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Her Reputation

(The Bubble Reputation)

by

Talbot Mundy

CHAPTER 1.

**"A scene—a scandal—at church—
on Easter Sunday of all days in the year—
with nearly everybody in the county looking on!"**

There is an hour of promise, and a zero hour; the promise first; and promises are sometimes even sweeter than fulfillment. Jacqueline Lanier was unconscious of her hour of blossoming, and so the outlines of young loveliness had not been hardened by habitual self-assertion. Since she came under Desmio's care her lot had been cast in very pleasant places, and she was aware of it, wondering a little now and then, between the thrills of appreciation; but at seventeen we are not much given to philosophy, which comes later in life when we are forced to try to explain away mistakes.

She had come into the world a stormy petrel, but Consuelo and Donna Isabella were the only ones who remembered anything of that, and Consuelo took as much pains to obscure the memory as Donna Isabella did in trying to revive it. Both women were acceptable because everything whatever that belonged to Desmio was perfect—must be. Jacqueline used to wonder what under heaven Desmio could have to confess to on the occasions when he went into the private chapel to kneel beside Father Doutreleau. She herself had no such difficulties; there were always thoughts she had allowed herself to think regarding Donna Isabella. It had cost Jacqueline as much as fifty pater nosters on occasion for dallying with the thought of the resemblance between Donna Isabella and the silver-and-enamel vinegar cruet on the dining-room sideboard. And there was always Consuelo, fruitful of confessions; for you accepted Consuelo, listened to her comments, and obeyed sometimes—exactly as might happen.

Consuelo presumably had been born middle-aged and a widow, and so would remain forever, as dependable as the silvery Louisiana moon that made the plantation darkies love-sick, and as the sun that peeped in every morning between the window-sill and the lower edge of the blind.

You brush your own hair at the convent, but that makes it no less desirable to have it brushed for you at home during the Easter Congé, especially if the hair grows in long dark waves like Jacqueline's. At the convent you stand before a small plain mirror, which in no way lessens the

luxury of a chair at your own dressing-table, in your own delightful room fronting on the patio balcony, in Desmio's house, while Consuelo "fixes" you.

At the convent you wear a plain frock, all the girls dressed alike; but that does not detract from the virtue of silken underwear and lacy frocks at home.

"Hold your head still, Conchita!"

All Easter week Consuelo had been irritable, and Jacqueline's blue eyes watched curiously in the mirror the reflection of the duenna's plump face and the discontented set of the flexible mouth. There was a new atmosphere about the house, and the whole plantation vaguely re-suggested it, as if Desmio's indisposition were a blight. Yet Desmio himself, and the doctor and Father Doutreleau, and Consuelo had all been at pains to assure her that the illness was nothing serious. True, Donna Isabella had dropped ominous hints; but you could not take Donna Isabella's opinions quite seriously without presupposing that there was nothing good in the world, nor any use hoping for the best.

"Why are you worried, Consuelo?"

The critical lips pursed, and the expression reflected, in the mirror became reminiscent of younger days, when a child asking questions was discreetly foiled with an evasive answer.

"Because your hair is in knots, Conchita. At the convent they neglect you."

"I am supposed to look after myself in the convent."

"Tchutt! There is no reason why they should teach you to neglect yourself."

"They don't. The sisters are extremely particular!"

"Tchutt! They don't know what's what! It's a mystery to me they haven't spoilt your manners—"

"Why—Consuelo!"

"Nobody can fool me. You'll never have to look after yourself, Conchita —whoever says it!"

That was one of those dark sayings that had prevailed all week. Jacqueline lapsed into silence, frowning; and that made Consuelo smile, for as a frown it was incredible; it was just a ripple above lake-blue eyes.

"You can't tell me!" exclaimed Consuelo, nodding to her own reflection in the mirror as she put the last few touches to the now decorously ordered hair. Next day's rearrangement at the convent would fall short of this by a whole infinity.

"Can't tell you what, Consuelo?"

Pursed lips again. But the evasive answer was forestalled by a knock on the door, and Jacqueline drew the blue dressing-robe about her; for there was no doubt whose the knock was, and you never, if you were wise, appeared in disarray before Donna Isabella. You stood up naturally when she entered. As the door moved Consuelo's face assumed that blank expression old servants must fall back on when they dare not look belligerent, yet will not seem suppressed.

"Jacqueline—"

Donna Isabella alone, in all that house, on all that plantation, called her Jacqueline and not Conchita.

"—don't keep the car waiting."

Jacqueline glanced at the gilt clock on the dressing-table. There was half an hour to spare, but she did not say so, having learned that much worldly wisdom. She watched Donna Isabella's bright brown eyes as they met Consuelo's. Consuelo left the room.

Donna Isabella Miro stood still, looking like one of those old engravings of Queen Elizabeth, until the door closed behind her with a vicious snap in token of Consuelo's unspeakable opinion.

It was one of her characteristics that she kept you standing at attention quite a while before she spoke.

She had her brother's features, lean and aquiline, almost her brother's figure; almost his way of standing. Dressed in his clothes, at a distance, she might even have been mistaken for him. But there the resemblance ended. To Jacqueline, Don Andres Miro had been Desmio ever since her three-year-old lips first tried to lisp the name. It had been easiest, too, to say "Sabella," but at three and a half the Donna had crept in, and remained. At four years it had frozen into Donna Isabella, without the slightest prospect of melting into anything less formal.

"I hope, Jacqueline, that in the days to come you will appreciate how pleasant your surroundings were."

"Do I seem not to appreciate them, Donna Isabella?"

The older woman smiled—her brother's smile, with only a certain thinness added, and an almost unnoticeable tightening of the corners of the lips.

"I hope Don Andres' kindness has not given you wrong ideas."

"Donna Isabella, how could Desmio give anybody wrong ideas? He's— he's—"

Words always failed when Jacqueline tried to say what she thought of Desmio.

"He is absurdly generous. I hope he has not ruined you, as he would have ruined himself long ago, but for my watchfulness."

"Ruined me? How could he?"

"By giving you wrong notions, Jacqueline."

"Wrong, Donna Isabella?"

Jacqueline had all her notions of life's meaning from Desmio. His notions! None but Donna Isabella would have dreamed of calling them by that name! They were ideals; and they were right—right—right—forever right!

"Wrong notions about your future, Jacqueline. Fortunately"—how fond she was of the word fortunately! "Don Andres can never adopt you legally. There is no worse nonsense than adopting other people's children to perpetuate a family name, and we have cousins of the true stock."

Lanier blood is good, and Jacqueline knew it; but, as Consuelo said, the convent had not spoiled her manners. She said nothing.

"So—incredibly kind though Don Andres has been to you—you have no claim on him."

The frown again—and a half-choke in the quiet voice; "Claim? I'm grateful to him! He's—"

But words failed. Why try to say what Desmio was, when all the world knew?

"Do you call it gratitude—after all he has done for you— knowing what his good name and his position in the country means to him—to make a scene—a scandal—at church on Easter Sunday, of all days in the year, with nearly everybody in the county looking on?"

"I made no scene, Donna Isabella."

"Jacqueline! If Don Andres knew that Jack Calhoun had walked up the middle of the aisle during High Mass, and had given you an enormous bouquet which you accepted—"

"Should I have thrown the flowers into the aisle?" Jacqueline retorted indignantly. "I put them under the seat—"

"Accepted them, with half the county looking on!"

"I didn't want to make a scandal—"

"So you encouraged him!"

Jacqueline controlled herself and answered calmly, but the incorrigible frown suggested mirth in spite of her and Donna Isabella's lean wrists trembled with suppressed anger.

"I have always avoided him. He took that opportunity for lack of a better, Donna Isabella."

"Can you imagine a young gallant bringing flowers to me during High Mass?"

It was easy to believe that the whole world contained no gallant brave enough for that effrontery! Her narrow face was livid with malice that had seemed to increase since Desmio's illness.

"If Don Andres knew that for months Jack Calhoun—"

"Let me tell him!" urged Jacqueline. Her impulse had been to tell him all about it long ago. He would have known the fault was not hers, and would have given her good advice, instead of blaming her for what she could not help; whereas Donna Isabella—

Donna Isabella stamped her foot.

"I forbid! You cause a scandal, but you never pause to think what it will mean to those it most concerns! As if your name were not enough, you drag in one of the Calhouns—the worst profligates in Louisiana. The shock will kill him—I forbid you to say a word!"

One learns obedience in convents.

"Put your frock on now, and remember not to keep the car waiting. You can say good-bye to Don Andres in the library, but don't stay too long in there. He mustn't be upset. Try this once to be considerate, Jacqueline."

There is virtue even in spitefulness, for it makes you glad when people go, which is better after all than weeping for them. Jacqueline's quick movement to open the door for Donna Isabella failed to suggest regret. Consuelo's—for her hand was on the door-knob on the far side—deliberately did not hint at eavesdropping; she was buxom, bland, bobbing a curtsy to Donna Isabella as she passed, and in haste to reach the closet where the frocks hung in two alluring rows.

"The lilac frock, Conchita?"

Then the door closed, a pair of heels clip-clipped along the balcony, and Consuelo's whole expression changed as instantly as new moons change the surface of the sea. With a frock over her arm she almost ran to Jacqueline, fondling her as she drew off the dressing robe.

"What did she say, honey? Conchita—was she cruel? Was she unjust?"

But at seventeen we are like birds, who sing when the shadow of the hawk has passed, and Jacqueline's smile was bright—invisible for a moment —smothered under a cloud of lilac organdy.

"Careful, Consuelo! There's a hook caught in my hair!"

Whereat much petting and apology. Clumsy, Consuelo—kindness crystallized—and adding injury to insult! Consuelo self-abased:

"Mi querida—tell me—did she speak of that young cockerel?"

There are some fictions we observe more carefully the more opaque they are. Consuelo had been listening, and Jacqueline knew it. The evasive answer works both ways.

"She said I must be quick, Consuelo."

Hats—a galaxy of hats—Consuelo would have had her try on half a dozen, but Jacqueline snatched the first one and was gone, as a young bird leaves the nest. Sunlight streamed into the patio and touched her with vague gold as she sped along the balcony. Down the wide stone stairs latticed shadows of the iron railing produced the effect of flight, as if the lilac organdy were wings. Then—for they teach you how to walk in convents —across the courtyard between flowers and past the gargoyle fountain toward Desmio's library, Jacqueline moved as utterly unconscious of her charm as Consuelo, watching in the bedroom doorway, was aware of it.

And something of the fear that she had seen in Don Andres' eyes of late, clutched at the old nurse's heart. Lanier beauty—Lanier grace—the Lanier heritage of sex attraction—Jacqueline

had them all. An exquisite tropical butterfly, fluttering on life's threshold, unconscious of covetous hands and covetous hearts that would reach out to possess her. What lay ahead of those eager little feet?

"Oh, Mary, take care of her!" she muttered—adding more softly, "Poor Calhoun!" Then thoughts reverting to Donna Isabella—"She would turn my honey-lamb out into the world! Not while I live! Not while I have breath in me!"

But Jacqueline's only thought was Desmio. It banished for the moment even the memory of Donna Isabella. We can be whole-hearted at seventeen; emotions and motives are honest, unconcerned with side-issues. She entered the library as she always did, frank and smiling, glad to see him and have word with him, and as she stood for a moment with the sunlight behind her in the doorway, he rose to greet her. Father Doutreleau rose too, out of the depths of an armchair, eager to persuade his friend to sit down again, but neither priest nor physician lived who could persuade Don Andres to forego courtesy.

"So you are on your way again, Conchita—and so soon!"

"It was your wish that I should attend the convent Desmio."

"How is the heart?" she asked him.

"Yours, Conchita! You should know best!"

So he had always spoken to her. Never, from the day when Consuelo carried her in under the portico, and Desmio had taken her into his arms and keeping, had he ever treated her as less than an equal, less than a comrade.

He was not more than middle-aged, but his hair and the grandee beard were prematurely gray. Short lines about the corners of his bright brown eyes hinted that to walk the earth with no dignity is no way of avoiding trouble and responsibility. He sat in the high-backed chair as one of his forebears might have sat to be painted by Velasquez, and it called for no great power of imagination to visualize a long rapier at his waist, or lace over the lean, strong wrists. Yet, you were at ease in his presence.

"You will come to see me, Desmio?"

His answering smile was much more eloquent than if he had said "of course." It implied that his indisposition was only temporary; it mocked his present weakness, and promised improvement, asking no more for himself than a moment's forbearance. If he had said wild horses should not prevent him from visiting Jacqueline at the convent, words would have conveyed less than the smile.

"I shall come to the convent to listen to the Sister Superior's report of you—and shall return to Father Doutreleau to sit through a sermon on pride!"

"Desmio, you are incorrigible."

"So says Father Doutreleau! The fault is yours, Conchita. How shall I not be proud of you?"

