her. He always insisted on walking on the outside of the street as he had been taught by Paul Brule. Marcia was amused—and pleased, too—at the sturdy, square-shouldered stride he affected beside her, even at the same moment that his increasing likeness to that other Rolf struck a pang across her heart. As the child grew and showed a desire to mingle with other children, Marcia realized with helpless panic that the day was not far distant now when he would come to her with the inevitable question which Paul Brule had said would be the final test of her stubborn will.

One afternoon in mid-May, when the valley was as still and sunny as a dream, she dressed Rolf in a new blue and white piqué suit she had managed to make for him, and with the music case under her arm started with the boy down the path.

"Remember, Tinker," she called to him as he ran ahead, "you're wearing your new suit and your new shoes. Be careful how you play today. Mother can't afford to buy you any more for a long time."

He became suddenly very sedate in his walk and glanced back solemnly now and then for her approval.

"I'm going to be very, very careful, Mumfer," he confided.

In front of the Stormos' he strode with dignity past a group of children mixing colored "medicine" in bottles at the side of the road. Marcia smiled

as she thought that in the fascinating backyard of the Quigley Boarding House his good resolutions would be put to rout.

She hurried past the Stormo place, waving a greeting to Mrs. Stormo who was hanging clothes on the line, and to the ancient Jens where he knelt before a wooden fence rail to which he was running string from wooden pegs in the earth. “Good luck with your sweet peas, Jens!” she called from the sidewalk.

“Vhat you s’y?” the old man called back anxiously, a hand cupped behind his ear.

“Good luck with your sweet peas!” Marcia repeated.

To her dismay Jens was getting laboriously to his feet, coming toward her.

“I couldn’t make out vhat you s’y.”

Marcia shook her head ruefully. “I was only wishing you luck with your flowers.”

“O-oh!” the old man’s countenance beamed. “I get it now—sure!”

He went back to his work, wagging his head mysteriously.

The two wooden benches that stood on the veranda in front of Quigley’s place were filled, as usual, with the town’s idlers. Marcia had become accustomed to the sidelong glances, the significant clearing of throats, and the knowing hums that always greeted her when she approached the house. If a traveling salesman happened to be among them, her reception was sometimes varied by a few sprightly bars from a popular song. Today as she came to the shabby gate before the place, the wife of the station-agent and Viola, the spinster daughter of Absolom Peck, passed her. Their talk increased briskly in tempo and audibility and both stared resolutely toward the opposite side of the street from Marcia. There came a snicker or two from the veranda as she opened the gate and hurried up the front steps with the boy. Why had she never learned to control the vivid flush that always burned in her cheeks when she passed these wretched loafers?

In the hallway she met Mrs. Quigley, who was on her way upstairs, broom and dustpan in hand. The red-headed, buxom proprietress nodded curtly, out of deference, no doubt, to the fact that Marcia’s visit was on behalf of one of her steady boarders. With a word to Rolf to be careful of his clothes, Marcia released him to play in the backyard where Mrs. Quigley’s three or four offspring were already engaged in mortal combat with wooden

swords and with saucepan covers for shields. As she glanced into the yard she recognized two or three neighbors' boys who had also joined the fray. A little dubiously, she turned back and went into the parlor where Vera was already waiting.

The lesson was only half finished when a roar from the backyard sent Marcia to the window. "I'll have to go and see what has happened," she said. "It looks as if Tinker is in trouble."

She went out through the hallway to the side door, Vera following her from curiosity. As she appeared on the steps, Rolf came running to her, his face white, his eyes more luminously ashine than she had ever seen them.

"What's wrong, Tinker?" she asked.

"I hit him—I hit Davie," he said, pointing behind him with a smudged hand at the eldest Quigley boy, a child of nine or ten, who was standing sullenly apart with a stick in his hand.

"He hit me with this—on the head," the Quigley boy spoke up.

"Why—Tinker! Whatever made you do that?"

Rolf broke into tears suddenly and clasped his arms about her knees.

"He—he said—you killed my daddy—"

Marcia gathered the boy to her to keep him from saying more. Then, asking Vera to take him into the house, she stepped down into the yard.

"Did you say that to Rolf?" she asked the Quigley boy quietly.

"No," the boy replied, turning away.

"Oh, you did, you did!" cried three or four voices at once.

The boy turned away sheepishly, then bolted for the back door. On the steps he turned belligerently. "I guess I can say what I want in my own yard!" he called. Behind him, framed in the open doorway, stood the ample figure of his mother, her lips pressed tightly, her red hair fairly bristling.

"What's this?" she demanded.

Marcia had no sooner begun to explain than the woman's voice broke out harshly again. "I seen it all from upstairs, so you can't tell me anything about it. I saw your youngster lift the stick and hit Davie over the head. He might have killed him. You can keep the young devil at home after this."

“I’m sorry Tinker did that, Mrs. Quigley,” Marcia replied, doing her best to control herself, “but Davie should be more careful of—”

“Davie only said what’s true—and what everyone in town has been sayin’ since the truth got out,” Mrs. Quigley interrupted her. “When your own mother-in-law says it, I guess it’s true. Davie had a right to say it and you can keep your brat at home from now on. I’d ‘a’ told you that long ago if it wasn’t for makin’ trouble and hard feelin’s. I don’t see how you can have the face to put yourself in where decent people are anyhow. Come in here, Davie, and let me look at your head. It’s a wonder he didn’t kill you.”

Davie, in a sudden attack of self-pity, began to cry lustily. Mrs. Quigley pushed him inside the screen door and followed him with a last glare at Marcia.

Vera Deal had sensibly led Rolf back into the parlor. Two or three of Mrs. Quigley’s boarders had come into the hall and were looking about them with alert interest. Marcia hurriedly dusted off Rolf’s clothes, put on her hat and explained to Vera that it would be impossible to come down to the boarding-house to give any more lessons. They talked quietly for a while and at last they agreed that it would be better for Vera to go up to Marcia’s place on Saturday afternoons. Vera would speak to her father about it.

In the still amber of the evening in the little front yard of the “castle,” with the white of the dogwood tree above them, Marcia sat on the ground with little Rolf.

“You are a very little boy, dear,” she said after a long time, “and you don’t understand many things that you will some day understand. But if anyone ever tells you again that—that mother did what Davie Quigley said—you must not listen to him. Because it isn’t true, dear. Do you understand now?”

“Yes, Mumfer.”

“Your daddy was a very good man and mother loved him very much—and he loved mother very much, too—and he died. Now, dear, if anyone ever says anything like that again, you won’t listen, will you?”

“No, Mumfer.”

“You must walk away and come straight to mother.”

He nodded gravely and she gathered him close and kissed him. And in that moment she wished that he might be, once more, only a dream throbbing under her heart.

After dark, two evenings later, Marcia sat on the floor of the living room with the boy curled against her in the fitful light of the fire she had built in the fireplace to remove the chill of the early spring night air. She had told him stories until he had fallen asleep. Something possessed her now that drove out every other emotion. It was fear. It reached, like a long arm, down through the chimney and across the red of the fire. It sighed, languidly, sinisterly through the room as though the old house were its lungs. It used her own heart for the rhythm of its power.

She lifted the sleeping boy and carried him to bed. A moment later she was standing in the middle of the room listening, her breath stopped in her throat. There had been a sound upon the window that looked toward the valley, a quick, sharp tapping sound that paused a moment and then began again. She moved quietly into the kitchen and opened the door softly.

As she came around the corner of the house, three small dark figures shot across the light from the window and fled down the hillside. Now one stumbled in the darkness, fell. Marcia was swooping upon the fallen boy like a great furious bird. She dragged him, limp with terror, back into the light that fell from the window. She shook him until her arms were powerless, then in a voice which she did not recognize as her own, told him to go home.

The boy scrambled away, weeping noisily.

Marcia was indoors again, flat upon her bed. For the first time in her life, it seemed, she was actually crying. She went to sleep so, and when she woke she laughed with deep humor. She had become a spectacle.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE thornapple tree bore white flowers, then red-lacquered fruit, and then again it was fall, and winter, and spring.

In Amaranth people began to look toward Marcia Gunther's place on the slope that climbed out of the valley. Herb Lundy had never before, in all his years of store keeping, displayed such early spring vegetables as he did this year. He boasted of them as though he himself had raised them—while in the same breath he gave full credit to Marcia Gunther. He did so one day while she stood by smiling.

"And he means every word of it," Mrs. Lundy said to Marcia in an aside. "I heard him say the same thing to Mr. Crosby just last night. Have you seen Mr. Crosby? He's the engineer that's come to town to put that new railway bridge over the Vermilion."

Marcia admitted that she had not seen him, had not even heard of him, though young George Nordland had told her weeks ago about the new bridge that would be built over the river within sight of her house.

"You'll have it lively enough up there this summer," Mrs. Lundy went on, "too lively, maybe. If the bridge workers discover that garden of yours, you'll have to look out."

Marcia laughed. "When they find out there's a scarecrow watching it, they'll probably not bother it much."

Why was it that Herb Lundy's wife had always provoked in her such perverse moods? Marcia had often wondered about that. Why did she always chuckle inwardly when the woman cast that curiously apprehensive glance at her?

"Scarecrow!" Mrs. Lundy exclaimed. "You'll be lucky if they don't try to come any farther than the garden. I don't think I ever saw you look so well. And the boy, too. Life must be agreeing with you both up there."

"It's largely a matter of agreeing with life," Marcia retorted.

"That's true as you say it!" Mrs. Lundy admitted. "Finding fault with things doesn't get a person very much in this life, I must say." She moved to the other side of the store where the dry goods were. "What was it you said you wanted to see?"

Marcia repeated her order and followed the woman across the floor.

“Mrs. Neering was in this afternoon,” Mrs. Lundy went on, unfolding the goods Marcia had asked for. “She was ordering vegetables and Herb told her they were some that you grew up on the hill there. I’ve always said that Mrs. Neering was one woman with God’s grace in her soul, if ever there was one.”

“I hope that was not the only reason she had for buying home-grown vegetables,” Marcia remarked pleasantly.

“Land, no! What makes you say such things? No—she’s going to hold some kind of a spring sociable at the church next week—for the women of the place. When we mentioned your name, she turned to me and asked me if I thought you’d come out if she sent word up with Harriet.”

“And what did you tell her?” Marcia asked, although she knew very well that Mrs. Lundy had paused in the hope that Marcia might express herself one way or the other concerning the church affair.

“Well, I said I’d like to see you come out—if you would—but it was my opinion you were too busy and wouldn’t have the time. But she’s a dear, good woman, Mrs. Neering is. She never grows tired talking about what you did for poor Mrs. Stormo. Though of course she knows how Doctor Brule worked, too—but then he’s a doctor, after all. Herb says Brule would be one of the smartest doctors in the country if he’d only leave drink alone.”

“I didn’t know that Doctor Paul was much of a drinker,” Marcia observed, instinctively on the defensive.

“I guess none of us did, if it comes to that—until this winter. But I guess the trips he takes down to the city aren’t altogether for what they call professional reasons, if everything you hear is true. And I guess the most of it’s true, too. How much of this will you have, Marcia?”

“You can give me three yards,” Marcia replied curtly.

She was glad to be out upon the street again, hurrying down into the flats with the twilight eddying about her. It was not difficult, at such times, to shake herself free from the irritating effect of Mrs. Lundy’s chatter. She had little regard for anything the woman might say to her. Her only desire, so far as anyone in Amaranth was concerned, had been to withstand the petty cruelty that had driven Hally Percival’s mother to seek another place in which to work and earn her living. That much she had done already. Best of all, she had proven to Paul Brule that she could face the town’s opinion of her—even to that last bitter test of her courage in Mrs. Quigley’s backyard. And now they had begun talking about Paul Brule. As if anything they could

say would give him a moment's thought! She smiled wryly at her own preoccupation with a question so trivial.

Then suddenly her brows knit. After all, if she were to go on living here, Rolf would grow up, and there was no divining the mind of a boy. The day might yet come when it would be of gravest importance to him that his mother should be held in high repute in the town. He was the son of a man who had set great store by such things. A painful twist came into her heart at the thought.

On the edge of the flats she met Inga Nordland walking into town from the Nordland farm.

"Hello, Mis' Gunther!" she called. "Spring is really here. I saw a band of gypsies making camp out your way—in the gully this side the hill."

Odd what magic in a word. Gypsies . . .

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry you're not going back with me. I want to call and talk to George about his lesson for next week. I'm going down to Bethune and won't be able to see him Thursday."

"He won't like that, either," Inga said. "He's just crazy about his music. But I've got to hurry, I wish you could wait till I get back."

"I'm afraid I can't today, Inga. Haldis will be getting impatient."

"Don't let the gypsies run away with you," the girl called back as she hurried down the street.

It was only a few steps out of her way to call at the Nordland farm. In a few minutes she was following the vague path that led across the hillside to her house. Halfway, she stood still and looked about her. The gray bloom of early dusk crushed into her consciousness, thin and sweet and overwhelming. Surrender ached through her body, surrender to the soft May evening, with its prophecy of swallows' wings, with its tremulous charcoal tracings of birches against cool vacancy, with its shore of nameless color in the east, the shore of the unrisen moon.