Jacqueline leaned on the arm of the chair and kissed him, making a little moue at Father Doutreleau, who sat enjoying the scene as you do enjoy your patron's happiness. There was a world of understanding in the priest's round face, and amusement, and approval; better than most, he knew Don Andres' sheer sincerity; as priest and family confessor, it was his right to approve the man's satisfaction in such innocent reward. But it was the priest's face that cut short the farewell. Jacqueline detected the swift movement of his eyes, and turned to see Donna Isabella in the door.

"Consuelo is waiting for you in the car, Jacqueline."

Don Andres frowned. He disliked thrusts at Jacqueline. For a moment his eyes blazed, but the anger died in habitual courtliness toward his sister. Blood of his blood, she was a Miro and entitled to her privileges.

"Good-by, Conchita," he said, smiling.

Jacqueline's hand, and Father Doutreleau's kept him down in the chair, but he was on his feet the moment she had started for the door. She glanced over her shoulder to laugh good-by to him, but did not see the spasm of pain that crossed his face, or the uncontrolled movement of the hand that betrayed the seat of pain. She did not see Father Doutreleau leaning over him or hear the priest's urging:

"Won't you understand you must obey the doctor?"

All Jacqueline heard was Donna Isabella's voice beside her, as usual finding fault:

"Perhaps, while you are at the convent we may be able to keep Don Andres quiet. At the convent try to remember how much you owe to Don Andres' generosity, Jacqueline—and don't dally with the notion that he owes you anything. Good-by."

CHAPTER 2.

"One may safely leave fond nurses to discover ways and means."

And so to the convent, with Donna Isabella's farewell pleasantries not exactly ringing (nothing about that acid personage could be said to ring, true or otherwise) but dull in her ears. Consuelo did not help much, she was alternately affectionate and fidgety beside her—fearful of Zeke's driving, and more afraid yet of the levees, where the gangs were heaping dirt and piling sand-bags against the day of the Mississippi's wrath.

Consuelo bemoaned the dignified dead days of well matched horses. But, like everything else that was Desmio's, Jacqueline loved the limousine. Stately and old-fashioned like its owner, it was edged with brass, and high above the road on springs that swallowed bumps with dignity. Desmio's coat-of-arms was embroidered on the window-frames; and, if the speed was nothing to be marveled at, and Zeke's driving a series of hair-breadth miracles, it had the surpassing virtue that it could not be mistaken for anybody else's car. Men turned, and raised their hats before they could possibly have seen whether Desmio was within or not.

"You throw away your smiles, Conchita!"

"Should I scowl at them, Consuelo?"

"Nonsense, child! But if you look like an angel at every jackanapes along the road, what kind of smile will you have left for the right man, when the time comes—the Blessed Virgin knows, that's why young Jack Calhoun—"

Jacqueline frowned.

"Mary, have pity on women!" she muttered half under her breath. "I wish I might tell Desmio."

"Tchutt! You must learn for yourself, Conchita. Don Andres has enough to trouble him."

The frown again. Learn for herself. In the convent they teach you the graces; not how to keep at bay explosive lovers. Though he had seized every opportunity for nearly a year to force himself on her notice, she had never been more than polite to Jack Calhoun, and she had been a great deal less than polite since she had grown afraid of him.

Consuelo had studied that frown for seventeen years.

"You'll be safe from him in the convent, honey," she said, nodding, and Jacqueline smiled.

But as they drove along the convent wall toward the old arched gateway—the smile changed suddenly, and something kin to fear—bewilderment at least—wonder, perhaps, that the world could contain such awkward problems—brought back the frown, as Consuelo clutched her hand.

"Look daggers at him, child!"

You can't look daggers with a face like Jacqueline's. That is the worst of it. You must feel them first, and faces are the pictured sentiments that we are born with, have felt, and wish to feel. Not even at Jack Calhoun could she look worse than troubled. And it needed more than trouble—more than Consuelo's scolding—more than Zeke's efforts at the throttle and scandalized, sudden manipulation of the wheel, to keep Jack Calhoun at a distance. He had been waiting, back to the wall, twenty paces from the gate, and came toward them sweeping his hat off gallantly. One hand was behind him, but it would have needed two men's backs to hide the enormous bouquet. Love—Calverly—Calhoun brand, which is burning desire—was in eyes and face—handsome face and eyes—lips a little too much curled—chin far too impetuous—bold bearing, bridled—consciousness of race and caste in every well-groomed inch of him. He jumped on the running-board as Zeke tried vainly to crowd him to the wall, and the bouquet almost choked the window as he thrust it through.

"Miss Jacqueline—"

But a kettle boiling over on the stove was a mild affair compared to Consuelo. She snatched the flowers and flung them through the opposite window.

"There, that for you!" She snapped her fingers at him, and Jacqueline learned what looking daggers means. "I know you Calhouns! Be off with you!"

Jack Calhoun laughed. He liked it. Lambs in the fold are infinitely more sweet than lambs afield. He loved her. He desired her. So should a Calhoun's wife be, as unattainable as Grail and Golden Fleece, that a Calhoun might prove his mettle in the winning. He had a smile of approval to spare for Consuelo; her wet cat welcome left him untouched, just as Jacqueline's embarrassment only piqued his gallantry.

"Miss Jacqueline—"

He had a set speech ready. He had phrased and memorized it while he waited. By the look of his horse, tied under a tree a hundred yards away, he had been there for hours, and it was a pity that the fruit of all that meditation should be nipped by the united efforts of a Consuelo and a Negro coachman. But so it fell; for Zeke leaned far out from the driver's seat and tugged at the big bell-handle by the gate; and Consuelo, leaning her fat shoulder on the car door, opened it suddenly, thrust herself through the opening and, forced Jack Calhoun down into the dust.

"That much for you!" she exploded, and he laughed at her good-naturedly; so that even Consuelo's angry brown eyes softened for the moment. He had breeding, the young jackanapes, and the easy airy Calhoun manners. She almost smiled; but she could afford it, for the convent gate swung open and lay-sister Helena stepped out under the arch to greet Jacqueline.

Jack Calhoun was balked, and realized the fact a second too late. He ran around the limousine; but by the front wheel Zeke blocked the way with the wardrobe trunk, and Jacqueline was already exchanging with Sister Helena the kiss the convent rules permitted.

Accept defeat at the hands of women and a Negro coachman, God forbid! Jack Calhoun ran around the limousine again, jumped through the door and out on the convent side, too quick for Consuelo, who tried in vain to interpose her bulk.

"Miss Jacqueline—!"

Sister Helena drew Jacqueline over the threshold. That was sanctuary. Not even a Calhoun would trespass there without leave; and there were Zeke and Consuelo, beside ample lay-help near at hand. Also, there was human curiosity —the instinct of the woman who had taken vows, which in no way precluded interest in another's love-affair.

"May I—won't you say good-by to me, Jacqueline?"

Why not! What wrong in shaking hands at convent gates? Sister Helena glanced at Consuelo, but Consuelo was inclined to pass responsibility; her guardianship ended where the convent wall began, and she was definitely frankly jealous of the sisters. She looked vinegary, non-committal.

"It will be so long before I can see you again!"

Jacqueline shrank back for no clear reason, but instinctively. There was a look in his eye that she did not understand. It suggested vaguely things the convent teaching did not touch on, except by way of skirting deftly around them with mysterious warnings and dim hints. The wolf knows he is hungry. The lamb knows she is afraid. The onlooker reckons a sheepfold or a convent wall is barrier enough.

"Won't you tell me good-by, Jacqueline?"

She held out her hand, with the other arm around Sister Helena, ashamed of her own reluctance. Why! By what right should she refuse him common courtesy? He had never done a thing to her but pay her compliments. Jack Calhoun crossed the threshold, seized her hand and kissed it. She snatched the hand away, embarrassed—half-indignant—still ignorant of causes.

"There—there—now you've had your way—be off with you!" Consuelo thrust herself between them, back toward Jacqueline and face to the enemy.

Calhoun backed away, hardly glancing at Consuelo, watching Jacqueline over the fat black-satinéd shoulders. There was acquisition in his eyes now—the look of the practiced hunter whose time is not quite yet, but who has gauged his quarry's points and weakness. Three paces back he bumped into Zeke with the trunk. The trunk fell on his feet but he ignored it; if it hurt him, none but he knew; Zeke's protestations fell on deaf ears. Midway between gate and limousine he stood watching the trunk rolled in, and Consuelo's wet-eyed leave-taking—watched Consuelo come away, and saw the great gate slowly closing—watched like a hunter. Then, with the gate half-shut, he caught Sister Helena's eye, and the appeal in his made her pause. Hearts melt under dark-blue habits easily. The gate re-opened by as much as half a foot, disclosing Jacqueline again. Eyes met hers brimming full of tenderness for Consuelo, who had said such foolishness as nurses do say—tender, and then big with new surprise.

It was Jack Calhoun's heart leaping now. Had he won already? Was she as glad as all that for another glimpse of him? The hot blood rose to his temples, and the hot assurance to his lips. He would have been no Calverly-Calhoun if he could keep that tide within limits.

"I love you, Jacqueline—I love you!" he almost shouted. Then the gate shut—tight. He heard the chain-lock rattle and the key turn; and he laughed.

Consuelo's voice beside him brought him out of reverie.

"She's not for you—not for the likes of you!"

"Did you hear me say I love her, Consuelo?"

He was watching Consuelo's face, pondering how to turn an adversary into a confederate, probing to uncover her weakness. She being Consuelo, and he a Calverly-Calhoun, he was absolutely certain to guess wrong as he was sure his guess would be infallible.

Consuelo looked almost panic-stricken, and Jack Calhoun's lip curled again in that heredity-betraying smile. He thought he saw the joint in her armor. Old nurses, pension in view, may well dread dismissal and the search for new employment. Doubtless Don Andres would visit his wrath on Consuelo if he should think she had failed in her task as duenna. He knew the Calhoun reputation and could guess what Don Andres thought of it.

"I will call on Don Andres," he repeated.

"No, no!" She was almost imploring now. "Worry on Miss Jacqueline's account would kill him! He is seriously ill. You must—"

"What then," he interrupted. His hand went to his pockets, and the offer of a bribe was plain enough if she would care to take it.

"What then, Señor? Aren't you a Calhoun? Aren't you a gentleman?"

He put his hands behind him—legs apart—head thrown back handsomely. He had Consuelo at his mercy; he was sure of it; and none ever accused the Calverly-Calhouns of being weakly merciful.

"To oblige you, Consuelo, I'll say nothing to Don Andres at present —provided you reciprocate."

"In what way, Señor?"

He laughed. "One may safely leave fond nurses to discover ways and means," he answered. "Are letters mailed to young ladies at the convent censored by the nuns?"

"Of course, Señor. What are you thinking of?"

"If you will smuggle in a letter to Miss Jacqueline, I will not mention to Don Andres that you have permitted me more than one interview with her. Otherwise,—my sentiments toward her being what they are—you leave me no alternative."

For a second his eyes glanced away from Consuelo's. She understood the glance; Zeke was listening. Jack Calhoun's smile left his lips and crept into his eyes. Consuelo began to stammer something, but he interrupted.

"I will write a letter to Miss Jacqueline. Tomorrow I will call on Don Andres to inquire after his health. If you should meet me in the patio, and take the letter, I will make no intimate disclosures to Don Andres. Are we agreed?"

Consuelo bit her lip, and nodded.

"Tomorrow then—in the patio—shortly before noon. Don't disappoint me!"

Consuelo could not trust herself to answer, but stepped into the limousine, nodding to him a second time through the window. Words would have choked her. Jack Calhoun, smiling as his father used to smile when ships left port with contraband, gave Zeke a fifty-dollar bill—checked the old darky's exclamations with a gesture—waved the limousine on its way—and stood watching until it was nearly out of sight. Then he went for his horse and rode homeward at full gallop, using the spurs unmercifully.

"My Jacqueline! My Jacqueline!" he sang as he rode. "I love her and she's mine! My Jacqueline!"

The gangs mending a levee had to stop work and scatter to let him pass. His horse knocked a man down, and a foreman cursed him for it, calling him by name.

"Ye daren't get off that horse and act like a man! Ye're all dogs, you Calhouns!"

Jack did not hesitate a second, but reined it and dismounted. When he rode away five minutes later the foreman was a bruised and bleeding wreck, unfit for work for a week to come.

CHAPTER 3.

"Andres, I have distressing news for you."

Consuelo, leaning back against the cushions in the limousine, her fat bosom heaving as if she had run uphill, did not dare trust herself to let a thought take shape for twenty minutes. She could not have defined her own emotions. Fury—indignation—fear for Jacqueline—contempt for Zeke, who had accepted a bribe—an old nurse's faithful love, that can be tigerish as well as sacrificing—a ghastly, sinking sense of the dilemma facing her—and helplessness, were all blended into one bewildering sensation. And through that drummed the certainty that she, Consuelo, must do something about it.