There was a smell of smoke in the air, piercing, tantalizing. Searching the shoulder of the hill, she found the smoke rising in a gentle blue tendril, only a little less faint than the blue of the air itself. It came from the ravine that cut through on the eastern side of the hill. Whoever was camping there had the rocky summit between them and her house. It was early still and Haldis Stormo would not mind staying a little longer with Rolf.

She slipped cautiously through a stand of birches and came to a projection of stone about which dense gooseberry bushes grew. She sank to the ground and with her cheek pressed close to the stone looked around its side. Voices were clearly audible now, although they were low. Now the voices ceased, vaguely as a wind ceasing, and the thin searching note of a violin rose in the stillness.

They were seated about their campfire and their canvas wagon projected, a bulbous white wraith, halfway out of a clump of trees. Their women moved facilely about in the tattered, eternal carnival of their brilliant skirts; their brown, frowsy children played on the ground, belly down. Their horses stood, meek and thin, like ghosts of old trees, with heads bent and backs sagging. And the dark boy with the red bandanna kerchief about his neck played the violin.

She did not know how long she crouched there, flat against the rock. It seemed that her eyes, staring so, swelled in their sockets and that her lids drooped suddenly heavy then against her cheeks. But still she could see the dark youth, and the red kerchief, and could hear the music that was, still, like a color before her eyes. With all the life of her being she wanted the dark youth and his sullen, beautiful mouth and the thin cruel color of his music. She felt that he was looking straight at her and that she could not move. His eyes, that she could not see, had impaled her against the rock. Abruptly and lightly, on a note that might have been a kiss flung on the wind, the music stopped.

She had come out clear on the sky, away from the trees. She had not run, of that she was sure, and yet it was strangely difficult to breathe. But she would have to hurry now to save Haldis from anxiety about her. She began to run through the dusk that covered all the hillside.

A night passed, and she walked idly with Rolf across the face of the hill, back through the stand of birches, out upon the scarp of rock about which the dense gooseberry bushes grew.

The wind blew over the stillness. She clambered down the rock and walked absently over the trampled grass. Here was a long white patch on the broken limb of a slippery elm . . . had the brown children chewed the bark into a flavorsome mass, spitting it out only when it became dry and stringy? . . . and here were the gray embers of a fire. She stirred the ashes with her toe, then turned up through the ravine that climbed to the prairie land above. They passed quietly through the woods where the new leaves lanced

downward about them like shaped jewels. Birds balanced one note against another on the fragile scales of air. Time was threading its bright beads along the silk cord of eternity. Somewhere, absently, it would make a knot . . .

They dug up small cranberry bushes that grew on the edge of the swamp-land, and then walked back home over the knoll. On the knoll's crest the wind blew strong and straight, levelling the grass and laying a white shine along it. The sound of the wind was without end, without change; it was like some familiar word the remote mind knew, forever monotoned in a minor key.

Life was an idyll here on the hillside in these bland days of summer when she could stand in her own dooryard and look down to where the steel skeleton of the new bridge was rising. In the humid air of early morning, before the wind came up, she could hear the voices of the workmen, their laughter and their curses, the clang of the hammers and the chatter of the riveters.

The sound and the sight of a bridge taking form down there on the river became an increasing agitation and a sharp, bewildering excitement. In her solitude the bridge came to have for her an inscrutable significance. It became an emotion, a fine indulgence of the imagination, a symbol of power and purpose.

Then there came an afternoon when Marcia, looking from the doorway, saw a man from the bridge gang coming up the slope, carrying in his hand a bright tin pail that flashed in the sunlight. His head was bare and his moist dark hair was matted on his forehead.

She stood in her doorway and watched him approach.

"How-do!" he said, and smiled to cover his awkwardness. "It's a warm day, though you have a nice breeze up here on the hill. Could you spare us a drop o' cold water from the pump there? We've got kegs o' water down below but it's got so warm we might as well drink out o' the river."

Marcia stood straight and smiled graciously back at the man. "Take as much as you want," she said.

As he pumped water into the pail, swirled it about and tossed it away, a bright arc in the sunlight, Marcia reflected with humor upon the labor and privation that the new pump represented in her life. After all, it was not without its amusing aspect, the thought that a person should work so hard for a thing so plain, so homely. The man held the pail in place again and drew another stream from the pump. With a glance toward her, he lifted the

pail and drank thirstily from its brim. She could see his brown throat and the sturdy cords of his neck.

"That sure hits the spot," he said.

"It's very good water," Marcia said.

The man looked at her for a moment. "They tell me you used to be Marcia Vorse, of Bethune," he said.

"Yes."

"My name's Roberts—James Roberts," the man went on. "I knew your father well."

"You did?"

"I should say so—though that was before your time, lady. We worked on the same section gang. And I heard tell o' you, too—later, of course. I heard about you singin' at a concert once." He put his head shyly on one side. "I'm a fool about music myself. Used to play the fiddle now and then."

He turned again to the pump and filled his pail. When he was ready to go he glanced at her and smiled. "Thanks for the water," he said. "The boys'll be thankful for it."

He was gone and Marcia saw his blue clad shoulders vanish down the slope, one pulled a little lower than the other. There had been large damp patches between his shoulder blades. Hugh Vorse had worn a blue shirt like that one . . . with damp patches between the shoulder blades. The man might almost have been Hugh Vorse himself . . . with the dark moist hair curled down over his forehead and the look of kindliness in his eyes. She might have been Marcia Vorse again—listening to her father's voice. She had loved men's voices. Summer evenings, from the stoop in front of the section house, the voices of her father's men had drifted up to her, blending densely like the depths of trees blending at night, warm and strange and thrilling, where she lay in her little room, listening to what she could not hear, and storing up more than she could have heard. Men's voices—strong and mysterious . . .

She turned suddenly away from the door. What a traitor the heart could be! She seated herself at the piano and regarded intently the exercises before her, the little pencil checks, the guides to fingering, the words of caution she had scribbled above the bars. . . . It would not do to think so yearningly of life. It would be better hereafter to avoid the western side of the house with its window looking down to the river, to close her senses to the strong,

insistent sounds that the growing bridge made, to keep within the house when the man came again for water. . . . She began to play the exercises before her, slowly, absently, in chagrin and self-abasement. This, then, was what living alone on a weather-torn hillside, with the sense of earth and heaven driven into one, could do.

There came an evening in June when Marcia, at work upon the half acre that Jonas had dug and planted, looked up quickly at the sound of voices and saw the man Roberts coming up out of the hollow. A younger man was with him, dressed in puttees and riding breeches and a soft tan shirt with a knitted tie.

"Good evenin', ma'am," the older man greeted her. "I hope you won't take this as intrudin'. This is Mr. Crosby, the engineer who made the design for our bridge down there."

Marcia drew herself erect and received their greeting.

"Mr. Crosby thought he'd like to look at the work from the top of your hill here—just a notion o' his, you understand. I brought him up, seein' I'd been this way before."

"I hope you won't mind," the younger man said.

Marcia smiled at them and stretched one arm carelessly up toward the knoll. "You are quite welcome," she laughed, "so long as you don't trample my strawberry patch."

"We'll be careful of that," the engineer said, lifting his hat as he turned away.

The older man paused and looked at her, twisting his cap in his hands and smiling oddly. For a moment Marcia stood smiling back at him then turned away suddenly and lifted her sprinkling can from the ground. Could it be possible, she wondered, that he had looked at her as—as Emil Hess had looked at her that day when she had fled from him with little Rolf? She hurried into the house without turning to look behind her, but she knew the man was standing where she had left him, his eyes following her as she fled.

Trembling with confusion, she entered the house, heedless to the call of Rolf playing in the yard outside. She threw herself upon the couch in the half light, her eyes and cheeks burning. What had she become, what was she becoming? A rough woman of the land . . . on the outskirts of Bethune, when she was a little girl, there had been such a one. The woman had raised corn and turnips, acres of them, and her prize hogs had had a white band around their shoulders. She had been known for her temper and had lashed

about her with a great blacksnake whip when she was crossed. There had been a story of a man who had stayed with her and had been found on the road in front of her farm, beaten and strangled till he was half dead. The woman had become a name, a legend—old Lottie Tibbits and her pigs!

At length Marcia fell asleep. When she awoke, after dark, little Rolf lay curled beside her. A curious peace flowed over her and a serene strength such as she had never known. She gathered the child close to her, pressing his damp curls against her cheek.

Thereafter she could look down to the bridge over the Vermilion and see only a bridge there.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE thick evening heat of July lay over the valley. Mountainous clouds as pure as nacre were piled above the hills to the north-east, and scudding along the rim of the sky from the west was a low, purple-headed mass from which twists of lightning appeared now and then. But the rain was still far away and the heat was withering.

Mrs. Stormo had come up, with her two youngest, to spend the evening with Marcia and to escape the smother of the valley. The children played listlessly, with Rolf, in the yard; Mrs. Stormo sat with Marcia before the doorway of the house, looking down into Amaranth. The woman had brought some mending with her, but it lay in her lap, untouched.

"Karl says the heat in the cities is awful," she remarked, fanning herself with her apron. "He was readin' last night where they're dyin' in the streets. And I don't wonder. I think I'd almost want to myself, if it's half as bad as the papers say."

"I don't often read a paper these days," Marcia said, "but I can imagine it must be awful. It's bad enough here. Harriet Neering was telling me that her Great-aunt Hepzibah had taken a bad spell yesterday."

"Oh, it's something fierce!" Mrs. Stormo sighed.

Marcia got up from her chair. "I think I'll just make a pitcher of lemonade. It'll be refreshing, anyhow."

"Now don't you go to botherin'. It's a relief just to be up here with you, Mis' Gunther."

"It's no bother at all. I made a cake this morning before it got too hot and I want you to sample it. It's from a new recipe Mrs. Lundy gave me. You just sit out here—there's a tiny breeze once in a while and the house is so stuffy. I won't be a minute."

"Oh, you're so—nice, Mis' Gunther. You're always doin' for folks, it seems to me. My ones say they never knew anybody like you, never. The girls all want to be just like you when they get big."

"I'll talk to them about that, next time I see them," Marcia laughed.

"You can say what you like—it won't change them a bit. And believe me, there's a lot more that's beginnin' to think the same way—for all the talkin' they've done."

Marcia stood before the doorway a moment and looked down at Mrs. Stormo. Then she turned quickly into the house, unable to make reply.

The lemonade made, she cut the cake and placed it on a colored plate she had bought in Bethune a few days before. Little by little she was making the old house look more cheerful, with gay china and chintzes and cretonnes. This year had been better than last, next year would be better than this, and she would one day have a home such as she had dreamed of once . . . even the cherry table would be hers. And there would be peace in this house of hers, and the rigid enchantment that bound her would be broken. But that would be only after youth with its bright treachery had gone.

Ah, how one's mind could go on—even with poor, good Mrs. Stormo sitting just outside the door. What would the kindly woman have thought, Marcia wondered, if she could have witnessed the strange conflict that had gone on within these gray walls? Even now she had no certainty that the burning desire to live without restraint might not break out again and overmaster her with its violence.

She carried the tray out of the house and set it upon the doorstep. The children ran up and she gave them cups to hold while she poured the cold drink. She felt Mrs. Stormo's eyes upon her and glanced up to find the woman's face full of a wistful admiration.

"My Haldis calls you her good angel," the woman said, quite ingenuously.

A few minutes later a shout from Rolf drew Marcia's attention to the figure of Jonas Todd plodding up the path from the flats. She rose at once and went to meet him.

The old man halted in the dooryard and with a sigh folded his hands slowly before him. He darted a look about at Mrs. Stormo and the children and blinked his eyes uneasily at Marcia.

"It's only Mrs. Stormo and two of her children visiting me, Jonas," she explained.

"Of course. That's it," he observed, approaching the house slowly, his eyes upon Mrs. Stormo. "This woman—she was the sick woman. Of course. Now *she's* sick."

"You mean Dorcas, Jonas?"

"Of course. You see—when a woman won't be talked to—that's bad, eh? It's this heat. I could have told her—but she never lets me talk. That doctor

is with her down there, but what can he do now? That's what I asked him, too. And he knows—when it can't be done, that's the end, eh? But I couldn't tell her that. Where'd be the good in sayin' anything now? Come down with me. You'll see for yourself."

He folded and unfolded his hands nervously.

"Did she send you to tell me to come down, Jonas?" Marcia asked.

"Eh? Isn't that what I've been sayin'? Of course. You and the little man there. She wants you and the little man. You'll come, eh?"

"Certainly, Jonas." It was like stepping abruptly out of oneself, to make that reply.

"A man would lose his mind just listenin' to her. '*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us*'—that's what she says. Though, of course, I never put store in things like that. Here's the way of it, as I see it. What you can't forgive in life—*what—you—can't—forgive—in—life*—" He ceased speaking and glanced quickly about him. "That's the way I see it," he concluded and stood looking at Mrs. Stormo, rubbing his hands and smiling.

"I'll get ready at once," Marcia said. "Come, Tinker, we have to go down with Jonas. You just wait here, Mrs. Stormo, and we'll all go down together."

On the walk through the town Marcia steeled herself for the ordeal that lay before her. Jonas hurried at her side, holding Rolf's hand, saying nothing, sighing now and then as though some terrific weariness assailed him. When they reached the avenue, however, he walked more slowly and began talking again.

"The last time you came here—there was too much talk. There'll be no more of that, eh?"

"No, no, Jonas. Dorcas is sick and—"

"I know that. But what would stop her if she wanted to talk, eh?"

"There'll be no quarreling this time, Jonas," Marcia assured him.

"That's it—that's it! You see, it never should have gone like that. Now, should it, eh? You know that. The house there has been hollow—hollow."

But they had come to the corner now and the wooden walk down which she had gone so fearfully one May morning—the twenty-eight paces to Dorcas Gunther's house. As she laid her hand upon the wrought-iron gate she hesitated with an involuntary backward jerk of her shoulders, as though only now had she come to a full realization of where she was going. Blight had ever lurked within that house—blight of beauty, blight of hope, blight of soul. She was going in to meet it again.

"You won't stop now!" Jonas exclaimed, looking at her questioningly. "Didn't I say she was askin' for you—didn't I?"

"Yes, yes, Jonas," Marcia replied brusquely. "Let's go in."

As she stepped into the hallway the smell of the house came over her so that for an instant she had difficulty in controlling herself. She had almost forgotten that smell. The silence of death itself was on the place. The rain cape she had carried with her made a sharp, scuttling sound when she dropped it upon a hall chair.

There were footsteps along the little corridor that led to Dorcas's room. Marcia waited uncertainly and Paul Brule emerged from the shadows and stood before her. Jonas had gone on into the dining room with Rolf.

Brule stood with one hand in his pocket. With the other he stroked the hair at his temple.

"I sent for you," he said abruptly. "Dorcas is going to die."

"Can it be as bad as that?" Marcia asked.

"There's very little chance of her surviving. Her heart has given out. The heat has been too much for her. She may go any time."

A pang smote through Marcia. "I'm very sorry," she said simply. "Jonas told me, but I hoped—"

"I told him to tell you," Brule interrupted. "I wanted to make sure you would come. It was very decent of you, though I don't see how you could have done anything else. But that's nothing, now that you're here. I came out when I heard the gate open. She heard it, too. She knows you're here. Do you think you can pull yourself together enough to—to do a little acting, by way of a final act of mercy to an old woman?"

"I'm here to do anything I can, Doctor Paul," she told him.

"Dorcas wants to forgive you—and ask you to forgive her. Is that too large an order?"

Marcia laced her fingers tightly together. Her eyes looked straight into Brule's and she saw that they were full of a bitter and a sardonic humor. What, she wondered, did life or death mean to this man? To Paul Brule, Dorcas was a silly, irate old woman, dying, and alone. And yet—he pitied her. She held her fingers rigid.

"Shall I go in now?" she asked.

"The sooner the better. She'll want to see Tinker, too, but that can wait. Come along."

He took her arm gently and led her down through the darkened corridor to the rear of the house. A nurse slipped discreetly out as Marcia entered the room.

Dorcas Gunther's body under the white spread might have been a child's. Even her face was curiously childish, Marcia thought. Her shrunken hands moved restlessly on the spread as though in them alone was concentrated what little life remained to her.

Marcia stole forward softly and seated herself in the low rocker that stood close to the side of the bed—Dorcas's rocker, in which she had rocked to and fro, to and fro, with a small sound that came suddenly back to Marcia now.

Dorcas opened her eyes and turned them upon Marcia.

"You're here, I see," the old voice quavered. How old it had become, how incredibly old! And yet how incredibly like the voice Marcia had known in those days when she used to come in to find Dorcas sitting among the shadows on the porch. . . . "You're back, I see!" . . .

"Yes," Marcia said, and would have added "mother," but that she was not sure how Dorcas would feel about that. "I am very sorry to find you so ill." There was nothing on earth she could say, it seemed, although pity for the frail body lying there was overwhelming her.

"No. I'm not ill any more. I am healed because—I have forgiven you, Marcia Vorse."

She stretched out a thin hand toward Marcia, but she had withdrawn her eyes and was staring vacantly at the ceiling. Marcia took the tense hand in her own and bowed her head over it.

"Mother!" she whispered.

Dorcas seemed not to have heard the word. “Near seven years it is, since you came to the house,” she went on. “God has used the years to chasten me. It was a grievous thing you did. You turned your heart from the Lord. You heeded not the prayers of the righteous. You walked in the ways of the ungodly.”

She paused for a moment and Marcia felt the thin hand close tensely upon hers.

“The Lord has spoken to me in a dream, Marcia Vorse,” she began once more. “He wants you to humble yourself before the throne of mercy, lest the Avenging Angel smite ye with his sword. He will forgive. ‘*Seek ye the Lord while he may be found; call ye upon him while he is near.*’ Hearken to the word of God, Marcia, or it will go hard with you!”

She seemed suddenly spent. The brittle fingers relaxed and Dorcas closed her eyes. Marcia, looking at the face on the pillow saw its hardness change to a gentleness she had never seen there before. When the voice spoke again it was so soft that Marcia had to lean forward to catch the words.

“Last night my boy came to me—clear as day—and he said to me—here in the room, ‘Forgive her, mother, before you come away.’ That’s why I sent for you, Marcia. I know I can’t stay. But I could not go—without telling you—that you have my forgiveness for what you did—to me—and mine. May God have mercy on you.”

The voice paused once more and in that moment of silence the heartless humor of life revealed itself in Marcia’s mind. She struggled against the acceptance of it, fought against the stupid compromise that insulted both intelligence and emotion. All her sensibilities shrank from this picture of an old woman who had lived without charity and now, confronted with death, coddled about her still all the strange shibboleths of her literal creed. Dorcas Gunther was afraid to die. It came upon Marcia then that fear, whatever prompted it, was a thing to respect, to hold in reverence. Dorcas was an old woman dying, and she was afraid.

A peal of thunder broke over the valley. After the sound, the silence in the room was appalling. Dorcas opened her eyes and turned her face toward Marcia.

“Is the boy with you, Marcia?” she asked.

“Yes, mother. Shall I bring him in?”

Dorcas nodded and turned her eyes to the door. Quietly Marcia got up and left the room. When she returned with Rolf, Dorcas's gaze was still fixed upon the door. A faint smile crossed her face as the boy stepped into the room, clinging to Marcia's hand.

"Come, my child," Dorcas breathed and lifted her hand unsteadily from the spread.

Marcia seated herself once more and Rolf climbed upon her knee.

"The boy is like him," Dorcas said. "Are you a good boy, Rolf?"

"Uh-huh," Rolf replied, nestling closer to Marcia and putting his arm about her neck.

"And you're going to grow up to be a good man?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Your daddy was always a good boy when he was little. He grew to be a good man. And you'll grow to be just like him, won't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"I hope you will, dear. I think you will."

She turned her face away and was silent. The door of the room opened softly and Marcia turned to see Brule beckoning to her. With a glance toward Dorcas, she got up and went out into the hall.

"I think it would be better to let her rest now," he said. "You've had your talk?"

"Yes."

"Go into the living room and wait. I'll come out in a minute."

In the hallway Jonas was opening the front door to the Reverend Neering and his wife. Marcia went forward to greet them. The two made no effort to conceal their amazement at seeing her there. Each in turn shook hands with her in blank surprise.

She ushered them into the living room and seated them in the most comfortable chairs. Then she herself sat down where the light from the dining room would not fall upon her face, and drew Rolf upon her knees.

"It's—ah—very fine of you to come here at this time, Marcia," the minister stammered. "It's an act of charity."

“I can only say the same, Marcia,” Mrs. Neering said with emotion. “It’s splendid of you.” She spoke in her small, twittering, hurried voice, bringing her shoulders forward and pressing her hands together in her lap. “You have set a wonderful example for the rest of us. Philip in his sermon just last Sunday—”

“Hush, Emily,” the Reverend Neering rebuked gently. “This is no time . . . How is Sister Gunther, Marcia?” He leaned forward and spoke in a low, sober tone.

“There’s very little to say, Mr. Neering,” Marcia returned. “Doctor Brule has been doing everything he can for her, but the heat has been too much for her. Her heart has failed.”

“Ah—the heart!” Mr. Neering breathed. “Very bad—very bad. I would have called earlier in the day but I was in the country all morning. Is she resting quietly?”

“She seems to be—quite content,” Marcia said absently.

“Yes, yes. Your coming, of course, has helped her, too.”

Jonas was hovering in the background, between the kitchen and the hall. He was ill at ease. He sighed again and again. Above the low-voiced conversation of the Neerings, the sound of Jonas weaving to and fro across the hall floor was almost intolerable to Marcia.

“You’ve been well, in spite of all this terrible heat?” Mrs. Neering asked.

“We have it much cooler on the hill,” Marcia said.

“Of course you would. And how’s the little chap?”

“He’s been very well, thank you.”

The conversation dropped away and in the silence—the soft shuffling sound of old Jonas moving ceaselessly in the hall, up and down, up and down. The minister and his wife sat leaning a little forward in their chairs, in an attitude of expectancy which was at once alert and solemn. At last the door to Dorcas’s room opened and Marcia could hear Paul Brule coming quietly down the corridor.

He came directly into the living room and greeted the Neerings.

“She asked if you had come, Mr. Neering,” he said. “She is very tired, naturally. Probably you had better go in alone for a moment and then we must let her sleep.”

“Whatever you think best, of course,” Reverend Neering said. “Emily, you will wait here, then.”

He stole away softly and Brule seated himself on a chair close to Mrs. Neering. The woman leaned toward Brule and her face lighted with a smile.

“This is a blessed moment, Doctor Brule,” she murmured.

Brule looked at her, frankly questioning.

“The Lord is patient,” she went on. “Philip and I have prayed for the moment when our poor sister would open her heart at last and take her daughter in.”

Brule seemed to understand at last. He looked quickly at Marcia, then bowed his head in his hands without speaking.

“I have always known Marcia was ready to come back to her,” Mrs. Neering continued. “You remember the Lord said, ‘*All ye like sheep have gone astray*,’ but He stands ready to forgive—always. Sister Gunther resisted the Lord—and we must not judge her harshly—but He softened her heart at last. And now she’s at peace—the peace that passeth all understanding.”

Brule lifted his head and looked at her. Then he laid a hand very gently on her shoulder. “Yours is a wonderful creed,” he said in his deepest voice. “I often wish we could all be like you. Life would be a very simple thing if we were. The trouble is that we’re not like you to start with.”

Another peal of thunder sounded quite close and Jonas shuffled into the living room and looked from one to another of those seated in the shadows.

“Come and take Tinker for a little while, Jonas,” Marcia begged him. “He has fallen asleep.”

Without a word Jonas lifted the boy cautiously and carried him into the dining room where he seated himself in a rocker and began moving back and forth, his eyes upon the window that shone now and then with livid flares of lightning.

Presently Mr. Neering came out and closed the door to Dorcas’s room noiselessly behind him.

“She is asleep,” he whispered as he came into the living room. “I’m afraid the storm is going to break soon, Emily. We ought to be going—unless there is some service we can do here.”

“There’s nothing to be done,” Brule assured him. “You might come back again in the morning if you like. I’ll stay here tonight.”

“Yes, yes—of course. First thing in the morning. Well, Emily, let us go then, before the rain comes.”

They went out at once, Brule and Marcia going to the door with them.

As she bade goodnight, Mrs. Neering clung warmly to Marcia’s hand for a moment. “The Lord moves in a mysterious way, Marcia,” she breathed.

“Come and see us soon, Marcia,” Mr. Neering said. “We’ll have Harriet fetch you and the boy along, eh?”

“Thank you,” Marcia responded.

When they had turned back into the house, Brule spoke to Marcia about going home. “There’s nothing you can do,” he said, “and Tinker ought to be at home and in bed. There’s nothing I can do, for that matter, just now. I’ll take another look into the room and speak to the nurse. Then I’ll run you home in the car. Get on your things.”

When Brule came back, Marcia was ready to leave.

“We’ll have to walk over to my place,” he told her. “I didn’t take the car out when I came over.”

Jonas followed them to the veranda steps.

“But you’ll be back, eh?” he said to Marcia.

“I’ll be back in the morning, Jonas,” she told him.

“Of course. Why not, eh? With her gone—there’ll be no reason, now, will there?”

“In the morning, Jonas,” Marcia called and hurried away to catch up with Brule who was carrying Rolf.

A few heavy drops had already begun to fall. They were still a block from Brule’s place when the downpour began. Brule opened his coat and threw it about Rolf, then seized Marcia’s arm to hurry her along. The heavy shouldered figure pressing roughly against her in the rain, half-sheltering her from the gusts of water, gave her an alien and altogether unprecedented sense of being protected. How new, how odd and delicious! And how ridiculous! Paul Brule protecting her! There had been a morning, she reflected, when he would have seen her stoned without lifting a hand to prevent it.