She knew that Don Andres loved Jacqueline with infinitely more delight that he had loved his own daughter, whose resemblance to Donna Isabella had been too obvious, even at the age of ten, to stir paternal sympathies. Her death, leaving him with no direct heir and a widower, had hurt his family pride more than his affection, and it was not until Jacqueline entered his household that his inmost heart was really touched. Jacqueline, at three, had stepped into an empty place, and filled it. Spanish herself, Consuelo knew the depths of Don Andres' distaste for public scandal. Gossip and the name of Calverly-Calhoun were almost synonymous terms. Gossip and Don Andres Miro were as fire and water.

Zeke being nearest, was the first who must be dealt with. She began at once:

"How much did he give you, Zeke?" she asked, sliding back the glass panel behind the driver's seat.

Zeke attended to the driving thoughtfully for a good long minute before he showed her the crow's-footed corner of an eye and a silhouette of snub nose over pursed protruding lips.

"Didn't yo' see?"

He returned to his driving. His shoulders grew eloquent of marvelous unconcern for Consuelo, or anything connected with her.

"You—Zeke—why did he give it to you?"

Another minute's silence—then Zeke's eye, wide-open trying to look around the corner of his head, and thick lips opened impudently:

"He likes muh—don't you s'pose?"

Enough of Zeke. He would tell what he knew, or not tell, with or without exaggerations, as Calhoun might instruct. Meanwhile, he would use his own discretion, and by night the servants' hall would have three versions of the affair, as surely as Zeke would have a headache on the morrow. And by morning Donna Isabella would have her own embittered version of the scandal.

Consuelo leaned back again against the cushions, thinking. Hers was a lone hand. Somewhere midway between master and domestics, with no clearly defined position in the household now that Jacqueline was growing up, she had the distrust of both sides to contend with. Insofar as she ever came in contact with Don Andres he was kind and courteous to her, but Donna Isabella had taken care to prevent confidential relations between master and nurse, and pride kept Don

Andres from interfering with his sister's authority in the household. Yet she did not dare go to Donna Isabella and take her into confidence. As well ask a she-wolf to be sympathetic.

And she knew the Calverly-Calhouns—knew that Jack Calhoun would hesitate at nothing. Worse still—the boy had brains. It was likely enough to dawn on him that Donna Isabella was the key to the situation. What was to prevent him from approaching her? And what was more likely than that Donna Isabella would exaggerate the scandal? Her jealousy knew no limits. She might succeed in convincing Don Andres that marriage to Jack Calhoun was the only way to prevent Jacqueline from becoming a subject of light gossip of the countryside.

There was one way left then—deadly dangerous to herself. She must go to Don Andres, and tell him everything. That thought brought memories. Once—a year or two before the convent days—there had been a governess, who had dared to approach Don Andres with complaints about Donna Isabella's injustice to Jacqueline. Of all insufferable indignities the one Don Andres tolerated least was tale-bearing against those whom it pleased him to honor, and the governess had left the house that night. She had been young, with new positions open to her; Consuelo, well past fifty, with about three hundred dollars in a savings bank, had no delusions as to how the world would treat her, once dismissed. But she thought of Jacqueline, and the little dancing frown above the lake-blue eyes:

"Mother of God, protect me! I will tell Don Andres," she said, half- aloud, as if afraid to hear her own voice. She crossed herself, knelt in the limousine, and prayed.

She was dry-eyed—dry-lipped—businesslike, when the limousine rolled under the portico and Zeke waited for her to climb out as she pleased. Consuelo would have scolded him for it at any other time, but she was in no mood for trivialities; great resolution had her by the shoulders; she rang the old-fashioned door-bell with a jerk and a clang that startled her. But they knew it was only Consuelo, and the footman kept her waiting.

She heard his footsteps at last on the tiles, and heard him pause in the hall, midway between patio and front door, where dining-room and drawing-room opened off to the right and left. When he came to the door his black face was a dumb enigma, and she saw beyond him the figure of Donna Isabella, frowning sourly under the drawing-room portière. She would have walked past with the usual old-fashioned bobbing curtsy, but Donna Isabella stopped her:

"Why do you use the front door, Consuelo?"

Silence. Pursed lips. Attention.

"The fact that you are an old servant is no excuse for forgetting your manners."

Consuelo's manners at that moment were a galleon's in full sail down- wind. She had cut her cables—thrown away her charts—was forth on life's last adventure.

Forget her manners? She dipped her pennant and sailed on, leaving Donna Isabella to put what construction she might choose on utter silence.

Straight to her own room. Off with her hat and cape, firm-lipped and resolute—crossing herself before the image of the Virgin. Out again, straight to the patio and toward the library.

Then, at the library door, sudden weak knees and emptiness. The zero hour! She was keyed up for sacrifice; but what if it should be in vain?

Her knuckles rapped the door—so hard that they hurt before she could prevent them.

"Come!"

Too late! "O Mother of God, put courage into me, and words into my mouth! I don't know what to say to him "

The door was shut behind her, and she was midway across the room, hardly knowing how it had happened. Don Andres was in the high-backed chair, laying down a book, his other lean, long, veined hand resting on the chair-arm.

"What is it, Consuelo?"

Then, suddenly, all fear and all discretion to the winds! Words came —from somewhere—sounding to Consuelo like another woman's speaking in a voice she hardly knew.

"Don Andres—have I been a good servant to you?"

"I have always thought so, Consuelo."

He was too courteous to seem surprised. His eyes looked kind, not critical. How could it be that such a man had enemies? Consuelo dropped on her knees on the floor beside the footstool, clasping her hands on her bosom.

"Don Andres—I come to you as your servant now! I mean no harm to any one, and if I offend you, dismiss me and I will go in silence. Only hear me to the end first!"

"You may tell me what is in your mind, Consuelo."

"Don Andres—it is about Miss Jacqueline—Mr. Jack Calhoun is making love to her. He made a scene at the convent gate, and I could not keep him away from her, although I tried!"

He nodded, looking grave. He was perfectly sure how faithfully Consuelo would have tried.

"He made a scene at church on Easter Sunday."

Don Andres frowned.

"Why has Jacqueline not told me of all this?"

"She was forbidden—she wished to, Don Andres,—she was forbidden months ago to tell you anything."

"Did you advise her not to tell me?"

"God forbid! Don Andres, that innocent has never had another secret from you. As God is my witness, there is nothing in her life until this, that you did not know."

He nodded again. There was only one other individual in the household who might have imposed restraint. But his nod was in recognition of Consuelo's tact in not mentioning the individual's name.

"Does she respond to Mr. Calhoun's attentions?"

"She fears him, Don Andres! What does she know of men? She shrinks away from him, and he pursues her! She does not understand. She only knows there is something that she doesn't understand. He fascinates her—he has made up his mind—he is set on winning her—and—Don Andres—you know those Calverly-Calhouns!"

He overlooked the last part of her speech. The Calverly-Calhouns for generations had been his equals.

"Have you had speech with him with reference to this?" he asked after a moment's pause.

So Consuelo told him all that Jack Calhoun had said, and of the bribe to Zeke, and of her own unspoken promise to meet Jack Calhoun in the patio next day and take a letter from him. She stammered over the last part, for she had not been in that household fourteen years without knowing the master's method with servants who consented to intrigue. His deep frown frightened her—it was only a matter of moments now.

"Stand up, Consuelo," he said at last, and she struggled to her feet, biting her lip, awaiting her dismissal.

"Did he offer you money?" he asked.

"I don't think he dared, Don Andres."

"You agreed to smuggle his letter into the convent?"

"Don Andres—what else could I do?—I haven't the power to manage him otherwise—I'm an old woman, and he laughs at me— unless he thinks he can use me he'll go to—to some one else—and they'll make a scandal between them to—to—"

The nod again—cryptic—dry. The dark eyes deadly serious. A too long pause, as if he were unmercifully framing words. The thin lips tightly set.

"You were always a good servant, Consuelo."

Were! So the end had come. Her heart sank, for the awaited is not less terrible when it arrives. She bowed her head, remembering she would go in silence.

"I am not ungrateful for good service, or unconscious of my obligation to reward it. You may leave that part to me. But I will tolerate no insubordination in my house. You understand me?"

She did not. She looked hurt now—amazed. She had never been insubordinate. A little of the meekness left her: She would not go in silence after all. She would tell him to his face what a faithful servant suffered constantly at Donna Isabella's lips—how much had to be endured for his sake—she would seize an old woman's privilege of speech and pour out all she knew! But he spoke again before she could begin and even in that moment of indignation she could not force herself to interrupt him.

"You must continue as if this interview with me had never taken place. You understand?"

Slowly his meaning dawned on her.

"Am I not dismissed?" she asked, her face reddening.

He ignored the question. "There must be no impudence or disobedience. No dark looks, Consuelo. No suggestion of an understanding with me behind another's back. No Spying. No tales to me. No indignities to—any one."

Consuelo bobbed her old-fashioned curtsey. Words would have been empty in the presence of that magnificent consistency. For his pride's sake she would let Donna Isabella drive nails into her—poison her—malign her—and she would say nothing! Followed emotion, making the stout bosom nearly burst the black satin bodice. Tears. Smothered, sobs into a handkerchief.

"There—that will do." He loathed anything undignified. "I will ask Donna Isabella to excuse you from duty until tomorrow morning."

Consuelo went without another word. Don Andres did not pick up the book again but sat staring into vacancy—alone—dismally lonely, and too proud to admit it even to himself. The house, and his whole life, were empty without Jacqueline. She was all the brightness he had ever known and to send her to school at the convent was his master-sacrifice. He broke into a smile as he thought of her, and the smile died away into a swordsman's frown, teeth showing through the parted lips, as he remembered stage by stage the fight he had waged for her—a memory that Consuelo's news had only sharpened. So an affair with Jack Calhoun was to be the next difficulty! He wondered how deeply Isabella was already mixed in it.

Well he understood his sister Isabella. She had opposed his determination to accept the child's guardianship; and that failing, she had tried to wean Jacqueline away from him and make her a dried-up image of herself—even as she had succeeded in doing with his own only child. But his own child had been a Miro. He did not disguise from himself that the Miro blood was dying—the direct Miro line near its end. Isabella had succeeded with that daughter of his; the weak twig of an ancient tree had come easily under her sway, had wilted under it, and died. But nothing in Jacqueline's nature had provided Isabella any thing to work on. Rather she responded to his own lavished affection and Consuelo's mothering; and that had given Isabella deeper offense than the original crime of introducing the child into the household.

He had made up for Isabella's bitterness, by giving Jacqueline every advantage and every privilege within his means. And the means of the Miros in Louisiana are beyond the scope of most men's dreams.

So the house was lonely now Jacqueline was at the convent—felt like a tomb, for all its decorous luxury. Don Andres Miro, possibly the best loved, certainly the richest and most respected among the old Louisiana Settlers, felt like a man with no occupation left. He was much too proud to feel sorry for himself; he would have smiled if run through with a rapier. But pride heals no heart-ache—fills no empty nest.

And Calverly-Calhoun? He knew that breed! No scion of that stock for Jacqueline! He had intimately known two generations of Calhouns, and could guess the hourly anguish of the women they had married. Good women don't reform bad men, they only irritate them; he knew that. He would rather, if necessary, see Jacqueline married to some young fellow without family, but of decent means and good repute, who would know enough to appreciate her and treat her with respect. But there was fortunately no hurry about that, and only need for vigilance. Meanwhile—

He would have one more try—if necessary he would call in the United States Attorney-General himself—to find some flaw in the Miro trust deed. If, subject to provision for his sister Isabella, he might leave by will the whole of his estates to Jacqueline, then—

Again the proud smile. That would be a true gift given from the heart —the reply complete to Isabella—and, by no means the least amusing part of it, a full expression of contempt for John Miro, his distant cousin, now heir legal and presumptive, whose Lynn shoe-factory was a disgrace and scandal to the Miro name. If by any legal means it might be possible, he would bequeath to Jacqueline every last acre and investment of the Miro fortune.

To that end he must preserve his health. It was important that he should have his wits about him and the strength to see possible law-suits to a conclusion; for it was no part of his determination to leave a mere document behind him, over which and his dead body Jacqueline should have to fight the gum shoe-maker. She would have no chance unless, he, Andres Miro, should do the fighting for her. He would do that, bitter though he knew the fight might be.

The difficult days, he recognized, were coming. All that lay behind was child's-play compared to the road ahead. Obstruct Calhoun and there would be other suitors to be fenced with. When a rumor should creep abroad, as it inevitably must, that the estates might fall to Jacqueline, every needy adventurer on the countryside would add his importunities to the confusion. Then more than ever Jacqueline would need his comradeship and guidance. He must throw the weight of years aside, and attend to it that his company should be a pleasure to her and not a burden. To that end, he must resume his youth and be more spirited and companionable than any of the young bloods she should meet. Well—he considered that not impossible. Only he must get well. A man needs health before he can be young again; and doctors—he did not know how much faith to place in even his family physician; the man never seemed to know his own mind—but then, the Miro's were ever a long-lived breed. Why theorize about disease, when long life was hereditary fact?