In front of his door he directed her to go inside while he brought the car around into the drive. She stood in the open doorway watching the rain—the doorway with the little light burning under it. As she moved back a step or two into the small hallway, her eyes fell upon a few unopened letters that lay on the console. Brule's man of all work had probably brought them in from the last mail and left them there for him. The letter that lay on top was addressed in a woman's hand-writing, a fragile, erratic script. It bore a foreign postmark, from somewhere in Germany. Some incredible impulse moved Marcia to turn the letter over and look at the other side. On the flap of the envelope was a slender monogram in gold: L. M. B. A faint, poignant dismay filled her, unanalysable as anything but humiliation at herself. She laid the letter down quickly, the monogram turned underneath. She was amazed and annoyed to find her heart-beat quicken unreasonably.

There was the sound of the horn in the drive now. With an unpleasant sense of having pried into a secret, Marcia hurried out of the house, catching the child up and covering him with her cape before she stepped out into the rain.

They talked very little on the drive through the rain-drenched streets. Marcia crouched down in the deep seat of the car; a sense of fatigue had come over her that was soothed somehow by the powerful muffled sound of the motor; she reflected that his automobile was the only luxury that Paul Brule permitted himself. Now the car was slipping down through the flats, now turning into the road that led to Marcia's pathway. Brule had not spoken for a long time, and she sensed that one of his taciturn moods was upon him.

Leaving the car at the side of the road, Brule took Rolf in his arms and hurried up the path with Marcia following him.

When they were safely indoors at last and Marcia had lighted a lamp, Brule threw his coat aside and sat down. He watched her while she prepared Rolf for bed, then took his pipe from his pocket and filled it deliberately. When Marcia came out of the room where she had tucked the boy away, she found him smoking, his long frame slumped down in his chair, his arms folded and one hand slowly smoothing the bowl of his pipe. Marcia drew a chair to the side of the table and sat down.

"Are you really going back there tonight?" she asked him. "I think it would be better for all concerned if you went home and took a little rest."

Brule drew his pipe from his mouth and spoke without looking at her. "The fact is," he said with a preoccupied air, "I wouldn't rest if I did go home. I haven't rested in that damned place for nearly a year. Besides, I'm

in one of my rotten moods tonight. I'd rather sit here a while with you, if you don't mind."

"I wish you would," she confessed. "Shall I make a cup of tea?"

"Not for me. If you want some, go ahead. I'll sit and smoke. I haven't had a smoke since noon."

Marcia got up and went to the kitchen. She could not help feeling that Paul Brule wanted to be alone. It had been only courtesy on his part that made him say he wanted to sit here a while with *her*. She went leisurely about the task of making tea and lingered unnecessarily while she arranged two cups and saucers on the tray together with pieces of the cake she had made that morning.

When she carried the tray into the living-room at last, Brule was sitting just as she had left him. She set the tray on a small table and moved it over beside him.

"You refused it," she said, smiling down at him, "but I insist. Help yourself to cream and sugar—and try some of my cake."

He drew himself up in his chair and laid his pipe aside. "Well," he said as he took the cup she gave him, "within another week, I suppose, you'll be serving tea to the town's most select."

"I haven't thought of anything quite so ambitious," she replied. "What makes you think so?"

"You can at least consider yourself restored to grace, after tonight," he said. "The Neerings regarded your presence down there as a direct answer to prayer. Don't you suppose they'll want to celebrate the occasion by having you cut the ices or something at an afternoon tea? That's the very least to expect, I should say. Isn't it written somewhere that the angels in heaven rejoice more over one lost soul that returns to the fold than over the ninety and nine who are there already?"

"You are heartless," Marcia said.

"On the contrary, it's because I'm nothing of the kind that I have either to lose my patience with people or to look for the comedy in them."

"I can understand that—with some people—but scarcely with Mrs. Neering."

"I didn't have her specially in mind. You know that. But don't let us get into any arguments tonight. I'm not in the mood for it. You haven't told me

yet how you got on with Dorcas."

"There isn't much to tell you. She—forgave me."

"And you *feel*—forgiven?"

Marcia's mind hurriedly went back over that brief scene in Dorcas Gunther's bedroom. She knew that Dorcas would die as she had lived—unforgiving, except in words only. It came to her suddenly that the old woman had not asked for forgiveness. Dorcas would ask God for that. In granting Marcia forgiveness for what she had done, she had been as aloof as Heaven itself, identifying herself, doubtless, with the God she served.

"I can't tell you how I feel," she told Brule.

He suddenly lost his bantering manner. "That's it, that's it!" he said quickly. "None of us can. Because we're alone. So damned alone. Just look at it, will you? Here's our little preacher, this Reverend Neering—going about the country, always in a hurry, doing all he can after his own fashion to make this rotten world a decent place to live in. Think of the hours he must have by himself—for after all he isn't a fool—think of those hours when he has to fight like hell against despair—and do it alone—all by himself—on a lonely country road, perhaps, at night? And that little woman of his—the sweetest of God's innocent creatures—making her prayers—for you and for me, mind you!—and for Dorcas Gunther—picture her on her knees in her room, with the door locked, weeping and calling on the Lord to save a blundering mankind from going over the abyss. Praying for us—and alone! And old Dorcas, lying on her bed, seeing visions—talking to the God she believes in, and hearing him talk to her—talking to her son—think of the solitude of that shrivelled old woman going out alone! And that queer brother of hers—Jonas—isolated in a life where only a thin ray of light enters once in a long, long time. We fill our lives with ideas—loves, hates, ambitions—thinking to make companions of them, so to speak. But something in us always remains separate, nevertheless, unapproachable. You, now—you and your puny, stubborn will—you've been deceiving yourself with the belief that all life hangs on this something you call atonement—nothing but an illusion—a companion in your own peculiar aloneness. There is no such thing."

Marcia laughed sharply.

"No such thing as atonement, you mean?"

"Of course. If there were, there would be a point, wouldn't there, indicating a place where atonement was achieved? It's nothing but a device

by which you shield yourself from the unbearable truth."

"And that is—" Marcia looked down at her hands, lying tightly folded on the table.

"That you have done something irrevocable. Atonement, remorse, repentance, all hokum."

She flung back her head and looked at him desperately. For a moment or two she could say nothing, and in the interval a slow flush crept over Brule's face. The color affected her curiously. She felt suddenly confused and inarticulate.

"Maybe they are—hokum," she said at length. "But—they can be very powerful, nevertheless. They can cast a spell over you . . ."

Without looking at him, she sensed his odd glance. But she was unable to say any more.

"The only thing you can say of any living creature," he went on then, more calmly, "is that he is alone. That much you *know*—the rest—all your loves and hates, your prayers and good works—your God and salvation—your repentance and forgiveness—all just ways we have of getting away from our loneliness."

There was little said after that. Marcia sat in thought, listening to the rain on the window and the distant peals of thunder. The worst of the storm had passed.

Brule drained his cup and set it aside. Thrusting his pipe back into his pocket, he got up and threw on his coat.

"Good night, Marcia," he said abruptly. "I didn't come up here to make you the victim of my mood. But I do feel better, anyhow, and I'll get on back. I'll come for you before noon. Good night."

Marcia went with him to the door where she stood watching him until he vanished in the darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AND so, unfittingly, Dorcas Gunther died in a lavish midsummer. Marcia attended the funeral with Jonas and Paul Brule. In the tactlessness of embarrassment and sentimentality, people paused to commiserate and condole, but nothing they might say now could awaken any response in Marcia. If it was true, as Paul Brule had said, that she had won back to the town's esteem, it was only because of her own fierce resolve not to be crushed by its disfavor. She owed no debt of sentiment to Amaranth.

And now Marcia was twenty-seven years old.

The weeks blazed into August. On the hill the wild raspberries and gooseberries ripened and in the tawny, sweet, sharp-smelling grass tiger-lilies burned. Marcia saw the signs. The earth was striving again to wheedle her into a mood. But she was proof against it now—after the riotous tumult of the spring. She scarcely felt loneliness, even, any more. She could sit before the house through the long, slow sunsets and teach little Rolf to read and write the first words in the primer that he would be taking with him to the school in the flats before many more weeks had gone; she could linger with him at the piano in the last silver of returning dusks and guide him patiently through the simple exercises she had invented for him; she could go through the days with their multitude of duties and feel no longing for other human companionship than his.

Of course, there was Paul Brule to think of. There was something insistent, almost perverse, in the way her thoughts of him returned again and again to disturb the peace of mind she had won for herself. She would sit at her piano in the near-darkness of the large room on rainy evenings, her fingers falling tranquilly on the keys; and when she sang her voice might have had the rain itself in it, so full it was of a mystic patience. Or she would smile out of the open window beside her, loitering over a soft note. And she would tell herself that she would never be lonely again, she would be enchanted forever—aloof from existence as she had known it once, as she had dreamed of it once. And then . . . that poignant thrust of life—that sharp, quick flame! She had survived loneliness, but only as a swimmer, reaching an unpeopled shore, survives death in the sea.

Paul Brule had fallen into the habit of strolling out from town in the long evenings, lingering a moment for a romp with little Rolf or a brief word with her, and then going on alone up through the ravine to the hill's top. His manner was full of a strange preoccupation. It occurred to Marcia that he

was like a pilgrim pausing here to gather strength for the remainder of a toilsome journey. Sometimes he came and sat in a lawn chair for only a moment, scarcely speaking, then got up abruptly and almost rudely strode off across the garden and up the side of the hill. He had gone off once like that when Nora Hanrahan was there. Nora, watching him go, had frowned pensively. "Poor Paul!" she had said. "His old demon has been giving him little rest lately." Nora's manner when she spoke of Paul of late had nearly always ruffled Marcia's studiously maintained indifference. Was Nora, who fled her own demons—whatever they were—by rushing off to Europe when the impulse moved her, growing impatient with Paul? Or was it simply that Marcia herself had come to look upon him with less detachment? Her regard for both Paul and Nora had been like a transfiguring garment that she had slipped on whenever they came near her and had put deliberately away as soon as they had gone. Was it possible that some vague wonder concerning Paul Brule lay on her spirit now when she looked from her doorway in the approaching twilight? Would it be this, then—something that neither she nor Paul Brule had ever thought of—that would force her at last from her stubborn little stronghold here above the town and thrust her into the world, seeking escape from herself?

Running from life—it amounted to that, after all. Running from Amaranth and Laura Prouty and Dorcas Gunther and Paul Brule—that was running from life. They *were* life. Another town, perhaps . . . but there would always be the Laura Proutys and the Dorcas Gunthers and the Paul Brules. There would always be the fight against hate and jealousy and meanness—and love. Somewhere little Hally Percival's mother was still waging that fight. Brule himself was in the throes of the struggle, with his lonely walks and his somber moods and his sardonic humor. Marcia sometimes felt that she must ask Nora to tell her the whole story concerning Brule. But that would be surrender of a kind. There was sympathy, pity at least, behind that impulse. Pity meant compromise. And compromise meant going back, somehow, into the places she had forsworn. Her mind turned from it in fear. Rather, far rather live at peace under the spell that had held her for so many years.

But there were places, things, people, that made one betray oneself without thinking. When Mrs. Neering came late one afternoon, with Harriet and Perry Graves, the young English professor at the College, and asked if they might not use the "castle" and the hillside for their annual Sunday school picnic, Marcia gave her consent at once.

It occupied a curious half hour, the visit of those three people. Had Harriet and her mother come alone, the visit would have had little special significance. But that Perry Graves should have come to Marcia's unapologetically humble house was a very distinct overture on the part of Amaranth. Most significant of all was the fact that he, worthy young man, did not know that his coming was an overture. He had come along with Harriet and her mother just as if a visit to Marcia Gunther's place on the hill was something that anyone might do, anytime, without a thought. It was quite possible, Marcia thought without malice, that Amaranth had grown weary at last of talking about her. Well, seven years was a long time. . . .

Marcia had met Perry Graves once or twice in the town, at a concert first, and once at Nora's. He must have heard all about her, of course, though he had been in town but a few weeks and had probably not yet encountered Laura Prouty or Mrs. Lundy. What he had learned, then, had been told him in the spirit of extenuation. . . . How really kind—and how incomprehensible!

But one must not give way to such moods. There had been enough of bitterness during those years she had spent on the hillside. Had she not fought through to a kind of patient content at last? Why should Perry Graves's coming ruffle that content? It did not matter what they had told him, or what had been the spirit of their telling. His was a gentle disposition that probably took small account of such things. He was, Marcia supposed, about her own age, perhaps a year or two older. She could not help feeling amused at the complete self-effacement with which he sat listening to Mrs. Neering and Harriet discussing the arrangements for the coming picnic. But she was conscious, too, of his eyes following her closely as she went about serving tea. His eyelids had a way of drooping quickly if she suddenly glanced at him. And when at last he spoke up of his own accord and told her he had come up to ask her if she would not become a member of a small literary club he was organizing for the coming season, Marcia felt that a refusal would have been too unkind. His manner was so sincere, so earnest that she promised at once to think about it. She even responded by expressing the hope that he might find time to come up to the picnic.

Marcia stood before her doorway and watched her three visitors go, the young professor walking very erect and slight with a guiding hand, determined and diffident, at the elbow of either of the women. Perhaps the earnest young man was paying court to Harriet. The thought was only a fleeting one, however. Harriet, strangely, did not inspire nor encourage even so mild a passion as Perry Graves might feel. She demanded little of life.

She might never feel the full flood of happiness rushing within her—but her life would be secure from the bitterness of defeat.

Marcia shrugged her shoulders impatiently and turned to go back indoors. There would be supper to get for herself and Tinker. The boy had gone down to the Stormos for the afternoon. She would put the potatoes to boil and then go down for him, if Haldis did not bring him home in the meantime. Heigh-ho! Strange how a little incident like the unexpected visit of the Neerings and Perry Graves could disturb one—but stranger still how easily one dropped back again to the unruffled level of a workaday world.

As she turned to go into the house she lifted her eyes, then stopped suddenly. Paul Brule was coming down from the ridge above the house, swinging his soft hat at his side. He was dressed in soft gray flannels, and the light of early evening about him was gently gray and unreal. A sudden excitement seized her. She leaned against the corner of the house and waited while he approached. He was smiling as he came down to her and his eyes were winking reflectively. He halted a few spaces away, planted his feet stoutly apart, and looked at her intently.

"Ambassadors from Amaranth, eh?" he observed with a slight nod of his head in the direction her visitors had gone.

"It's my day for receiving," she replied, smiling at him. "Come along in."

He came beside her and they went together into the house.

"Mrs. Neering came to ask me if she might use the place here for their Sunday school picnic," she explained. "They stayed late, you see, and now I have to hurry with supper. Tinker is down at the Stormos. I may send you down for him if he doesn't come home soon. Will you take supper with us?"

"Love to," he said promptly. "I was ready to invite myself if you hadn't done so."

He followed her to the kitchen and after stirring up the fire and adding fresh wood to it he sat down and began filling his pipe.

"Can I help you?" he asked absently.

Marcia sensed a curious restraint in his manner. It had become almost habitual with him of late. There was something almost bleak in his mood.

She set a dish of apples on his knee and placed a paring knife on top of them.

“If you really want to help,” she suggested, “you may peel and quarter those.”

“Right in my line,” he remarked, absent again.

For several minutes neither spoke. Marcia went quickly about her work and Paul smoked his pipe and worked over the apples.

“So Perry Graves has been calling on you, eh?” he observed finally, his voice very distant.

“Well—not exactly,” she retorted with faint irritation.

“He’s a nice boy,” he went on, paying no heed to her reply. “Plays a rotten game of tennis, but he can’t help that. He has the makings of a comfortable husband for some nice girl.”

Marcia’s shoulders twitched with anger. The contempt in his voice was thinly veiled. Was he baiting her or was he simply in the grip of one of his perverse moods?

“I agree with you—quite,” she said evenly.

“He could do this kind of thing very well, I should say,” he added with a quick flourish of the paring knife.

Marcia turned upon him sharply. “Who asked you to help me?” she flashed. “If you remember—”

His sudden laughter interrupted her. She turned from him and went into the living room. Little Rolf came suddenly bounding through the front doorway, Haldis Stormo following him.

“Doctor Paul!” the boy shouted at the sound of Brule’s loud laugh, and rushed into the kitchen.

Marcia began setting the table, chatting with Haldis as she worked. But always she was listening to Paul Brule’s voice talking to Tinker in the kitchen. Why should he find his chief delight in tormenting her? Why, above all else, should these exasperating spells of his annoy her so?

Late that evening they sat together before the doorway in the dusk. Brule had put Tinker to bed while Marcia cleared the supper table.

“Of course you’re going to let them have their picnic here, aren’t you?” he asked.

"Yes."

"You couldn't very well say no to little Mrs. Neering, could you?"

"I could have refused," Marcia observed, "but that would mean making excuses of some kind, and besides—there's really no reason why the town shouldn't come out for an afternoon if they want to."

"When the mountain refused to come to Mohammed, Mohammed went to the mountain," Brule murmured. "You've stood them off for six or seven years—now they're coming to you. That seems fair enough. I'd like to be on hand to see how the mountain receives her visitors."

She did not reply to that. She was looking out across the valley, a strange tightness straining at her heart.

"In the end," Brule went on, "life will get you back again. The thing will be too much, even for your obstinacy."

That stung her. "Obstinacy!" she exclaimed. "Have you ever troubled yourself to ask just how much obstinacy there is in what I have done?"

He leaned toward her, his eyes intense, alight. "Marcia," he said, "if I have not troubled myself much about it, it is because I understand it only too well. If I have seemed a bit impatient with your attitude sometimes, it was because I knew the attitude—have known it for years. I know as well as you do what it means to arrive at an emotional impasse in life. I know what it means to go back again and again in the hope of breaking through it. I know all that—but knowing it doesn't help a damn. If you can't definitely write *finis* to an emotion, you're done for. You can never surmount it to other things. . . . It's all a bit of rare comedy, Marcia."

Marcia could make no reply. He looked too bleak, too piteous in his frozen humor. She might have asked him to go on, tell her more, permit her to look into his life as he had looked into hers. But she was afraid of that. It would imperil all the defenses behind which she was now safe. It would threaten that hard-won serenity of hers, and she could not afford to be hurt again. She could not, after these desperate years. And yet, to be heartless . . .

It was almost as if he had read her thoughts just then. "Sympathy means nothing. A fool's antidote. Fish-wives' herbs. The tonic of quacks. It's the knot in a man's psychology that must be untied—or cut through . . . to stop the recurrent obsession . . . the repetition, over and over again, like a broken cog in a great wheel . . . a matter of mechanism, nothing more." He got up abruptly. "But I'm a blithering ass! I'll get along now, Marcia. You probably don't know what I've been talking about. I've been talking to you about my

wife." He smiled oddly at her, then gave her his hand, bowing slightly. "Good night," he said, and stepped down into the path.

He turned away and moved idly down into the flats, as though he were bent for nowhere in particular. Marcia went into the house, her throat full of a perplexing, harsh feeling she could no longer ignore.

Nora Hanrahan seemed to float down the dusk of the flower-girt walk, so that the light chiffon dress she wore bloomed dimly about her. Marcia had heard her call and had halted before Nora's gate.

"Come along in, Marcia, I have a deep plot to unfold."

Nora, as always when she was excited, was half laughing, half crying in that unrestrained fashion of hers.

Marcia permitted herself to be led up the narrow path to Nora's door.

"I was going to run out first thing tomorrow morning and talk to you. Why *do* you make it so hard for your real friends to see you?"

"I have really been very busy," Marcia told her. "I couldn't begin to tell you half the things a person has to do in a place like this—just to live."

"I know, I know," Nora said, drawing her arm snugly about Marcia. "But listen. I'm going to give a party on Thursday night and—"

"Thursday?"

"That's the day of the picnic, I know. But it has to be Thursday, because that's Paul's birthday and the party is for him. You won't have to come until the picnic is all out of the way. Anyhow, you're coming, picnic or no picnic, so don't begin by making excuses."

Marcia was too tired to make excuses. She dropped into a chair of the veranda and listened while Nora talked on excitedly.

"We've got to do something to lift Paul out of his terrible mood. I've been watching him for weeks now and he's going to break up one of these days if something doesn't change. It's that wife of his, of course. He permitted her to divorce him last winter, but somehow he doesn't seem to get over thinking about the whole thing. She has been in Europe ever since she left him—but she's back again—in the city."

Within Marcia's mind the demand shaped itself in words. ". . . tell me—tell me!" But she did not speak. After all, she did not want to know. She

resented any such intrusion upon her reticence. She shut her mind against any contemplation of Paul Brule's affairs. It was the only way. If, for a moment, she permitted herself to dwell upon it, she was at once aware of a confusion of emotions that would not bear analysis.

But Nora was hurrying on. "I'm asking a half dozen or so—Perry Graves and Harriet Neering—that Miss Innis who is visiting Mrs. Aldous—the editor from Bethune—just a handful. And listen to this—now, don't get impossible! I have a little gown I bought in Paris—it looks a fright on me, but it was made for you. Come on. I want to see you in it."

Marcia's protests were of no avail. Nora bustled her into the house and into her bedroom. There Marcia stood and suffered the beautiful gown to be put upon her.

In the long mirror she saw what the dress made of her; the sight at once repelled and fascinated her. The gown was a vivid, debonair sheath holding her body. She caught herself wondering what Paul Brule would say when he saw her in it. . . . She must not think of that. The dress was beautiful, but it was unnatural about her. That first moment of rapture was a warning to her, she knew. She could not—*would* not yield to it. She looked past her own reflection in the glass and saw Nora's excited eyes.

She shook her head. "It's lovely, Nora," she said slowly, from out of her enclosing dream, "but it is not for me. I could never give it the spirit it needs." A little insincere there, she thought secretly. "I couldn't get into the mood of this thing and it would be all wrong to wear it any other way."

"You're a little hypocrite," Nora said sharply, "and you know it. Take that dress home with you tonight—or never speak to me again. That wild magenta is just the color for you. It needs a little taking in right here—under the arms. It's just the right length—yes. Here—I'll pin it where you ought to take it in. . . ."

In the end Marcia was obliged to take the dress with her. She could not help smiling a little at Nora's almost childish faith in anything so superficial as an evening gown. What did she expect to achieve with a handful of silk gauze, anyhow? And yet . . . to be so constituted that mere personal ornamentation could stir one—there was something very pleasant to think of in that. Why should she be so arrogant and impatient at Nora's sensuousness? Perhaps the senses were all one could rely upon, after all.

She carried the dress home with her, feeling that she was being cajoled, tricked, that she was being subtly a traitor to herself.

The day of the church picnic on the hill was awash with sunlight. Bright knots of people straggled up from the flats where cars were parked and the hillside became noisy with their talk and laughter. From her house, where everything was prepared for what cooking would be done, Marcia watched them come, some early, some late, women and children lugging hampers, boys carrying up cases of soda and ginger-ale and freezers full of ice cream. Harriet Neering and her mother took charge of things in Marcia's kitchen, where great pots of coffee were brewed, while Marcia spent her time out of doors helping to arrange the games for the children. She could not help wondering sometimes whether she was not deriving secretly a shabby satisfaction from this open manifestation of the town's good will toward her. Toward the people of the town, indeed, she had never felt any real antagonism. Only indifference, rather. She had been preoccupied always with her own intimate struggle. They had been hostile to her—how well she knew that—but they had never known anything of her. They had never known, really, the reasons of their own hostility. People who talked—who knew everything—and knew nothing. . . .

Toward the end of the afternoon the men began coming out. They wanted to be on hand for the supper and to take the tired children home in the evening. Somewhat elegantly apart from them, faintly superior and yet nervously genial, came Perry Graves. Marcia disengaged herself from a group of clamoring children and went forward to meet him. She had known by the searching lift to his slender, serious face through the crowd that he was seeking her. She was glad for a moment's escape from the cloying solicitude of everyone about her. . . . "We have seen nothing of you since poor Dorcas passed away," and "What a lovely place you've made of it—I had no idea," and "I think it's just wonderful how you've brought little Rolf along—he's adorable!" . . . Paul Brule had promised to come, but something must have kept him. Marcia hadn't seen him for several days. But Perry Graves had come—and was offering her escape. She hurried forward, her hand outstretched, her lips smiling.

"I'm awfully sorry if I'm late," he apologized. His palm was moist from nervousness, his manner hesitating and over-eager.

"But you're in plenty of time," she assured him.

"Really? I had arranged a game of tennis with a colleague and it went rather later than I planned."

She was on the point of asking him if he had won. Some mischievous imp within her insisted on finding out. But a gentler spirit prevailed finally.

"Then you must be tired," she said, touching his arm. "Come along and get some food before it is all eaten. These children are all young cannibals."

She found a place for him at the long table where the men sat, and left him while she returned to her duties. He did not linger at the table, however. In the kitchen, where she had gone to prepare fresh coffee for a half dozen late-comers, he found her again.

"You know," he said with a confidential, almost frightened air, "I'd much prefer talking to you, if you don't mind. I abhor crowds—especially crowds of children. I hope you won't mind. Maybe I could do something to help you, eh? I should love to do that."

Marcia smiled at him. "There really isn't a thing to do," she told him. "But you may talk to me as much as you please, of course."

For the next hour he was at her heels, almost like an anxious dog afraid of losing his master in a crowd. Marcia was half amused, half appalled. Even Perry Graves must needs seek escape from something. She did not permit the knowing, good-humored glances of the women bustling about her to irritate her. Nor was she susceptible to the flattery implied in their glances. With Perry Graves at her side talking incongruously and incessantly of modern poetry, as though he were afraid of what a moment's silence might do, Marcia let her eyes wander again and again toward the road that led through the flats, down which Paul Brule's car must come. When supper was over and he was not there, the mild exhilaration she had felt all afternoon died. She was angry at herself now for having looked so often toward the road in the flats. She turned her smile more warmly upon Perry Graves and gave herself resolutely to the spirit of hilarity that existed about her.