His reverie was interrupted by Father Doutreleau who came and went in that house pretty much as his own pleasure dictated. He was as close to Andres on the one hand as Jacqueline was on the other, so that apart altogether from his office of confessor, François Doutreleau was intimate in Miro's councils, knew his secrets, and was one of the three men who discussed them with him.

"Forgive me if I remain seated, François. It's your own medicine! Ring the bell, won't you, and we'll have some wine brought in."

There was wine enough in the Miro cellar to last another generation, and it was normal routine to have sherry and biscuits served in the library on afternoons when Miro was home. As a rule Doutreleau looked forward to it; his well filled figure and declining years responded gratefully to Old-World hospitality, and he knew good wine. But on this occasion he showed less than his usual satisfaction, and a hesitation that was rare with him. When Andres had filled two glasses, Doutreleau merely raised his glass and set it down untasted.

"What is new, François? Have you seen the papers?"

"Andres, I have distressing news for you. Be a brave man, and prepare yourself."

Doutreleau swallowed his wine at a gulp then. He had crossed the Rubicon.

"I trust it is not distressing to yourself, François. If it concerns me alone I shall find a way to bear it."

"It concerns us all. Andres—Doctor Beal has been to see me."

"I can well imagine your distress! The man has bored me with his platitudes for thirty years! Has he said you are too fat? I disagree with him. Take courage, François, and be comfortable. I am lean, and I assure you it has disadvantages."

"Andres, he has told me what he had not the courage to tell you."

"Pusillanimity! However—I myself have often confessed to you, François, sins that I would detest to have to tell the world."

"He spoke of you, Andres."

"And that distressed you, François! Take some more sherry. Choose a livelier subject for discussion next time!"

He understood there was genuinely bad news coming, and he prepared to meet it as he would meet death, or any other evil, proudly—conceding it no right to disturb his outer dignity.

"Andres, he has told me you have not long to live."

Not a flinch. Not a tremor of the steady eyelids. Not a moment's relaxation of the smile; rather it increased, and grew kindlier.

"So you were distressed to hear that of me, my friend? I am grateful for the compliment. Did Beal in his omniscience set the date of termination of my mortal activities?"

"He gives you a few months, Andres. Possibly a year."

"I hope he doesn't think I suspect him of malpractice! Assure him, I am convinced he has done his best!"

"Andres, I admire your courage. But to Jacqueline—to your household and dependents—to the parish—to myself—this is disaster. Won't you promise me to do all in your power to remain with us as long as possible? Won't you obey Beal? Won't you let him call in specialists? I want your promise, Andres, as friend to friend."

For a full minute Miro did not answer. When he spoke at last his voice was normal, suggesting no echo of battles going on within him.

"I would prefer to exact a promise from you first, François."

"Name it, my friend. If it is anything permissible—"

"Oh, none of the deadly sins! Promise to keep this news a secret, and to impress on Beal the same obligation."

"For myself, of course, I promise. But Beal will want to call in the specialists, and—"

"Let Beal be answerable for their silence. Impress that on him."

"Then you will see the specialists?"

"On that condition, yes. But not in this house, or there would be talk about it. Let Beal arrange for me to visit them."

François Doutreleau rose, turning his back to Miro, and then, still keeping his face averted, went behind Miro's chair, where he laid his hand on the iron-gray head that he had blessed so often, but never before so fervently.

"Brother—my friend—" he began, but his voice choked and he could not trust himself to speak.

Miro reached upward for the fat hand and drew it down to the chair-arm.

"I am proud of our friendship, François, although I am unworthy of it," he said in a steady voice; but he did not look up at the priest. "We shall be making an indecorous exhibition of ourselves unless we're careful. Would you care to leave me for a while to think this out alone? Suppose you take dinner with us? After dinner we can talk again."

Doutreleau walked to the door, saying a prayer under his breath, and Miro watched him, still smiling,—until the priest turned at the door.

"You will dine with us tonight then, François?"

Doutreleau nodded, for he could not trust himself to speak, and left the room.

Then, with no witnesses, Don Andres Miro sat at bay, looking death and its full consequences in the eyes. Little by little it dawned on him what his death would mean to Jacqueline. He had given so much thought to caring for her that his mind refused at first to readjust itself, and for a while he still thought of her as his ward, his heart's darling, whose destiny was in his keeping.

So this was the end of his plans! It might need years to engage the best legal talent in the land and force through the courts a new trust deed that should settle the estates on Jacqueline! If Beal was right, in a year at most the gum shoe-maker would be in possession, and Jacqueline at the mercy of the world and Isabella, with a few paltry thousands in cash to make her an even choicer prey for wolves.

He had raised her in exquisite luxury, and his death now would plunge her helpless and unprotected into the world he had prevented her from understanding!

What had he taught her, except gentleness and goodness? Nothing— unless pride, that would make her suffer in silence. He supposed that Consuelo perhaps might have told her things that a mother usually tells a young girl, but he rather doubted it, he had said nothing to Consuelo about that, and she was not given to taking liberties.

Haggard and worn—older than he had ever seemed—he leaned back in the chair and faced the facts—then suddenly grew resolute again. He was a Miro. He had months to live! The fire returned into his eye—the Miro heritage—the stubbornly resourceful Miro spirit that had never confessed defeat, nor ever yielded to a lesser force than Providence. Had he wronged Jacqueline? Then he had will to set the matter right, and time in which to think.

He thanked God that he saw the wrong before it was altogether too late. He was ready to flinch from nothing. Somehow, by some means, Jacqueline should not be loser by his guardianship; he, Andrew Miro, would attend to that, and then die cheerfully.

But how? Isabella could be absolutely counted on to thwart whatever plans he might make; he could not take Isabella into confidence. He could provide a moderate sum of money out of cash in hand, and deliver it to a trustee, to be paid to Jacqueline after his death; but the income from it would be no more than a pittance, and Jacqueline would be almost as unprotected as before. Nevertheless; that was something nothing like enough, but he would do that first.

He could make good provision for Consuelo, on condition that she keep watch over Jacqueline. But Consuelo's influence would wane as Jacqueline grew older, and, besides, he could hardly expect a spirited girl to submit forever to the dictates of an old nurse. To an extent, too, that would imply indignity to Jacqueline.

She was worthy of dignity—fitted by breeding and character to be heiress of the Miro fortune and estates. Yet he could not make her that, unless—unless—

There came another, new light in his eyes. He sat bolt-upright— smiled. The invisible, long rapier again. He hardly resembled a sick man, but a great adventurer, when the library door opened and Donna Isabella looked in, even more sourly than her wont. He rose with his usual courtesy to greet her.

"No wonder this house lacks discipline and the servants give themselves airs!" she grumbled.

"Surely nothing has displeased you, Isabella!"

"Something seems to have pleased you!" she retorted. "It will be dinner time in ten minutes, Andres, and you sit there grinning to yourself like a lunatic. How can you expect a well ordered household, when the master is late for his meals? Is it fair to me!"

Don Andres smiled without a visible trace of sarcasm, and bowed to her cavalierly as he left the room.

Donna Isabella nodded after him, thin lipped and exasperated. She would have liked him much better if he had turned on her and shown ill-temper.

CHAPTER 4.

"Come now. Listen to me, Consuelo."

"No disobedience! No insubordination! No indignities to any one!"

Consuelo went about her duties with those all too definite limitations humming in her head. All morning long Donna Isabella invented aggravating tasks, as if with the deliberate intention to force rebellion. All her efforts were unsatisfying; weariness was dubbed unwillingness; silent endurance was the sulks; a breathless answer was impertinence.

And it neared noon. Jack Calhoun was coming. Consuelo had made up her mind to get that letter from Jack Calhoun and to take it straight in to Don Andres. There would be no insubordination about that. Don Andres thereafter could take any course he pleased about it, and surely not even Donna Isabella could accuse her of remissness or intrigue.

But the worst of it was that Donna Isabella had a chair set in the patio, not far from the front hall, whence she could oversee everything, and Consuelo could think of no excuse for getting between her and the front door.

At last in desperation she suggested putting fresh flowers in the drawing- room.

"Always some excuse for being lazy!" snorted Donna Isabella. "Go and change the curtains on the bedroom windows."

No disobedience! No insubordination! But what were the Blessed Virgin and the saints all doing? Consuelo, with aching thighs, mounted the stairs to the balcony, and from one of the bedroom windows watched Jack Calhoun come cavaliering in to pay his compliments. She was not surprised that Donna Isabella should receive him courteously; Zeke had already disgorged his several versions of the scene at the convent gate, and Donna Isabella was no fool, to begin by snubbing a man who might help her to be rid of Jacqueline; she invited young Calhoun to sit beside her. Consuelo saw him glance repeatedly to right and left, and knew what he was looking for, but she could not make him see her at the bedroom window, though she prayed to at least a dozen saints to make him look upward, instead of around.

And, as Consuelo had admitted to herself, young Jack Calhoun had brains.

He was a man of his word, of course, but he had not promised to say nothing to Donna Isabella. He and Donna Isabella sat considering each other while he made polite inquiries about Miro's health; and he made a much better guess at her character than he had done at Consuelo's. In turn Donna Isabella summed him up perfectly. He was the necessary man headstrong, handsome, with a fortune not yet squandered.

"Don Andres is not well enough to see you. Have you any particular message for him?" she asked; and something in her bright eyes suggested expectation. He did not hesitate.

"Is he too ill for me to talk to him about Miss Jacqueline?"

"You may talk to me."

He proved a fluent talker, without convincing Donna Isabella in the least. But jealousy will hesitate no more than passion does, to gain its end.

"What chance have I?" he asked her finally.

"None, if you go to Don Andres and ask him."

"I am asking you."

"That is different. You say that she reciprocates your feelings?"

"My God! I believe so. Donna Isabella, I can see her eyes now— innocent and pure and wonderful! I said good-by to her at the convent gate. I kissed her hand.

And she stood watching me as I went, with her eyes full of love—My God! Donna Isabella, I would go through fire for Jacqueline! Her eyes haunt me!"

"Consuelo, of course, permitted you to talk with her?"

For a second his eyes met Donna Isabella's in a flash of scrutiny as swift as pistol-fire. The Calverly-Calhouns are born quick on the trigger.

"Aha! Yes. She's diplomatic, Consuelo is. I'm told the nuns read love- letters, and that's not decent—no more decent than it would be for me to employ Consuelo with out your knowledge. I have hopes of Consuelo's stocking, however, if you've no absolute objection! Of course, I give you my word I wouldn't put anything into a letter to Jacqueline that shouldn't pass a reasonable censor—but you know what nuns are."

Donna Isabella smiled—a wee bit mischievously, as old ladies may who are asked to forward love-affairs.

"What do you think Don Andres would say, if he heard I ever contemplated permitting anything of the sort?"

"Who cares what he'd say as long as he doesn't know?" Calhoun answered with one of his contagious laughs. "Come now, Donna Isabella, you were young once, and I'll bet you've been in love! Haven't I been frank with you? Aren't you going to lend a pair of surreptitious wings to Cupid? Jack Calhoun's your worshiper for ever more if you'll help him this once!"

"Don Andres would never forgive me."

"No need. He'll never know."

"Have you brought the letter with you?"

He produced it, and Consuelo, watching through the bedroom window, saw it change hands. Donna Isabella sat still for several minutes, turning it over and over in her fingers. Fascinated—unable to wrench her gaze away —Consuelo saw the library door open, and then close again, as if Don Andres had seen, or overheard, and, after deciding to interrupt, had changed his mind.

Donna Isabella heard the movement of the door, and took the hint. The letter went into her bosom. Jack Calhoun received his congé and was shown out by the footman. Donna Isabella went to the drawing-room, which Andres never visited if he could invent excuse for staying away, and five minutes later the footman came in search of Consuelo. On her way across the patio she passed Don Andres, but he gave her no inkling whether he knew what was going on or not. Nevertheless, the sight of him encouraged her.

Donna Isabella, seated in shadow in the drawing-room, kept Consuelo waiting with the sun in her face for several minutes before she condescended to speak at last.

"What do you mean by permitting Mr. Calverly-Calhoun to speak to Miss Jacqueline on her way to the convent?"

Consuelo did not answer. If she had spoken she would have rebelled; she held her tongue by a miracle.

"You have nothing to say? What do you mean by spying through a bedroom window all the time I was talking to Mr. Calverly-Calhoun?"

Absolute silence. No answer was possible, unless Consuelo chose to deny the fact or to be openly insolent. She would do neither. She merely hung on—clung to her faith in Don Andres and stood there, looking almost as miserable as she felt.

"If Don Andres were not so ill, I would report you to him." Donna Isabella paused between her sentences like an inquisitor selecting new implements of torture. "You have been careless and unfaithful. If Don Andres knew—"

Consuelo bit her lip—on the verge of rebellion—or tears, she hardly knew which.