But the hillside might have been swept clean of everyone there. She found herself staring blankly at the precise, obedient scallop of cocoa-colored hair which lay flat against Perry's scholarly brow. His spirited chatter gradually lost all meaning. She was piqued and disappointed at Brule's failure to come.

Even when the young professor stood clasping her hand in farewell and promising to meet her again that evening at Nora Hanrahan's, she could scarcely focus her attention upon him. When the people began finally to trail back down the hill and she was left alone, she could not resist the feeling

that overcame her. She was disturbed and excited and hurt. And yet—she had never before looked forward to Brule's coming here.

As she dressed in the soft brilliant gown to go down to Nora's party, she took herself firmly in hand. Where now was the spell, the enchantment that had held her during the years? Deep in her heart she knew it was still holding her. It would always hold her. She was not struggling against Paul Brule, but against herself. She had fought the same battle in the spring when the men were at work on the bridge and the sound of their strong voices came up to her disturbingly. She would have to go through that struggle again—and again—until her traitor spirit was submissive at last. Some day it would be so . . . it *would* be so!

Still, when she was finally ready to go and Haldis Stormo stood in the middle of the big room staring at her in amazement, her lips felt soft and trembling and out of control.

Dusk moved through the loveliness of Nora Hanrahan's house, Marcia thought, like dim water through caverns far under the sea. And her guests moved with it, slowly, acquiescently, with a faint murmur of voices. Flowers bloomed here and there, like shadowed coral, perhaps. About Nora herself there was a deliciousness that was like—like apricots in the sun, Marcia thought.

"Paul went to the city yesterday morning," Nora told her when they were alone together in the bedroom where Marcia had gone to lay aside her cloak. "He went down with his car, but he promised me he would be back without fail in time for the party. I—help me to keep them amused for a while, dear. Come along and talk to Perry Graves. He has already asked about you—twice."

They found the professor in a corner of the large living room, a half dozen Japanese color prints in his hands, talking animatedly to Dorothy Innis, the young woman who was spending a vacation with Mrs. Aldous. His face, as Marcia came up to him, flashed a dull color. He bowed his head slightly over her hand as though to hide his look from her. Marcia felt no flush at the tribute. Instead, she smiled indefinitely back at him, her aloof, preoccupied smile that came from a distance far behind her eyes. It was clear at once that the professor was ruffled, bewildered, by her manner and Marcia urged him at once to go on with his story of the Japanese prints.

“A very simple test of a print is recommended by some of the best authorities. Hold it up to the light—so. If the design shows through as clearly from the back as it does from the front, you are moderately safe in assuming that you have a genuine old print. But I have found the test to fail. There are some very clever reproductions—and many excellent forgeries. A favorite method of deception is . . .”

It was almost as if he were reading from a book. Marcia’s mind began to wander from the subject in spite of herself. She had caught in Nora’s eyes a look of uneasiness that she could not mistake.

“. . . the sun on the beak of a hummingbird. . . .”

What if Paul should not come, after all? She told herself that it would not matter. It would be a disappointment to Nora, of course.

“. . . colors derived from gold, silver and bronze lose their brilliancy when exposed to a strong light. . . .”

Above the hum of voices the young professor’s words rose now and then, forcing themselves into Marcia’s consciousness. She wondered uneasily why she had come at all. Miss Innis, sitting between her and Perry Graves, exclaimed rapturously now and then. But across Marcia anxiety was drawn taut as a wire. She strove to awaken some sort of interest in Nora’s guests. She saw them as she might have seen the characters in a book that was too dull to read. There was, between her and them, too deep a chasm for the exchange of any human warmth.

Nora came from the dining room at last and stood among her guests, smiling ruefully. She gleamed composure and conviviality, but instinct told Marcia that she was far from feeling either. For Nora’s eyes were tense with some kind of fear.

“Something has evidently delayed Paul,” she began, and Marcia knew that her voice was moving too quickly. “Probably nothing more than a puncture miles from a telephone. But I know he wouldn’t want us to wait any longer. Besides, he may be here any minute now. We’ll go in anyhow.”

Beside Perry Graves, Marcia walked into the riotously festive dining room. A bleakness had descended upon it that could not be gainsaid. Nora’s voice, as she seated everyone, was determinedly merry. She looked once directly across at Marcia and the message in her eyes was disconcerting.

On a buffet at the end of the room stood an old English drinking cup of dull silver. Marcia’s eyes fastened upon it and for some reason seemed to be held there. The professor was talking eagerly beside her. This time it was

Chinese poetry. But beneath his words his voice yearned timidly toward her. Once he made so bold as to say, outright, in a sort of catapulted mumble, “How beautiful you are!” Marcia’s smile blurred across her eyes.

Perry’s voice went ardently on.

“. . . the emperor’s hall was hung with gold in honor of the poet—but the poet arrived an hour late—drunk!”

Someone’s quick laughter sounded at the farther end of the table. That was that editor friend of Paul’s from Bethune, who was intent upon something Miss Innis was telling him. Marcia drew her attention back to what the professor was saying to her.

“. . . and the nightingale said . . .”

Paul Brule did not come.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MARCIA looked from her window and saw old Jonas bowed over the bean rows in the garden. Rolf was with him, helping to fill the large basket that lay on the ground between them.

All the fervor of August was out there, streaming from a cloudless sky, fulfilling the season's promise in mellowing fruit and ripening seed. This morning it seemed more amazing to her than ever before that life could continue so, accepting its recurrent beauty and pain and death and then beauty again, with no echo of the drums of defeat. It was intolerable to think of the millions of Augusts that had been, burning themselves out in a wild stillness here on this hillside—and of the millions to come, gorgeous and incomprehensible and frightening in the small, enclosed mind.

That echo of defeat had persisted in Marcia's being ever since she had left Nora Hanrahan's place last night. She had admitted to herself on the way home that Paul's failure to appear had been a peculiar disappointment to her. That, however, had been largely because of her vanity. It had been something unworthy of her. But behind that, somewhere in her inmost self, had been forming for a long time an anticipation of disaster about to befall Paul Brule.

Perry Graves had walked home with her from Nora's place. There had been no light above Brule's door, and behind the closely knit trees at the side of the house where she knew his study to be there had been darkness, too. He had not come back, then. She had hurried through the darkness with Perry Graves as though she were trying to escape from something, she knew not what.

Only now, it seemed, as she looked from her window in the warm light of the morning, was she fully aware of what Perry Graves had said to her on their walk through the flats and up the hillside in the darkness last night. Solemnly he had told her of his antecedents, of his father, a county judge, dead five years now, and of his gentle mother whom he could barely remember. Soberly, heavily, as they mounted the hill to the house, he had told her of his ambitions and of what his income would be this year in addition to a small inheritance. He had clung to her hand for a frantic, timid moment when she was bidding him good night at her door and had asked her to go with him to Bethune next week to a play that was being put on there by local talent. She had smiled at him in pity and had promised to go.

As she thought of him now, it came to her that Perry Graves might be hers for the taking. She knew it. Monstrous thoughts smote across her. Perry Graves wanted her and was promising in return the most precious thing in life—contentment. Escape from love, from a passion that had all but destroyed her, from disloyalty to a memory . . . to Rolf. . . . Marriage without love . . . a brick house near the college . . . the gentle round of duties . . . the brittle crackle of academic thought—and Rolf Gunther's son growing to manhood in security and peace. She put her hand to her forehead and smiled vaguely. Perhaps, in time, she might grow very fond of Perry Graves. She was fond of him now. She suddenly felt very sorry for him.

Marcia went to the door and called to Jonas. "Come on, Jonas! It's time for a cup of tea."

He looked up slowly and mumbled dubiously something about the vegetables drying in the dusty heat. But Rolf had taken his hand and was tugging his best to make the old man come. Presently he drew the back of his hand across his forehead and started slowly for the house.

Old Jonas was happy here on the hill as he was nowhere else in the world, Marcia knew. And yet it had been impossible to persuade him to make his home here definitely. She had suggested, a few days after Dorcas Gunther had been buried, that he might build a small addition to the stone house, a chamber that would be entirely his own. But each time she had broached the subject a look almost of fear had come into his cryptic old eyes and he had shaken his head ruefully. . . . "No, no. You see, now—it's like this with me. *She* won't let me. *She* says I'll have enough to do if I look after the place down there. Why did she give me her money—before she went away? See? No . . . she'd know if I left the place. Not but what it's all right to spend a day up here when I feel like it. *I* say a man's soul ought to be his own sometimes, eh? Or where's the use in having one? Tell me that, if you can. But that's no great matter, either. *She'd* know if I left. . . ."

In her own way, then, and peculiarly in her own way, Dorcas Gunther was not dead. It occurred to Marcia that the old woman's soul had gained to an adequate and indisputable immortality. It might easily be that this was immortality—that the living image of the dead persisted in the consciousness of the living. Rolf Gunther had died—then lived, an immortal presence, inescapable. Paul Brule, if he were to die—a curious blankness asserted itself in her mind—what manner of image would he leave? In what curious form would eternity etch him to her? She did not know. In her

consciousness Brule was a dark unguessable area. She realized now that she had never permitted herself to know him.

"When a man's nothing—he can't be less—isn't that so, now?" Jonas remarked abruptly when Marcia had given him his cup of tea.

Marcia drew her chair to the table and seated herself. She had always been patient with the old man's garrulous moments, the more so now since the death of Dorcas had left him entirely to himself. It seemed to her that something roguishly venturesome had been set free in the old man's spirit. His pathetic furtiveness had vanished, and his old habit of glancing fearfully about him when he spoke, as if he suspected someone might be listening to what he was saying.

"None of us is quite—nothing, Jonas," Marcia said, smiling at him.

"Eh? Now wait a bit. Where there's nothing a man can lose, eh—that's just about what I mean. What could I lose, now? But that doctor that used to come to see *her*—it's different with a man like him, isn't it. I hear them talk, you see."

"Who talks, Jonas?"

"Well now, they all talk. In that store down there—I hear them. And out in the street, too—people talk in the street."

"And what do they say, Jonas?"

"Eh?" He scratched his head and frowned. "That's what I can't rightly make out. When a man starts to go wrong, *they* find it out, don't they?" He frowned laboriously and knit his brows. "It's like this," he said at last; "the doctor was a great man. Now what happens to a great man, eh? Answer me that."

"I'm sure I don't know, Jonas," Marcia replied, at a loss.

"Ah! Now you understand. I don't know, either. Though I've tried to find out. But a man can't find out much when people won't talk out. Something happens, though. There's nothing surer than that. And something has been going on there with this doctor. They all say so. And they wouldn't be saying so if it wasn't true, eh? Of course not. They've been saying it for a long time now. That proves it, eh?"

Marcia did not reply. She was well aware of what they had been saying about Brule. She had been forced to listen to some of it herself. Thought of that vicious, fatuous babble revolted her. She straightened her shoulders and got up from the table.

“I’m going to leave you alone this afternoon, Jonas,” she said. “Tinker can play around the house till I get back. I have to give George Nordland his lesson and there are some things to get at the store. We’ll not take the truck down to Lundy’s until tomorrow.”

The old man muttered something to himself, then got up from the table and shuffled out of the house. Rolf had already run outside and was playing in the yard before the doorway. Marcia got ready at once.

Mrs. Lundy’s voice, in that stuffy atmosphere with its smell of calico and coffee and apples in bushel baskets, was even more bland than usual, Marcia thought.

“. . . and her going to all the fuss she went to—ordering caviar two weeks ago and everything, not to mention buying us out of everything else we had in the store. And then to think Doctor Brule didn’t turn up at her party after all!”

Her manner was more oblique than usual, too, provoking Marcia to an unwonted bluntness. “How did you know he didn’t turn up?” she asked, thrumming her annoyance upon the counter’s edge with the tips of her fingers.

Mrs. Lundy opened her eyes in wide and injured innocence, looking across the counter at Marcia as she checked momentarily the white stream of sugar that poured itself into the brown paper bag on the scales.

“What do you suppose a person has a maid for? Nora’s girl was in here bright and early this morning and would have told more than she should, I guess, if I’d cared to listen to it.”

She turned her attention once more to the sugar. Presently she took the bag from the scales, snapped the sides together and folded the top neatly across in a pleat. Marcia watched the proceedings, thinking with that oddly detached part of her mind how satisfying it was to watch a paper bag of sugar being done up, brisk and precise, like that. It flashed upon her that such a thing was of eminent significance, it gratified some desire within one for finality, for completeness, perfection.

“What else, Marcia? Oh, yes, the vanilla.” She took the bottle from a shelf behind her and set it beside the bag of sugar.

“And a pound of rice,” Marcia added.

The heat of the afternoon was closing suffocatingly about her body. Mrs. Lundy had turned to a small bin behind the counter. Marcia could trace the line of her corsets showing midway up her expansive back beneath her tight gingham dress. In that homely line resided all of Mrs. Lundy's discreet indiscretions.

A breathy flutter caused her to look toward the front of the store. Laura Prouty had come in and was hurrying toward her.

"Well, of all things—to find *you* here, Marcia Gunther, when I was thinking about you this very minute. After your hard day yesterday—with the church picnic and all—I didn't expect to find you out shopping as spry as ever. The picnic was a great success."

"I'm very glad," Marcia said.

"And we all think your place is simply lovely. But of course you have worked, haven't you? The place shows it, I must say. I was just telling Mrs. Peck about it—at the corner as I came down. I gave her a good talking to for not turning out and doing her share yesterday, but she had a thousand and one excuses, of course. Always has. She has time enough to stand on the corner and talk a person's head off, though. I thought I'd never get away from her this morning."

"What's she got to talk about now?" Mrs. Lundy prompted good-naturedly.

Laura smiled expansively and seated herself on one of the stools before the counter.

"Nothing of any importance. Just her usual gossip. I always wonder why I let myself stand and listen to her. Anyhow, it seems that old Absolom Peck was down in the city last night and got home today with more scandal about Doctor Brule. I think they might let up on that man a little. He's the only real doctor Amaranth ever had and we'll wake up one of these mornings and find him gone. Nothing will run a man out of town quicker than to know he's being talked about behind his back."

"Except, of course, that some people don't always run from gossip," Marcia observed drily.

Laura Prouty giggled. "No—that's true."

"Well—what had she to say?" Mrs. Lundy demanded, falling back a step from the counter, her jaw dropping into the ample folds of her neck.

“I’m just not going to repeat it. It’d only keep the ball rolling and wouldn’t do anyone any good.”

“Well, if that ain’t you all over, Laura Prouty,” Mrs. Lundy declared. She turned questioningly to Marcia. “What else was there, Marcia?”

“That’s all, thanks.”

She moved a step aside, pretending to examine some material on the counter. Mrs. Lundy flicked her pencil from the tight figure-eight of sandy hair at the back of her head and wrote in a precise hand on the bag of sugar the cost of Marcia’s different purchases.

Laura Prouty laughed ruefully. “I’m just too touchy, I suppose. But I don’t like to hear people talked about. It just happened that Absolom Peck saw Doctor Brule going into one of the swell hotels on Michigan Boulevard, and with him—a very stylish woman, a regular beauty. Looked like an actress, Mrs. Peck said. Absolom thought he’d go in and get a good look at them so he followed them and sat where he could watch them in the dining room. There’s nothing in that to talk about—as I told her. She says the doctor sat for nearly two hours without eating a bite—just staring at the woman. Mrs. Peck thinks—well—”

She paused to draw a deep breath. Marcia felt then as though living fingers were closing about her heart. She was staring at Laura Prouty blankly. The woman looked at her and smiled. Then she leaned forward and patted Marcia’s hand.

“I’m always talking when I oughtn’t to, Marcia,” she said gently. “I just don’t give any thought to what I’m saying half the time.”

Marcia drew in her breath quickly and gathered her parcels together. “How much do I owe you, Mrs. Lundy?” she asked.

Out upon the street the summer sunlight swam before her eyes, hot and bewildering. Every familiar thing that encountered her gaze seemed to shift its position, seemed to become subtly and outrageously changed.

She was half persuaded to go to Nora Hanrahan’s place and get the truth about Paul. Then she paused to wonder what it was that impelled her to learn more about it. Even if the worst were true, even if he had gone back to his wife, what affair was it of hers? This confused pain at her heart was wholly incredible, unreasonable. She would have to hurry now or she would be late for George Nordland’s lesson.

As she sped down the street her ear was mechanically alert for the sound of Paul Brule's name. That was unreasonable, too. Why should anyone be talking about him now? But she could not help it. Before the barber shop beside Quigley's Boarding House a group of idlers was gathered. She deliberately slackened her speed, her mouth set in a hard line. Then, in the next instant, as she realized that she had been in that trice aggressively guarding Brule's name, a hot flush of annoyance at herself swept over her cheeks. How utterly ridiculous she was, how quixotic! She could visualize Paul Brule's lazy, cynical sneer at her gallantry on his behalf.

Somehow, she got through the hour with George Nordland. When she escaped at last from the house she almost ran westward to her own hillside. It would be better up there on the slope with the sun blazing out of a cloudless afternoon, with the grit of drying vegetables on her hands almost like a taste on the tongue, with the dust drying on her temples, and the tiny pebbles grating in the heels of her shoes. These were things she could understand. But to struggle against something you could not see, something you could not even name . . . Where was Paul Brule now?

The thin haze of early evening lay between Marcia and the valley, like a faintly tinted glass through which she saw. There was comfort in the cool silence of the hillside after the heat of the day and the talk. Words, words, words! Must people go on forever talking round and about things, merely that the gift of speech might not vanish out of disuse? She hoped now that Nora Hanrahan would not come up to tell her that Paul Brule had come back, to urge her to go down with her and talk to him. She did not want to talk to him. She did not want to be talked to. She thought of the piteous futility of priests entering the chambers of the doomed. How senselessly indecent that sort of intrusion was. Would humankind never learn respect for the soul's privacy?

That hard, incorruptible, central core of her consciousness where the image of Rolf Gunther had lived had become now only a rigid and inflexible space, untouched. Vaguely, with some still unquenched part of her being, some portion of herself that had not become drugged by the slow seeping of remorse, she felt a shudder of fear at this stoniness that possessed her.

The wind blew through the thornapple tree, and over her, cool and searching. She called to little Rolf who was playing by himself on the slope below.

"Tinker, Tinker! Come in, now. It's time for bed!"

The child trudged reluctantly up the path to her. She caught him up, pressed him close, hungrily against her own body, and looked with a frightened wonder into his eyes. Some day—some day when he understood—how would he judge her? Would she have the courage then to face that judgment alone? She would be older then, less invulnerable, with the brazen shield of youth worn thin.

Rolf pulled away and darted into the house, a small, bronze-headed Pan. Elusive, impetuous, not for her. It was foolish to think that one ever, at any moment, really possessed a child. Its first blind gaze in infancy was upon other things. It was invested from the first with the preoccupied arrogance of its own separate fancy. If you came at all within the scope of its consciousness, it was only as the object of its patronizing affection.

When Rolf was ready for bed she set him at the corner of the table where she had laid a light supper of cold milk and a thin slice of bread with maple syrup.

"Mumfer," the boy said archly, his chin lifted high so that she could tuck the napkin snugly under it, "can we have molasses sometimes? The Stormos have molasses on bread and I like it better than maple syrup."

"Perhaps so, dear," Marcia smiled, "but eat your supper now."

She sat down in a chair near the table and stared unseeingly at the dark maw of the fireplace across the room. She had been sitting there for several minutes when the boy's voice startled her.

"What you looking at, Mumfer?"

"Nothing, dear," she breathed, bringing her gaze back to his wide, questioning eyes. Those eyes, at that moment, were inexplicably unlike that other Rolf's—for the first time, it seemed to her. Or was that only because she wanted them to be unlike? She twined her fingers tightly together.

One thing had come to her working there with Jonas in the garden that afternoon. She had been thinking too much of Paul Brule, yielding too much to life and its treacherous beckonings, preparing herself once more for bitterness and heartbreak. She could not go on with it. If Paul came again to see her she would tell him of Perry Graves. She would have to. She knew that now. To remain here alone and meet Paul Brule, if he returned, would be to reveal to him in spite of herself the feeling that was overpowering her. She would not be able to hide it from him. He would see it in her eyes if he looked into them again. He would see it—and he would be amused at the irony of it all.

She could not understand herself now. Last night she had felt so secure. Even this morning when she had looked from her window at the August sky and the ripening hillside, all had been serenity out there—and within her. Now it seemed as if some tantalizing presence was behind her. It was speaking to her—"How long have you loved Paul Brule?" She felt her body tremble at the thought of it. It was sheer madness to think such things. It could not be so! She would not be traitor to the quest for peace that had kept her alive during those years in Amaranth. She would not yield to life now—on the very eve of victory.

"What *are* you looking at, Mumfer?" Tinker asked again, breaking in upon her thoughts.

"I—I was just thinking, Tinker," she told him. "Mumfer thinks and thinks and doesn't know what she thinks."

"Silly Mumfer!" Rolf declared.

She got up laughing nervously and came around the table to rumple the boy's hair. "Yes, Tinker—Mumfer is silly, very silly! Come now—off to bed with you!"

When Rolf was asleep in the bedroom off the kitchen, Marcia felt herself completely defenseless against the mood that came over her. She moved restlessly about the house, seated herself at the piano and fumbled over the keys, only to get up impatiently and look out of the window that showed the gully dipping down against the sky. Once or twice she lifted a book that she had recently bought in Bethune, then flung it down again, too ill at ease to open its pages. Presently the enclosing walls of the house became unbearable. She could at least go down into Amaranth to see Nora, stopping at the Stormos to ask Haldis to stay with Rolf until her return.

She had become impatient with herself. If one could only change completely, be someone else. She wanted to be someone else—actually, physically, some other person. Her own body irked her, her heart with its monotonous burden irked her to death. In the gathering dusk of the tiny dressing room she had made for herself off the big room, she removed her clothes with an almost violent exasperation. She bathed and dressed in a black, close-fitting silk dress that made her look almost fragilely slender, her throat rising bravely and delicately out of it, to her white, fixed face with its two petals of red high on her cheekbones. With her hat in her hand, ready to leave, she paused for a moment in the near darkness to stare into the mirror above the mantel.

Then she knew that while she had been dressing someone had come into the house. The eyes were meeting hers in the mirror. She swallowed desperately, her fingers clutching the brim of the hat she held. With a superlative effort she turned around, feeling her dress slim and challenging about her.

He stood there bareheaded, his hands dug deep down into the pockets of his coat. His soft shirt was carelessly open at the throat and in the dimness she could see the gleam of his skin. There was an uncertainty about his posture, as though he had gone suddenly blind. And yet his body did not waver. His eyes were looking down upon her with a lost reflectiveness. All at once he laughed, intolerably, and Marcia's flesh crept back with a sickening perception. The memory of Emil Hess had come to her.

"Have you been drinking, Paul?" she asked coldly.

He took two long steps toward her and leaned his elbow on the mantel piece. Marcia kept her eyes steadily on his face. She could not understand what she saw there.

"No," he said gravely. "I didn't sleep last night, that's all. And I've been on the road most of today."

No, he had not been drinking. She saw that now. But he was like a man standing in his own shadow, looking out. His long, mobile mouth with its pensive underlip was drawn to one side. His hair was an unkempt contour in the dusk above.

"I didn't think you would be so quick to join the hosts of Amaranth," he went on quietly. "But I can't blame you much. It would be more—"

"What do you mean?" she interrupted him.

"Didn't you just ask me if I had been drinking? Isn't that what they all ask me every time I meet them in the street? Not in so many words, of course, but quite plainly, all the same."

"I didn't mean it so, Paul," she replied. "I didn't hear you come in. I was startled when I looked around and saw you."

"I'm sorry for that, Marcia. Knocking on the door seemed a little superfluous somehow. Is there any reason why I shouldn't come in?"

There was a sudden harsh, uncontrolled note in his voice that frightened her. Her hands were icy behind her back.

"Of course not, Paul," she told him, struggling to keep her voice steady. "But I was just ready to go down town. Tinker is asleep and I was going to get Haldis to—"

"Don't go, Marcia—not yet. Sit down. I've got to talk to you—whether you listen or not. You don't need to listen if you don't want to."

He looked at her strangely for a moment, then turned and sank into a chair that stood to one side of the fireplace. His head fell forward and he was silent. Presently he looked up slowly.

"You were at Nora's party last night?" he enquired.

"Yes—we missed you."

"I know. I was at another party." He laughed. "It was a sort of a wake—a wake over a dead obsession."

Marcia clasped her hands tightly behind her. "You are talking in riddles, Paul," she said.

"Am I?" He laughed gently. "That's probably because you choose not to understand. You've always been so damned obstinate."

She looked down at his head and his hair so unwontedly unruly, like a boy's. She could have sunk to her knees before him and buried her face in his strong hands.

Then he began to talk rapidly, vehemently, leaning forward in his chair, swinging his shoulders now and then in a curious motion from side to side. It was, she thought with a pang, like the weaving motion of an animal in a cage.

"You can be as obstinate as you like." He brushed his hair back along his right temple in the manner she had come to know. "I'm going to tell you about it anyhow. I *can* tell you now—it doesn't matter. Her name was Laurine—Laurine Morris. I'm telling you about the woman that was my wife, Marcia. I married her because I loved her—and because I thought I could make her love me. But she—she always wanted something beyond. I tried to find it for her—worked hard—worshipped her—but I couldn't give it to her. You will understand that better, perhaps, than I can. Weren't you like her once?"

"Paul!"