"—but he must not know, for the present. Now you needn't look sullen at me; I am not going to discharge you."

Another pause—another long keen scrutiny. And then:

"I understand that you promised Mr. Calverly-Calhoun to take a letter to Miss Jacqueline."

No answer, but a little jerkily defiant nod. Donna Isabella had a definite purpose behind the morning's course of cruelty; she was demanding tears as evidence of good faith. Better for Consuelo to break down and have done with it!

"If you were not an old and trusted servant I would deal more harshly with you. Are you not ashamed to have so abused the confidence we have always placed in you?"

Donna Isabella was as near the end of her resources now as Consuelo was. Unless Consuelo were humbled, repentant, ashamed, she could not use her. She was growing really angry, but disguised it with an effort, forcing her voice to seem almost kind.

"I should have thought that after all these years your affection for Miss Jacqueline would have been more faithful."

That did it! It was anger, but it served. Poor Consuelo burst into tears of indignation—rage—contempt—rebellion; flung herself on her knees and buried her face in an armchair. And Donna Isabella, smiling to herself, put her own interpretation on it all.

"There, there now, Consuelo. If you're sorry, I'll forgive you."

Sorry? Consuelo? She bit the chair to keep brimstone Spanish execration in.

"Come, come, Consuelo. If you're sorry it can possibly be mended. Sit up now and listen to me."

Never—not once in fourteen years—had Donna Isabella spoken half so kindly, and it enraged Consuelo all the more, for she was not an animal, to be first beaten and then tamed. But her natural Spanish shrewdness came to her rescue. Donna Isabella must need something and need it badly. So Consuelo went on sobbing.

"Come now, Consuelo. Sit up and stop crying, and we'll see what can be done."

Tears—idle tears—and rapt attention! Hands over ears, but lots of room between Consuelo's fingers to let words filter through!

"The harm's done now. We must make the best of it. Above all, in his present state of health, we must keep any scandal from Don Andres."

Nothing new about that! So another paroxysm of sobs and moans, interpreted by Donna Isabella as signs of panicky fear of her brother. She permitted herself another of her thin rare smiles.

"Come now, listen to me, Consuelo." She need not have worried. Consuelo was all ears. "You have promised to take the letter. We can't break promises, especially when they're made to people of the standing of Mr. Calverly-Calhoun. Besides, if you don't take the letter, I'm afraid he'll grow impetuous and perhaps do something we would all regret."

An old servant is either a consummate actress, or out of work. Consuelo let herself come slowly out of the weeping spell, consenting to sit on a chair at last, but using tears and handkerchief enough to hide her real emotion. So it was as simple as all that! She could have laughed into the handkerchief! Jack Calhoun had seen the key to Jacqueline and seized it —had he? Had he? Did Donna Isabella really think she could hoodwink an old nurse?

"We can't expect a young girl like Jacqueline not to lose her head over her first love-affair, Consuelo. You may take her the letter, but you must talk to her and warn her not to do anything rash."

More handkerchief. So that was it! She was to take a letter to turn a poor innocent's head, and then put thoughts of rashness into the same young head by preaching against it.

"I am agreeing to this, as much as anything to save your face, Consuelo."

The face went into the handkerchief, red and confused.

"I am going to count on you to be extremely circumspect and tactful."

Quite right. Depend on it! Consuelo nodded vehemently over the handkerchief, both hands holding it tightly to her face.

"You must impress on Miss Jacqueline the absolute necessity for keeping all this from Don Andres. He would be furious, and the shock might kill him."

More nods. Consuelo's black chignon bobbed to and fro like the top-knot on a mechanical mandarin.

"You must contrive to manage this without a scandal. Of course, when Don Andres learns that Miss Jacqueline is in love with Mr. Calhoun, he will give his consent, I suppose. I don't see how he can withhold it after all this clandestine business. So distasteful to him, Consuelo. I'm surprised you didn't think of that before you let it go so far. However, now it's too late to remedy that, we must consider Miss Jacqueline, and not break her heart as well as his. My own heart was broken at a very early age, Consuelo. It was the fault of my parents. They interfered, exactly as

Don Andres would be likely to. I could not endure to see Jacqueline's heart broken as mine was, and her whole life blighted."

More tears into the handkerchief; then at last orderly, dutiful, controlled words, cautiously emitted between sobs:

"I will be careful and obedient, Donna Isabella!"

Truthful Consuelo! Careful! She would fight to keep young Calverly- Calhoun away from Jacqueline as she-wolf never fought for cub! Obedient? Watch her! She would take the letter—to the convent! She was jealous of the convent sisters—Yes, she would certainly take the letter.

"When, Donna Isabella?"

"Next week, when Don Andres sends the usual flowers and candy will be time enough."

CHAPTER 5.

"Put not your trust in princes, Jacqueline."

There were hours, especially during the first few days after her return, when it seemed to Jacqueline that in the convent she had Desmio for her very own even more than when she was under his roof and able to see him constantly. For in the convent there was no Donna Isabella to make acrid comments and to interrupt her day-dreams with bitter fault-finding.

From the Sister Superior down to the darky gardener, they all knew Desmio and loved him. He had left his imprint on the place—windows for instance, in the chapel, and the big bronze bell. And he had promised to come to see her, so there was always that to look forward to, which took the drag out of routine.

Not that the life was irksome; far from it. Don Andres being her guardian and sponsor, Jacqueline received no definitely better treatment than the other girls, except that she was one of the few who had a single bedroom; but there was always an indefinite, and very pleasant suggestion that much was expected of her.

There was no loneliness; almost never a moment's solitude. No girls were allowed to wander alone, or even in pairs, among the trees and well shrubbed acres within the wall, there was always a sister in attendance on every group, whose presence grew to seem as natural as did the absence of anything really reprehensible.

No definitely better treatment; but indefinitely—yes. For it was well understood that Jacqueline was destined for high places, and young girls are at least as shrewd as their elders. There was keen competition to make friends with her, with an eye to the future. The flattery might have turned her head, if she had not been reared by a man who understood and scorned ever subterfuge of that stuff. She undoubtedly lorded it a little.

And she was good to see, in the neat blue convent dress, that could not hide a line of her young figure, or a graceful movement. Dancing was a part of the convent regimen, and there were

private lessons by a visiting professional for those whose talent was worth cultivating. At Don Andres' request, Jacqueline had learned old Spanish dances, and since she would rather please him than anything else she could conceive of, she had thrown her heart into it, with the result that she walked as rhythmically as the poets sing; and the rest was sweetness, happiness, health and day-dreams.

For in a convent such as that one, what life may turn out to be after leaving is a dream not quite distinguishable from a pictured heaven. One could make magnificent conjectures, fairy prince or prancing horse included, with the saints to draw from and the stories of the saints to pattern human conduct by.

Jacqueline was not so afraid of Jack Calhoun from within the convent walls. And she did not think of Donna Isabella, lest suggestions of a tail and cloven hoofs should cause embarrassment and lead to irksome penances. The subject of Jack Calhoun leaked out in a recreation hour and rather thrilled her. There were girls who had witnessed the scene in church on Easter Sunday, and of all the rapturously fascinating, irrepressible and newsy themes in a convent, none can hold a candle to a love-affair.

Handsome Jack Calhoun! Young—wealthy, or so reputed—lord of a great plantation, with estates in Cuba, too, good family—horseman—with a reputation for gaiety that had reached young ears well filtered—

"Jacqueline, do tell—what did he say when he gave you the flowers?"

"Jacqueline, dear—does he—does he write to you?"

"Tell us all about it. We're simply crazy to hear!"

But Desmio had taught the art of self-command, and Donna Isabella's jealousy had bitten the teaching home. Jacqueline was not to be surprised into embarrassing admissions. And then Sister Michaela, wanting to know what the talk was all about, approached the group under the trees without seeming to cloak vigilance.

"What is the joke, Jacqueline?"

"I'll tell you if you like."

It was Sister Michaela's business to be told things. Except when she was ringing the convent bell, the chief excuse for her existence was that gift of hers for winning confidence.

She drew Jacqueline aside, and had the whole story of Jack Calhoun in two minutes, asking only three deft questions in a voice that would have coaxed out serpents from the sea, it was so bell-like and sympathetic.

"Have you spoken to him alone?"

"No, Sister Michaela, I don't know why, but he frightens me. I'm not afraid of any of the other men I meet."

"Have you talked about him to any one?"

"Only to Consuelo."

"Does Don Andres know anything of this?"

"No—or I don't think so. Donna Isabella and Consuelo said I mustn't tell him because of his ill-health. I wish I might tell him. Desmio always knows just what to do about everything."

Sister Michaela diagnosed much deeper than the surface, and her words went promptly to the very roots of what she saw:

"Don't take it seriously, Jacqueline. Don't believe too much. Remember this: Other people are not all as tender-hearted, and credulous as you are. They don't always say what they mean or always believe what they pretend to believe. As long as you know your own mind, and are good, you can afford to laugh at any one's unwelcome attentions."

"Consuelo told me to look daggers at him!" laughed Jacqueline.

"You?"

Sister Michaela smiled, and Jacqueline's frown appeared. She rather resented the suggestion that she could not look ferocious if she tried. From under her white bandeau,* Sister Michaela watched the frown as if it were plain writing by a moving finger in a language that she understood.

"Put not your trust in princes, Jacqueline," she said at last. "Some of them are frauds, and some are weak. Always trust your own intuition. That's the Blessed Virgin's voice that warns you."

Good advice, but not quite comforting. There was something ominous about it, as if Sister Michaela had foreseen dark events. She went off to toll the bell, leaving Jacqueline feeling rather depressed; but perhaps that was intended, since advice that leaves no sting is all the easier forgotten.

"Does she mean Desmio is the prince I should not trust?" Jacqueline wondered, and the frown vanished, as she threw that thought away, dismissed it, scorned it too utterly to waste displeasure on it. But she remembered Sister Michaela's words, and pondered them all through the French lesson, so that she had to be reprimanded for inattention; and if it had not been that a dancing lesson followed that she might have pondered them all day. But there was nothing ponderous or ominous about dancing, and it banished every consideration except high spirits and an appetite. When Sister Michaela tolled the bell for dinner there was nothing in Jacqueline's mood but laughter and a yearning for beef and vegetables; the future, insofar as it existed in her thoughts, was foreshortened to one day ahead, when she would have been back a week and Desmio would probably drive over in the limousine with his usual offering of candy for herself and flowers for the chapel altar.

Desmio! What on earth did she care for princes, as long as he came once a week! But the next day it was Consuelo, and not Desmio, who came. Consuelo was ushered into the great quiet drawing-room, where all guests were received, and was kept waiting there until she could interview the Sister Superior before Jacqueline was sent for. The request in itself was surprising, for Consuelo was well known at the convent and usually Jacqueline was brought straight to her and allowed to talk with her alone for half an hour. Consuelo strutted down the corridor fuming,

bobbed her curtsey at the threshold, collapsed into becoming humility, was smiled at and addressed by name, bobbed her curtsey again and laid a sealed envelope on the desk.

"A letter for Miss Jacqueline, please."

A sweet wise smile by way of answer—a little nod of acknowledgment and a glance at the address on the envelope. Nothing incorrect, or even unusual. Letters intended for young ladies in the convent never reach them until after they have been opened and read, but Consuelo might have handed it to any of the sisters; nevertheless, it was very right and proper of Consuelo to take such full precaution. Anything else? Certainly she might see Miss Jacqueline. Another smile from under a snow-white bandeau; then the face disappeared as the head bent forward, and a hand such as Tintoretto painted went on writing, writing with a golden pen. Consuelo bobbed her way out backward, all the steam gone out of her.

Then Jacqueline in the drawing-room in the plain blue dress that Consuelo hated, and with her hair mismanaged scandalously, and Consuelo unaccountably wet-eyed, which led, of course, to instant urgent questions about Desmio. But Desmio had sent kind messages, along with the flowers and a veritable load of chocolates, and was feeling so much better that he hoped to be able to come neat week.

"Then why are you crying, Consuelo?"

"Honey, dear, I don't know—I've done my best for you, that's all. Oh, honey, and you so innocent! And them so bent on—Listen, be still a while and listen!"

Consuelo looked up through the tears at Jacqueline, who was standing beside her with her arm on the chair-back, wondering. The young heart was beating almost as violently as the old one. Every imaginable fear was in the air—the worse—the most unspeakable—that Consuelo might have fallen foul at last of Donna Isabella and have been dismissed.

"Conchita, don't admit a thing! Don't let them trick you into a confession that you've given that Calhoun boy as much as a glimpse of a smile!"

"But I have smiled, Consuelo."

"Don't admit it! There's a trap laid, child. They're going to catch you in it, if you're not careful, and marry you off to that jackanapes—and they'll make Don Andres agree to it by pretending to him that you've been giving Calhoun encouragement on the sly."

"But I haven't, Consuelo. You know that."

"Lord knows I know it, honey."

"Who are 'they,' Consuelo?"

"Him and her—the jackanapes and Donna Isabella."

"How I do wish Desmio knew!"

"He does, honey. I told him."

Instant electric change in the whole world atmosphere, and Jacqueline herself again! She laughed aloud—kissed Consuelo—petted her—had Consuelo smiling in a minute—praised her—danced, to the scandal of the image of Saint Pierre in the niche above the mantelpiece—(or perhaps he was a saint who knew a good thing when he saw it, for there are such)—made such a merry noise of steps and laughter that Sister Helena came in to discover what on earth was happening, and laughed too.

"Showing her the new dance, Jacqueline? Do you think you ought to do that in here, dear? Things should be kept in their proper places."

"Isn't everywhere a proper place to dance when you feel happy?" Jacqueline answered. She would have danced with Sister Helena and devil take the consequences, if that had not been a place where they understand the management of buoyant young humans. Sister Helena forestalled indignity by meeting Jacqueline midway and, with an arm on her shoulder, switched attention firmly on Consuelo.

"How nice that she should be so glad to see you. You must come again."

Which was hint sufficient. Under Donna Isabella's regime one learned to read hints swiftly, and Consuelo hurried her departure as if she were almost guilty of sacrilege in having stayed so long. Jacqueline was led back to the study hall, both arms full of chocolate, and turned loose to distribute them. She was kept back that day after the lesson and was made to do six sums on the blackboard; but not even that subdued her thoroughly, and her eyes were full of laughter even when she was summoned to the Sister Superior's office before supper.

But you could feel subdued in the Sister Superior's presence. You could not feel otherwise. It needed no sense of guilt—no evil conscience to make you stand silent before the desk and wait until the veined patrician hand laid down the golden pen, the bandeau was slowly raised, and the face framed in white looked at you searchingly.

"How many letters, since you have been in the convent, have you received from Mr. Calverly-Calhoun, Jacqueline?"

"None, Sister Theresa."

The answer was prompt, and qualified by nothing except surprise. Jacqueline's frown appeared, aggravatingly mischievous, but the Sister Superior was not to be easily deceived by surface indications.

"Are you quite sure, Jacqueline?"

"Quite sure, Sister."

"A letter has come addressed to you from Mr. Calverly-Calhoun, and I have been told that he saw you to the convent gate on your return from the Easter Congé. Does Don Andres know of his attentions to you?"

"Yes, Sister."

That answer was triumphant—not a doubt of it.

"Does he approve?"

"I—I don't know—I haven't spoken to him."

The frown again, followed by the first shade of doubt in the Sister Superior's eyes.

"You were always such a good girl, Jacqueline. We have been so proud of you."

Silence—the frown dancing on her forehead, making pretense of all the comical emotions which Jacqueline did not feel.

"In his letter, Mr. Calhoun mentions previous notes that he has written to you."

Jacqueline shook her head.

"Have you received none? You are sure?"

Again the head-shake.

"None at home during the Congé?"

"None at any time, Sister."

Long silence. Eyes, hidden by the white bandeau, studying something which a book on the desk concealed from Jacqueline.

"Then why should Mr. Calverly-Calhoun distinctly assert that he has written to you repeatedly, and upbraid you for not answering?"

Rebellion—high chin and flashing eyes—Jacqueline at her very loveliest, indignant.

"I don't know, Sister Theresa. I know nothing of his letters, I don't know why he should write or pretend to have written."

Triumph again—a short, angry little nod. Desmio knew, and that settled it.

"How do you account for it that Mr. Calverly-Calhoun should write you a letter couched in most ardent terms, and make pointed reference to previous letters, if you have given him no encouragement, Jacqueline?"

"May I see the letter, Sister?"

"No. I will send it to Don Andres."

"No—no! Oh, please don't. Desmio is ill and a shock might—"

The last word froze on frightened lips. She could not force herself to speak of the horror of Desmio's possible death on her account. But fear is all too easily misinterpreted, and those little furrows over her eyes suggested panic without explaining it.

"You should have thought of that before you let yourself be led into this. Now go to your own room, Jacqueline, and search your heart and consider whether you have told me the whole truth."

Fiat lex!* There was no appeal from the Sister Superior's decision, nor any argument permitted once the order had gone forth. Jacqueline went to her room. The Sister Superior sat reconsidering a letter in a man's handwriting —almost able to discern the handsome, impetuous, bold graceless features of the man who wrote, in the sentences that all began carefully and all ended in a hurry, in disorder, with a dash in place of full stop.

Dearest, most delightful Jacqueline!

You know you are mine—you know it! Why be cruel to me? Why first encourage me with those smiles that set my heart on fire, and then treat me coldly?—Again and again I have written to you—am I never to receive an answer?

Are you afraid of me? Then why? Would I not rather die than do you injury or see you harmed? Jacqueline! Love such as mine can not be refused! It is all- conquering! You are mine—you are mine—for I love you!

Loveliest torturer! Be generous! Unwelcome business drags me away to Cuba, where I must attend to my estates—estates that you shall some day turn into heaven for me. Must I eat my heart out all these miles away, wondering what your silence means? Jacqueline, I must go in two days. Write to me! Or at the least send me word by Consuelo that I may hope—that you are not cold toward me—that, if only a little, you reciprocate my love!

Forever and forever yours with all my heart,

Jack Calverly-Calhoun.

The Sister Superior returned the letter to its envelope and placed that into a larger one along with a two-page letter in her own fine Italian hand addressed to Don Andres. Five minutes later the sister on duty carried it out and locked it into the mail bag with the rest—a hundred or more letters (all censored) to a hundred homes, and a score or so of business communications, all looking just as harmless on the outside.

And in her room up two flights of polished stairs Jacqueline lay on her bed torn between triumph, indignation and anxiety. Search her heart? She had nothing to search it for! She did not know whether the letter from Jack Calhoun had come through the post or whether Consuelo had brought it, but she suspected Consuelo naturally—else why the tears? Was that what Consuelo meant by saying she had done her best? It was rather bewildering. She felt confused, and inclined to cry, the whole thing was so underhanded and contemptible.

But emotions came in waves, and presently were mixed in a maelstrom of perplexity. Why had the Sister Superior doubted her? What did she mean by suspecting her of not having told the whole truth? Excepting only Donna Isabella, nobody before in all her life had dared so much as to hint she was a liar. The thought made her furious. It made her even more furious that a shock of any kind should come to Desmio through her.

She did not doubt Desmio loved her more than anything else in the world, since he had said so more than once, and he never said what was not absolutely true. It was cruel—unjust—wicked! How dared Jack Calhoun insert himself into her life?

What did that Jack Calhoun mean by daring to say she had received other letters from him? What did he intend by it? He must have known the letter would be intercepted. Not even Consuelo would have dared to bring her a letter without the Mother Superior's knowledge. Was it a trick then? Was that what Consuelo meant by saying a trap was laid for her?

Then came the thought of running away. If the Sister Superior thought her a liar, she would not stay under the roof another minute! She would escape—run all the way on foot back home to Desmio. She would make sheets into a rope, the way they did in story-books, and let herself down from the window and run—perhaps not go straight to Desmio, but hide somewhere and send for him. But she knew all the while she could never escape from the convent, however hard she might try. The impossibility of escaping made her feel angrier than ever.

Sleep. Even an ocean wearies in the end. Calm follows a typhoon. Deep dreamless sleep from which—all powers be praised!—no misery can keep any of us too long.

So—bringing supper on a tray—Sister Michaela found her with one arm under head, her hair disheveled, and her body looking as if waves had tossed it on the beach of time. Even with the electric light turned on, she did not wake for several minutes, and Sister Michaela stood watching her, telling beads by habit rather than intention. She had reached the thirteenth bead before Jacqueline awoke.

"Are you feeling better, Jacqueline?"

She sat up, recognized a friend and answered—as Sister Michaela noted—without the least trace of a desire to hide her thoughts.

"I don't know, I'm all different, I feel as if something had happened. It's—"

A long pause, only broken by the regularly measured click-click-click of beads, like the sound of water dripping.

"Sister Michaela—what did you mean by telling me not to put my trust in princes?"

"You'll find out. Only remember, dear. And don't forget the rest of it—always to trust your intuition. That is the Voice within. Now eat your supper, and I'll come for the tray by and by."

Sister Michaela went straight to the Sister Superior and talked to her without emphasis, but with assurance.

"She is perfectly innocent. But she's romantic, and she has a capacity for building mountains out of molehills. Her geese are all swans. She will magnify evil in the same way unless taught not to."

"Even the best ones sometimes have to learn that in a hard school," said the Sister Superior, nodding comprehension.

CHAPTER 6.

"Poison—brewed in mine own house!"

Don Andres Miro, inheritor of self-command as well as too much pride, never cared to show his hand until he judged the proper moment had arrived. The drawers of his desk, and the safe in the closet, were always locked. He kept his own keys and counsel.

So Donna Isabella did not even know that a letter came from the Mother Superior, although she carried in the mail-bag and sat down facing her brother. She had had no further word with Consuelo about Jack Calhoun's love letter, being minded to let the nurse bear the full weight of responsibility in case of accident. The Sister Superior would certainly write to Don Andres. Donna Isabella was determined to be on hand and informed of that move of events in order to snatch the advantage and tell her own version of Jacqueline's intrigue with Jack Calhoun at the moment when it would have most weight.

"I am expecting one or two important letters, Andres. Won't you please open the bag?"

His eyes met hers incuriously. His voice was exactly as usual.

"Important letters? Certainly, Isabella. I will send them to you as usual in the drawing-room."

"They are letters I don't wish the servants to see. Open the bag and give them to me, Andres."

But he did not yield an inch of ground, or fail of a moment's courtesy.

"In that case I will bring them to you with my own hand, Isabella."

She mastered her exasperation and contrived to smile. "Why trouble, Andres? With your heart so weak you should spare yourself. Give me the letters now."

"When my health is too far gone to permit me to cross the patio it will be time for me to change all my old habits," he answered suavely. "For the present I am aware that habits cling to me."

"God aids him who changes!" she retorted, quoting the old Spanish proverb. Then she rose and left the room with all the air of indifference she could master—which was rather less than she could wish. Don Andres' eyes smiled as the door shut with a snap behind her, and he inserted the key in the mail-bag lock.

The Sister Superior's letter emerged first. He sat turning it over and over without opening it. He scented danger—nodded—put the letter in his pocket and began to sort over the rest of the contents of the bag. Two minutes later he crossed the patio and opened the drawing-room door.

"No letters for you, Isabella."

She felt obliged to look surprised, and he looked sorry to have brought her disappointing news, but that was all. She decided she had hoped too soon. The next day's mail, or the next, would bring it.

But Don Andres returned to the library and sat for a whole hour reading and rereading—first the Sister Superior's fine script—and then the bold impulsive hand of Jack Calhoun, that began its sentences so downrightly and ended them in a scrawl and a dash toward the next.

It hurt. For a while his face grew ashen-gray as the weakening heart- valves failed under the mental pressure. He leaned his head back on the chair.

Slowly at first, and then with a wave of energy, Don Andres seemed almost to renew his youth. His face grew hard—the mask was off. He returned the letters to his pocket. No need to read them again, for he had them by heart and could see them, paragraph by paragraph, as if projected on a screen before his eyes.

"—a good girl, and always truthful. What I do not understand is the young man's reference to previous letters, which he complains of her not answering. She denies all knowledge of them."

"No 'and' about it! Jacqueline denies. That ends the argument."

He knew who the enemy was, although characteristically even then he named no names—not even to himself unheard and unseen in a room regarded as his sanctuary. He rose, surprised at his own weakness and, summoning physical strength by an effort of will, walked over to the door and locked it. Then he sat down again to review the situation in all its bearings.

"Poison," he muttered to himself. "A pen dipped in poison brewed in mine own house!"

He recalled Consuelo's impassioned outburst, word by word, and the orders he had given her.

"Good, faithful woman!" he said, nodding. "She shall be trusted further."

He smiled as he recalled his sister's anxiety about the mail-bag— naming no names—merely smiling. He understood that some one was in league with young Calhoun. Sufficient that he understood it.

Jack Calhoun. Forbid him the house? Perhaps, after all, not necessary. Cuba. Very fortunate for all concerned, including Jack Calhoun, whose absence would preserve him from indignity. There were rumors of financial trouble in connection with that Cuban plantation; and he rather thought, Don Andres did, that before Mr. Jack Calhoun could return from Cuba circumstances would have changed surprisingly—whereafter he at least hoped Jack Calhoun would know enough to keep his hands off.

"There is no other way—at any rate no better way," he muttered.

It annoyed him that he had been so long in making up his mind, but he knew that it was only his anxiety on Jacqueline's account that had made him over-cautious. Now he threw, not caution, but procrastination to the winds. He went first of all to the desk and answered the Sister Superior's letter, lest Jacqueline should suffer an unnecessary moment's anguish.