He did not hear her. "She was too—too full of the love of things—too—but what's the use! I can't explain it. She met a friend of mine. I never

blamed her much for what she did—nor him. She went away with him. She left him, too, I found out later. For someone else. That's the way it works out, eh?"

He was talking more quietly now, almost as if he were reviewing his life to himself.

"A man is a fool to love a woman like that. I thought—for a year or so—that I had given her up—forgotten her. My reason, you see, told me that I couldn't love a woman who had left me—like that. It wasn't possible to go on loving a—a ghost. It wasn't decent. But I did. You can't reason about things like that, can you? You see, she had left me so suddenly—so unexpectedly—that I never really believed it. I was too young to believe it—I was less than thirty then. For years—God knows how many years—I kept trying and trying to get back to that night—to *understand* what had happened—to *accept* it. Even the divorce—she divorced me just last winter—even that didn't release me. You see, I just couldn't get back—I couldn't—"

He paused abruptly and ran his fingers through his hair, then closed them fiercely and looked at them.

"It was as if she had left me on some great height and I couldn't get down again. For months I kept the place we had lived in—kept it just as it had been before she left—her music on the piano—a book lying open on the table where she had been reading—a little powder-puff and a box of powder she had left on her dressing table—everything just as it was. I had an idea that I might come in some afternoon and find her there. I *knew* better, of course, but I couldn't convince myself. Then one day—something gave way. I don't remember much about it. All I know now is that I suddenly seemed to forget everything—work—friends—places. I had a good friend who had worked with me in the hospitals in the city. It was he who took me away. That's how I happened to go to China and India and back through Europe. It took all the money I had. Then I came here, to Amaranth."

He smiled a little, half amused at the idea that he should have chosen this little valley to work in and regain his sanity.

"I felt well and got to work at once," he went on. "It was because I needed someone's friendship that I took up with Rolf Gunther during the first year. He was a challenge to me, physically. He helped me. I helped him out of a secret scrape with that Rosina Machelet—is there any reason why I shouldn't talk about it now?"

Marcia shook her head slowly. “None,” she told him. “That was before he met me anyhow. I have never thought much about it.”

“Men have their secrets,” he said. “That was Rolf’s secret. By and by I told him mine. That’s how we became such close friends. When I lost him—perhaps you can understand now how I felt. Not so much the loss, you understand—though that was great—but the way it came about.”

“I can’t blame you much for hating me as you did,” she said.

“There’s the strange thing about it, Marcia. I suppose I should have hated you. But I couldn’t. I still thought, somehow, that I loved her—and the two of you—Hell, I can’t explain the mess I was in!”

He put both his hands to the back of his neck and threw up his head. Marcia’s eyes suddenly flamed with tears. But it had become too dark in the room for him to see her eyes as anything but shadows. Then, abruptly, he thrust his hands back into his pockets.

“I told you once that we have to go back and untangle the knots in life—or cut them,” he went on. “You know now what I mean. I had to see her again, to possess her again—somehow or other. I’ve done it. She sent for me to come to her—when was it?—two, three days ago. She was sick and needed money. That’s what she wrote me. I went down and met her. She was just as she used to be. Not sick, you understand, but well—and as beautiful as ever. All a little trick of hers. Even then when I saw her, I couldn’t make myself believe that she had gone off that way—and only a scrawl of a note to let me know. I hadn’t seen her for nearly ten years, but I tell you, Marcia, I felt myself crumbling under her again. It wasn’t love, not even desire, I think. It was inertia. I couldn’t break the power she had always held over me. I was shackled to an obsession, a ghost. Just as you have been for years.”

He leaned toward her and spoke in a voice that was all gentleness.

“That’s why I had to come to you now—to tell you that it’s possible for a man to find his way back—back to the tangle—and unravel it. I went with her and sat while she ate dinner. I couldn’t eat. I sat and watched her and listened while she talked. It was almost like old days, Marcia—only with a difference that I was beginning to understand. I took her to the theatre—as I had done years ago. I went home with her afterwards. I tried to tell myself that we were going home together. But I didn’t go in with her until she asked me. Then I went. I stayed the night with her—sat all night looking at her and listening to her. I began to understand why the man who had been my friend

had yielded to her. I can never blame him again. She expected me to seduce her, you understand—this woman who had been my wife. It piqued her sense of adventure to have me stay the night with her. For me it was no adventure. I knew I had come to the end of my bondage. I began to realize it when I watched her prepare for bed. I knew the end had come when I sat unmoved by her as she pleaded with me, then lost patience with me, then grew angry, and finally fell asleep in rage and disgust. At dawn I got up from where I had been sitting and went out. I was free—and I *knew* it. To prove it to myself, I telephoned her early in the morning to ask her if she would take luncheon with me. She gave another engagement as an excuse. I wasn't glad—I wasn't sorry. It didn't matter. What did matter was the knowledge that I had laid the ghost of years. I almost ran out to my car and started for home at once. Isn't it funny, Marcia—I have never before thought of this forsaken little place as *home*."

He got suddenly to his feet and came close to her, his hands thrust down into his pockets.

"You wouldn't think of marrying a man—for love, Marcia, would you?" he asked abruptly.

She fell back from him.

"You are talking madness, Paul," she said, out of a dry throat.

"Certainly. I *am* mad. You and I have been in love—ever since we saved old Mrs. Stormo together. I've never admitted it to myself until today. You haven't admitted it yet. But you will."

He stepped nearer to her, reached out with his right hand and caught her roughly toward him. She drew back, watching him narrowly.

"You will," he repeated, "as soon as you've broken free from your little knotted life—from yourself and your little narrow existence—from this dead obsession that has wed you and lives with you."

He drew her to him once again, stooped suddenly, and kissed her mouth. Marcia swung against him like a vine. Her lids fell heavily for a moment and a rich faintness surged over her. Then, like something drawn up with all her power from the depths of her being, consciousness came back to her. She struggled free, stood away from him, rigid from head to foot. Her eves moved over his face with a fine, controlled disdain. But his look seemed to be changing. Something bleak and hungry had come there. . . . No, no—he was the same, arrogant, bitter Paul Brule, with nothing in his heart for her but contempt. . . .

What was this she had been thinking? What madness had swept her out of her senses? Marry—for love! How would she ever forgive herself for even this flaming moment of her heart's treason!

She strove to speak but her voice choked her. At last she lifted her hands toward him. "Go away now," she said quietly. "You have forgotten—you are mad."

He grasped her wrists then and as he swept her up to him the pain in her arms was like a brittle breaking thing. In her anger she only half heard the words that burned against her lips, her throat.

"I *am* mad—but I have not forgotten. I'm mad enough to wait—to come back here every evening—until you get free at last from your damned flimsy ghosts!"

Then he was gone and the door stood open on the dusk. She put her hand against the mantel to keep from tottering. She walked to the door and closed it. Then she turned and stood with her back to it.

She knew now what she must do. She had withstood the power that had driven little Hally Percival's mother out of town. This other power, this dark, cruel power that was tearing her heart, she could not withstand.

Tomorrow she would have to leave Amaranth.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THIS long trestle that hung darkly between the loose, following mist of the night and the lapping, vague water below, marked the halfway point between Bethune and Amaranth. Seven miles yet to go.

In the depths under her feet the darkness barked. Like a dog in a well, sharp and hollow and frightened. For a moment, engrossed by the sheer luridness of the sound, one forgot to be afraid. The stagnant water below chuckled against the piles.

It would be midnight by the time she reached home. She had not meant to go home. This whim of hers, to walk back along the railway, had been a very indulgence in madness after a wearying day. Her plan had been to stay the night in Bethune, to see a lawyer there in the morning and talk to him about the disposal of her house and its few acres on the hillside above Amaranth, and to take a last leave of her pupils. Then, in the afternoon, she would return to Amaranth for the last time, and slip quietly away with little Rolf. She had left him at the Stormos'. No one would know that she was going. . . . No one had known that Hally Percival's mother was going.

Something had broken that plan. She had played in the motion picture theatre in the afternoon and had told them she would not return. She had taken her money and had eaten her supper in a little restaurant near the station. She had sat at a table where she could look out and see the weathered walls, dull-red, and smoke-clouded, of the house that stood close to the railroad tracks—the little porch where her father's men used to sit and smoke—the two windows where Hugh Vorse once tended his boxed geraniums—the eaves under which she had lain and listened to men's voices. . . .

She could hear her mother singing. . . . *Sweet and low, sweet and low, Wind of the western sea* . . . and she was a little girl again, with the sun going down on the prairie near Bethune, and dusk moving slowly over the earth like a dark, soft wind that reached far into you and brought tears without any reason.

Somehow, then, she had found herself once more on the railway track leading to Amaranth. She had walked out to the edge of Bethune where the fringe of trees was a dark pattern against the sunset. An almost forgotten mood had seized her then, and she had spoken aloud the name of Rolf Gunther. Only the hard little sound of a locust rode the silence. Nothing else was there . . . nothing where she had walked with Rolf in the old Bethune

days . . . nothing there at the beginning of things. But one *had* to go back to the beginning of things, always. Trace the thread of life—find the knot—untangle it. Paul Brule had said that. She had never wanted to go back; inertia had possessed her, the inertia of her overwhelming loss. And yet, one had to go back. Else a memory would go on forever and forever, strong as a parasite graying the bloom of life.

And now—the void under the bridge was baying again, after six years of silence. No, not again. This was the first time. She was living, not again, but *still*. Time was not something that passed. All eternity was but a single fierce stroke of rapture. Existence was all a weaving to and fro upon the same dim loom. One never escaped that.

And yet there was a difference too. On that other night, more than six years ago, she had been near collapse. Tonight she was strong and fatigue worked upon her mind like a stimulating drug. Nor was she afraid now as she had been then. There was greater fulness, deeper release, more patient understanding of what life asked of one. Besides, she was not now hurrying home to Rolf Gunther. Or was she? Was it Rolf who had swept her to him there in that obscure room of the old house last night? Was it Rolf to whose perverse embrace she had yielded herself so utterly? Was it Rolf who had kissed her as no one had ever kissed her before?

Amaranth lay before her now, pathetic and small and helpless in its slumber in this cradle of the earth. How fantastic it all was! A little, anxious, decorous town clinging like a cluster of barnacles on the surface of a globe in space. Here was the pasture, with the dew sweet and heavy on the rank grass, and the smell of it rising to her senses like the intangible haunting burden of all-but-forgotten things. Here was the avenue now, and here the street down which she must go. Twenty-eight steps to the wrought-iron gate. The metal of the latch was cool and damp under her hand. On tiptoe she stole along the grass margin beside the walk. The house stared down at her from behind its mask of ivy. She knew the door would open to her. Jonas had no use for keys. She was in the hall now, the sound of the clock ticking coming from the dining room. Jonas would be asleep in his own room. She would move softly not to awaken him.

Something was at rest in this house; there was no oppressiveness about it now. She could move up the stairs without feeling the weight of the darkness upon her. She stood in the room that had been hers. Now the weariness that she had held in check swept over her. She sank down upon the bed and lay with her lids pressed close over her hot eyes. . . .

When she awakened at last it was with the feeling that she had slept a long time. Her eyes sought the window. The shade was down. Dimly above the bed she could make out the small rectangular frame that was only a deeper shadow on the wall. She stared at the motto; the letters Dorcas Gunther had embroidered in wool would not appear. It was too dark to discern the flaming legend. She rose to her knees on the bed and looked more closely. Her eyes that knew the legend so well were mocked by the blur.

She got from the bed and slipped out of the house.

She walked rapidly down the avenue, dreading the possibility of meeting anyone here at such an hour. There was a light above the door of Paul Brule's place. Last night there had been none. Paul had taken up life again.

She hurried away. The town fell back, a sparse glimmer of lights, as she sped down through the flats to the lumber-yard beside the river. The resinous smell of the lumber made her slightly faint. She trod over sawdust in a dark aisle between two high walls of piled lumber, and the cushiony, damp sensation had something furtive about it. Beneath the few stars that showed through a misted sky the river lay dimly livid. A fitful wind skimmed the river out into gray and white fans. Where the yellowing branches of willows trailed here and there in the water, she heard a lapping, plaintive sound, and sometimes where leaves had fallen away a sad nest showed.

Now, within sight of her own house on the hillside above her, she knew that she had been running through the dark, racing with bliss and fear. Her heart was bursting. She could go no farther, feel nothing more.

The length of the path to her own doorway dwindled under her feet. There was the thornapple tree, standing indistinctively in the darkness. She went and leaned against it, and a rich, sweet weariness surged over her.

In the morning she would go down to the Stormos', and bring little Rolf home to the castle. Before noon, old Jonas would wander up to begin cutting the birch from that new hillside acre. Also, there were those new potatoes she had promised to take to Herb Lundy's; she would have to send Jonas down with them in the afternoon. In the evening Paul Brule would come once more up the pathway. He had said he would. . . .

She rested her head back against the tree trunk and closed her eyes. A slight wind moved through the thornapple tree; it moved across darkness and sleep, on and on.

THE END

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GROSSET & DUNLAP, Publishers,
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THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.
Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Young May Moon* by Martha Ostenso]