"—grateful to you for your vigilance, and, if that were possible, more sure than ever of your judgment since you confirm my own conviction that she is always truthful.

"For the rest, I will immediately take steps to prevent a recurrence of such unsolicited attentions to Jacqueline and their consequent annoyance to yourself. I will write to you again, in confidence, about this at the proper time.

"May I suggest to you, meanwhile, if that may be done without presumption, that nothing would be lost by permitting Jacqueline to forget the incident, since I can well believe she has already suffered as much as if she were really guilty of grave indiscretion. I feel quite sure of her innocence.

"With renewed expression of my confidence—"

When he had sealed that letter he wrote a telegram—short, definite and urgent—then rang the bell and unlocked the door.

"Send Consuelo!"

No suggestion of conspiracy—no hint to Consuelo of a secret held between them—not a question concerning how or when that letter from Jack Calhoun had reached the convent.

"Take the limousine, Consuelo, and deliver this letter into the Sister Superior's hand. On your way send this telegram."

She understood. Her eyes shone. Don Andres already knew then—knew her part in it—and she was being trusted!

But she had to cross the patio to reach the servants' quarters and give orders for the limousine; and as the Holy Virgin was her witness, she was not invisible! She could not make herself unseen by Donna Isabella, although she would have sunk into the ground for choice.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Consuelo? What did Don Andres want with you?"

Well—Mother of God have pity on her!—she had lied a hundred times to save Miss Jacqueline, and had always done the penances imposed by Father Doutreleau, exacting though he was! She could lie again—and pay for it again—

"To the drug-store, Donna Isabella."

"Why?"

"For medicine."

"Where is the prescriptions"

It is loyalty that is the mother of invention.

"Doctor Beal promised he would leave it at the drugstore."

"Why didn't you tell Don Andres that I have given you other tasks? Go about your own business, I will send one of the footmen."

But a library window overlooked the patio, and Don Andres appeared in the doorway to the rescue, saying nothing, merely observant, shutting the door with a slam behind him to call attention to himself.

"Andres, why do you send Consuelo on an errand! She's forever finding some excuse for laziness. I'll send one of the footmen for your medicine."

"The footmen have bad memories," he answered.

"Nonsense! Write it down for him."

"I have—given—Consuelo—my instructions— Isabella!"

Brother and sister faced each other, and Consuelo fled; it was none of her business to witness a family quarrel. Don Andres smiled faintly as he watched her go, assured that he was right, she could be trusted.

"Your illness is no excuse, Andres, for putting me to gross indignity before a servant!"

"No," he said, "no illness could excuse that, could it!"

From her window, fifteen minutes later, she could see the limousine away in the distance, driving in the opposite direction to the village where the drug-store was that Andres usually patronized. It was headed straight for the convent.

So! That settled that! The news was out, and Consuelo must have turned the trick against her! What an idiot she had been to trust that woman—to endure her in the house!

It was too much already to have had to endure Jacqueline. Perhaps Andres thought that by insisting on keeping Jacqueline he could irritate her into leaving his roof and taking up quarters elsewhere. If so, he fooled himself! She had her rights—the legal right, not only to an income out of the estate, but to reside in the Miro mansion. No more than any Miro would she ever relinquish one privilege!

Well—so it was war, was it, between Andres and herself? She might as well look the fact in the face.

The bone of contention was Jacqueline. The only ally whom she could think of for the moment was Jack Calhoun. What had the young fool gone to Cuba for? Why couldn't he have waited?

Andres knew now about Calhoun's attentions to Jacqueline; that much was obvious. Give him enough scandal, and he would force Jacqueline into a marriage with Jack Calhoun or any other man!

Why in the name of ninety saints had the young fool gone away to Cuba?

Well—he could come back, couldn't he? He looked impetuous enough for anything!

Donna Isabella sat down at her escritoire and wrote to Jack Calhoun one of those guarded communications that stir the recipient's imagination by suggestion of what they leave unsaid.

"—Don Andres Miro has heard of your attentions to Miss Lanier and is taking steps to prevent a recurrence.

"I am quite ignorant of his plans. He has not consulted me. I have no actual proof that he has in mind some other individual of his own choosing, who perhaps he thinks will make a better husband for Miss Lanier—"

Donna Isabella smiled over that sentence. If anything could bring Jack Calhoun hurrying back from Cuba, that would. She sealed up the letter and took exquisite delight in dropping it into the mail-bag in her brother's presence and watching him turn the key, insuring trouble for himself. It made her sunny-tempered for an hour.

However, at the end of the hour she was on the horns of anxiety again; for it was she in person who received over the telephone a telegram from New Orleans. Curtis Radcliffe would arrive in time for dinner.

What was Andres up to now? Curtis Radcliffe had the reputation of being the cleverest lawyer in Louisiana, and that was synonymous in Donna Isabella's mind with treachery and underhanded cunning.

Andres might be thinking of changing his will, but he would hardly send for such an expensive man as Radcliffe in a hurry about that, because the estates and investments were practically all included in the Miro trust deed, and there was not a great deal else that Andres had to bequeath. Was he proposing to try to change the trust deed? Then she need not worry! He had tried that once before. Radcliffe had advised him it would need his sister's signature as well as that of the cousin who manufactured gum shoes. Andres would be too proud even to approach the gum shoe-maker, and as for herself, wild horses should not make her sign anything!

Summoning all her self-control she went to the library and announced the telegram.

"Curtis Radcliffe is on his way."

"I supposed so. I have just written notes to Doutreleau and Beal, inviting them to dinner too, to meet him."

"Really, Andres! Do you call that fair to me? How can I arrange a dinner for three guests at a moment's notice? Couldn't you have spoken sooner?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not like to speak before I have decided, Isabella."

How could anybody be affectionate to such a man! It was all she could do to avoid precipitating an open quarrel—more than she could do to retire without firing a Parthian shot.*

"I'm evidently nothing more than your housekeeper!"

"Not evidently, Isabella!"

Now what in the name of all the martyrs did he mean by that? Something sly undoubtedly. She slammed the door, and made up her mind that the dinner-party should not go down in the Miro annals as a joy to be recalled and lingered over.

Nevertheless, not even her sardonic humor spoiled the feast, for Andres was at his best and gave his own instructions to the butler about wine. And Curtis Radcliffe was a man whose conversation flourished on Chateau Margeaux '84—who knew good jokes about the priesthood that made François Doutreleau chuckle and hold his sides—who was far too discerning to annoy Beal with equally good digs at the doctors—and whose stories about lawyers were as merciless as they were funny.

"You appear to glory in the baseness of your own profession!" snorted Donna Isabella.

"As the good sun glories in the darkness it dispels!" said Doutreleau.

"As courtesy delights in opportunity—or a surgeon likes—what is it that a surgeon aspires to, Beal?" asked Andres.

"Partnership, with Radcliffe and myself!" said Doutreleau. Beal never had an answer ready.

It was an old-fashioned house, with the old time-honored ways unchanged. The men sat over the nuts and wine when the hostess had withdrawn, and Donna Isabella wandered about the patio moodily, listening to laughter that annoyed her all the more because she knew it masked seriousness. They would not talk business in the dining room, she knew that; Andres was a man who did everything at the appointed time and in the proper place. Whatever secret scheme had brought these four together would be discussed in the library and probably behind a locked door.

But the night was warm, and three of the library windows faced the lawn. Donna Isabella had a perfect right to enjoy the flowers and the moonlight shimmering on undulating landscape—perfect right to summon a footman and have a chair set for herself beneath an open window. She had a perfect right to sit still and nearly choke herself with a handkerchief trying to suppress a cough (for the night was a trifle chilly after all) when she heard the four men enter the library and felt, rather than saw the lights turned on.

She could hear Radcliffe making the circuit of the bookshelves. Doutreleau, she knew was already in an armchair. She heard Beal clear his throat, and heard his chair creak as he turned it toward Andres. Then her brother's calm voice; she could imagine him, with his back to the fireplace, smiling;

"Now, Beal, out with it! How long am I likely to live?"

Ten thousand devils take the man! Beal never answered promptly—hummed and ha-a-ed like a nincompoop, as if afraid of his own voice. And Donna Isabella—whether she was startled or felt chilled because she had not brought her shawl—coughed, and smothered a second cough into a handkerchief.

A moment later she heard Andres stride to the window. He closed it and pulled the shade down without deigning to glance out to see who might be sitting underneath it. He could guess too easily—preferred too magnificently not to know.

CHAPTER 7.

"Some one's going to suffer, Sherry Mansfield, but I'll make it!"

Affairs in Cuba might be—usually are—and were, in point of fact, precarious. Not even a Calverly-Calhoun may mortgage an estate however rich, pay ten percent interest, endure one hurricane, one drought, and one year's blight, entrust the management of the estate to an alien—and not face consequences. However, one can sometimes postpone settlement, especially if one happens to be twenty-seven, with a letter in one's pocket that has stirred the very lees of urgency and therewith, too, the poison of inborn recklessness.

So bankers in Havana locked new notes away, and Jack Calhoun paced the deck of a New Orleans-bound steamer, wishing whip and spurs might take the place of coal. It was a slow boat—just his luck!—crawling along with the hose on a hot main-bearing and a screen of seaweed like a petticoat. But the smoking-room was good enough—capable steward and plenty to drink—with a scattering of passengers less impatient than himself, whose conversation served at intervals to help pass time.

Clinton Wahl, for instance, special correspondent of the New Orleans Star, on his way back from covering political events in Cuba; quite a personage in a way, and not unconscious of it, but not so bad to talk to, if only he would not think in head-lines and pretend to see ambitious motive at the back of every event. A cad, of course, but amusing.

And young Sherwood Mansfield, not a cad by any means, but son of the owner of the San Francisco Tribune, and likely to inherit millions—meanwhile, worshipful of Clinton Wahl because a star reporter looks like Betelgeuse to a newspaper man whose career is yet to make.

It was rather good fun to watch the by-play between those two—Wahl obviously cultivating the friendship of the younger man for opportunist reasons, and Sherry Mansfield thrilled by intimacy with some one who signed his own special articles, and whose photograph appeared at the head of every syndicated column that he wrote. Between spells of furious deck-pacing Jack Calhoun struck up acquaintance with the pair.

There were those, especially later on, and Clinton Wahl among them, who assessed young Jack Calhoun as a mere profligate who never took thought and who always acted on the impulse of the moment. But that is the point of view induced by ribbon headlines. There were wheels within wheels—phases—moods—alternating passions—shrewdness beside impulse—swift discernment in addition to overbearing recklessness—and an element of kindness and good humor in his composition. He would not have been a Calverly-Calhoun if he had not had wit, and an instinct for making himself agreeable.

When Clinton Wahl grew weary of Sherry Mansfield's hero-worship and took a turn on deck, Jack Calhoun, vastly and intuitively preferring the younger man, entered the smoking-room and took a seat beside him. Mansfield was a companionable young chap, sturdy, frank and full of enthusiasm, with earnest gray eyes that could light up when he laughed; and his laugh was contagious.

He had puzzled Jack Calhoun, who had the notorious Calhoun gift for appraising people swiftly, and who only did not profit by it (as all his forebears had done) because he was too lazy. They sat at the same dining table, and he had found Sherry Mansfield even more interesting than the three girls opposite, who obviously preferred young Mansfield to himself—an unusual enough experience in Jack Calhoun's life to intrigue him thoroughly. There was a peculiar, half-wistful, wholly determined look about Sherry Mansfield's mouth that increased his attractiveness. When he was not smiling he looked as if his own courage and his own good timber had enabled him to survive it, without obliterating the memory.

Young Sherwood Mansfield liked to talk to men—with any man; but froze in the presence of women, not apparently nervous, but stone-cold suddenly, and colder yet as they made advances to him. Habitual lady-killer, Jack Calhoun drew exquisite amusement from the drama, thrice daily at meals, as those three young women opposite them at table tried to make themselves agreeable to Sherry Mansfield, and invariably were out their pains. He himself for excellent reasons was on his best behavior that voyage, indulging in no flirtations, minded for this once to lay a pure, if overbold heart at the feet of his adored; but he was deadly curious to know why this handsome young chap, with money, and so much life in him, should set him such a marvelous example.

Sherwood Mansfield did not look, nor talk, like a man in love. There is intuitive freemasonry between men whose hearts are aflame with that divine passion, and Mansfield was the one on the boat with whom Jack Calhoun would have deigned to discuss his own idolatry, as one equal to another. But the few hints he had let drop fell on barren ground; Sherry Mansfield simply avoided the usually, all-absorbing subject of women and their lure, frowning slightly on occasion, but more often seeming to fall vaguely on guard—then smiling the moment the subject was changed.

There was not another subject in the world that he was not apparently willing to talk about, and with intelligence. Because of his keenness to tread in his father's footsteps, world news was at his finger-tips, and he took the same sort of delight in it that some fellows take in baseball scores. Sooner or later, whatever the subject, he worked it round to the newspaper angle, and it was then that almost all his wistfulness vanished, his smile was most contagious, and his eyes shone brightest.

"Don't you think Clinton Wahl's a wonder?" he asked Calhoun.

"Wonders never cease," Jack answered, "but they vary, suh. I should say he has brains of a sort, but they're no good without breeding. He'd have been a professional gambler or a fake-stock salesman if he hadn't struck his gait at journalism."

"Wahl's no journalist!" Sherry snorted. "He's a newspaper man."

"Profound apology! But what's the difference, may I ask?"

Sherry ignored the question. One does not talk of one's religion to outsiders.

"As for gambling—Wahl did more than any one to expose the Cuban lotteries and the New Orleans policy ring. Didn't you read of it?"

"Can't say I did. How's your dad these days? I suppose he owns San Francisco?"

"Well, hardly! But he's made the Tribune the biggest thing in the West. It's all the life he cares for, and he lives it—doesn't even play golf."

Wahl came sauntering in again and sat down with his arms on the table facing the other two. Calhoun knew that look in the cavernous eyes and race-track mouth. Young men of wealth soon learn to recognize it, or they cease from being rich. Studying the thin nose and the movement of the long lean neck, Calhoun knew exactly how far he would trust him.

"There's a woman in a deck-chair near the bulletin board," Wahl said, smiling at Sherry. "I saw her in Santiago once or twice, but hadn't time to get to know her. If you asked me—there's a yen in her eye, and she's lonely. If I were as young and good-looking as you are—"

"Oh, to hell with her!" said Sherry Mansfield, and Jack Calhoun noticed the return of the peculiar wistful look that was so intriguing.

"To hell with her certainly, by all means," he agreed politely. Then, hazarding a shrewd guess: "but what's wrong with the sex?"

Sherry Mansfield frowned and rose from his seat.

"I think I'll take the air a while," he announced; and at the thought of fresh air the momentary ill-humor left him. He was whistling by the time he reached the door.

"Likable youngster," said Wahl, "and the women seem crazy about him, but he'll go far, for he mistrusts 'em!"

Jack ordered drinks. "Old story, I suppose," he answered. "I remember at his age I mistrusted the whole sex for a week, or maybe nine days. It was after the wife of a man in Key West turned virtuous and went back to her husband."

"Ungrateful female!" Wahl commented; and Jack Calhoun bridled a bit; he instinctively resented having Wahl in agreement with him on any point. However, it does not much matter with whom you talk on board ship; and just at that moment the steward brought the drinks.

"I never knew a grateful woman," Wahl went on, "unless it's true that gratitude is a foretaste of ambition. In that case, yes. If not, no. It's the scheming sex."

"It's the delightful sex," said Jack Calhoun. "I drink to them."

"It's the criminal sex," Wahl continued, warming up to what might be his favorite subject. "If you'd been on newspapers as long as I have you'd agree that nine-tenths of the crime in the world, and nearly all the trouble is due to women. They've a natural flair for posing as virtuous—"

"The Lord made 'em female and marvelous lovely!" Jack interrupted.

"—and there's a fixed tradition that they're incapable of evil motive or the brutal passions. But watch 'em at a prize fight!" Wahl went on. "Watch 'em at a gambling resort! Above all, I've learned to watch 'em when I'm on a story! *Cherchez la femme** is good scripture. If it's theft, arson, crooked politics, or murder, you may safely bet your last coin there's a woman at the

bottom of it, deliberately responsible and secretly pleased —usually a young woman, with a face like a Madonna's and a mouth that butter wouldn't melt in."

"I call that disgustin' cynicism," Jack remarked. "I should say you get devilish small fun out of life."

"Oh, I don't know," Wahl answered. "I've had my share of fun. They don't spare us; why should we spare them? The thing to do is to keep awake and not let a woman put one over on you. I remember—"

But Jack Calhoun lit a cigar and got up yawning. It did not amuse him to hear of the amours of a person like Wahl, and he went out to pace the deck with Sherry.

For a while as they strode side by side around the deck they talked at random, and Sherry spoke so eagerly of New Orleans and the probable hour of arrival that Jack Calhoun suspected more than ever that there was a love-affair not running smoothly. He worked the conversation round to women by remarking that the Creoles of New Orleans are earth's loveliest daughters; and when the wistful expression returned instantly to Sherry's face Jack felt sure he had uncovered the secret.

"When the fair sex is adamant, or damned elusive," he remarked with a far-away reminiscent air, "the key to love's young dream consists in gettin' your heart's darlin' into difficulties, and then helpin' her out. They've a genius for sufferin' over trifles. The ones most worth lovin' furiously are the easiest to scare. I'm head over heels in love myself with a perfect little angel in a convent—and they're like jails, y'know, those places. It's easier to get money out of a banker than to get your adored out of a convent. I'm hopin' mine'll get fired out. I've cooked up a scheme, to make the pope or somebody believe she's been gettin' letters from me on the sly. That ought to work it. Once you've saved your adored from a predicament you're Romeo in her eyes—and a worshipful fair woman, suh, is a brighter jewel in a gentleman's eye than art, or religion, or even patriotism! You'll excuse me if I speak with feeling. I'm in love myself."

But Sherry Mansfield astonished by not excusing him. He was hardly polite. He looked offended, as if Jack Calhoun had touched on some secret that he had no right to probe—something that hurt him almost physically. The pained look brought the cruelty in Jack Calhoun to the surface; sympathy vanished; and as Sherry Mansfield turned back into the smoking-room Jack resumed his walk alone with a smile of satisfied amusement.

"A soft streak in him somewhere," he reflected. Only lovely women, in his theory of life, were entitled to that form of weakness.

But Sherwood Mansfield's discontent had its roots in the past, not the present; he was thinking in terms of the future, and smiling, when he entered the smoking-room and sat down beside Wahl. Possible desire to cover up whatever it might be that tortured him, made him seize with all the greater energy on any subject that held optimism. And Wahl was a man who had done things, not a spendthrift like Calhoun. He glanced at Wahl with diffidence, and began to speak to him, as, not so long ago, he would have confided in the captain of the college team—manly, and sure enough of what he had to say, but deferent.

"You've spoken once or twice of news and head-lines. I think your flair for news is marvelous. I wonder if you'd think it cheek on my part to suggest that you're simply wasted on the New Orleans Star? None of my business, of course, but—"

"Don't apologize. I'm interested."

That was no exaggeration. Wahl's eyes glittered. "My dad's always hunting for brains. He hopes I'll step into his shoes some day, and, of course, so do I, but that's a long way off. It occurred to me that if I should wire him something to the effect that you'd consider an offer—"

"There's a wireless operator on this boat," said Wahl.

"—he'd appreciate my having kept the Tribune's interests in mind; and, of course, he's keen to see how I shape up. It wouldn't hurt me with him if he knew I'd picked a winner so early in the game—if you don't mind my picking you; that is. And of course, I can't promise anything. Dad owns the Tribune, and he manages it; there isn't any one on earth who can dictate to him."

"That's what makes the Tribune good," said Wahl. "It won't hurt to send your dad a wire. You're not going back to Frisco then?"

"Not yet. Dad wired me to stay over in New Orleans and cover the flood stuff if it happens. He's always trying to put a big chance my way."

His eyes were alight with enthusiasm as he spoke of that; but Wahl smiled with cynical amusement.

"You won't call flood stuff a big chance when you're my age. You can sit at your desk and write up all the floods from Noah's to next year's. Nothing to it—unless you can tie the blame to some one, or get the goods on Shem with Ham's wife. The crowd'll read flood headlines if they're peppy, and then turn to the divorce news and the story of a soubrette blinding another woman's lover with carbolic acid. However, I suppose your dad figures you're passing through and you'd better cover it on the off-chance. Take my tip and don't get too enthusiastic. Stories of broken levees and drowned cattle —lists of dead and missing—estimates of damage—cost as much over the wires as a magnate's passion for a chorus girl, and believe me, there's nothing to it when it comes to which sells papers. Feed the public what it wants, and it'll feed you. That's religion. Suppose we draft a wire to Mansfield senior. I'd rather be on the Tribune than on all the other papers put together."

Mansfield produced a pencil and began to write the telegram, but it was Clinton Wahl who shaped it, deftly suggesting phases, head-line fashion, and although Sherry was hardly aware of it, the telegram was almost wholly Wahl's when it was finished and the final draft approved. Wahl took it to the operator, smiling to himself. This was opportunity, and it knocks at a man's door only once!

But Wahl knew too much to depend altogether on young Sherry Mansfield's influence with his father; men of the type who can build a San Francisco Tribune out of nothing are not given to flash decisions based on a youngster's capacity for hero-worship. Opportunity may knock, but it calls for ability to open the door wide enough.

"That's on the way," he said, returning to sit beside Sherry. "Now, if only a story would break! If I could wire the Tribune something juicy and exclusive—"

"Why not cover the Mississippi floods with me?" asked Sherry generously. "Something might happen. Your flair for news—"

"Boy—I've written up the Mississippi once a year regularly since I cut my eye-teeth! Tell you what—I'll sit here and write your story for you, head-lines and all! Put it in your pocket, and use it as your own if the levees break. If they don't, keep it for next year. It'll come in handy sometime."

But therein Wahl showed misjudgment. Sherry's was the ambition that would rather win its own spurs. His bright face clouded over and he changed the subject, not exactly deftly:

"Where's the best place in New Orleans to hire a car by the day?" he asked. "I'm not going to waste time in the city."

"H'm! Story up his sleeve," thought Wahl. "I'll do the levees with him after all."

A taste of opportunity acted on Wahl as the scent of blood stirs a wolf. It brought his ruthless, tireless news-sense uppermost. He became as restless as Jack Calhoun and went outside to join his promenade. Those two were as the poles apart in temperament, but something remotely resembling a fellow-feeling comforted both of them as they fell into stride together.

The more Jack Calhoun saw of Wahl, in fact, the less he liked him; yet, strangely, enough, the less he cared to avoid him. To keep his mind off his own impatience, he encouraged Wahl to talk, and Wahl was at least no mealy-mouthed apologist; he made no secret of his views.

"Then you'd regard a friend's affairs as news, suh—?"

"Certainly. Anything's news that sells papers. I'm not sold on friendship. When a man gets over-friendly I suspect him."

"Pardon my curiosity, suh, and don't answer me unless you wish, but I'm impelled to ask whether you're married."

"Me?"

Wahl laughed sardonically.

"You were never in love?" Jack asked him curiously, and Wahl's smile grew broader than before.

"I've seen a lot of the effects of love," he answered. "It makes front- page news as a rule."

"Then you don't believe in pure love—out-and-out devotion— chivalry on one side, faithfulness and adorable dependence on the other?"

"Show me pure love before I'll believe in it!" Wahl answered. "I've never seen any yet, and I try to keep my eyes open. Devotion, yes—to bread and butter and a roof—or to diamonds and a limousine. But faithfulness? Chivalry? Who in the world is faithful to anything except bad habits? Who is chivalrous, when his ambition is at stake? A woman is a rogue at heart, and a man who adores her either fools himself like a lunatic, or else he suffers from too much appetite. The same man would eat himself to death, or die of drink and drugs in different circumstances. What's more, all women understand that."

"What a weird conviction! I should say you are the devil's own, suh! I would rather die than think as you do," Jack remarked.

"I've seen scores die, and thousands go broke for thinking the orthodox rot about women," Wahl answered. "And I've never met a woman whose real motives would bear investigation, although I'll admit to you I've seen great actresses. They're all born with the buskins on."

"Suh, you astonish me! I would never have believed a man could walk the earth and hold such notions!"

That pleased Wahl enormously. Like every other newspaper man in the South, he knew more or less of the Calhoun family history, and a lot about Jack's escapades. It tickled his sense of humor to be able to scandalize a man who thought himself made of such vastly superior clay.

"They should vivisect emotions and traditions instead of guinea-pigs," he said, "to find out why nine-tenths of the world is gullible and the other tenth helps itself."

The blood of the Calhouns was boiling, in Jack by then.

"Pon my soul, suh," he exploded, "if I were not aware I had invited your disgusting confidence, I'll be damned if I wouldn't insult you!"

Wahl grinned more delightedly than ever.

"You might call me the devil's own, for instance!" he suggested.

During what was left of the short voyage, Jack Calhoun avoided Wahl as he would never have shunned the devil. When the ship docked in New Orleans he hurried ashore and vanished, not even troubling to say good-by to Sherry Mansfield, whom he thought contaminated by Wahl's company.

"Now, if—only he'd get into a mix-up with some woman I'd have a front-page story for the Tribune!" said Wahl, watching him go. "The Calverly- Calhouns are as well known in Frisco as in New Orleans. Jack belongs to the two best clubs there, and his father used to own the Lion Line."

"It's up to you to get some stories, now," laughed Sherry Mansfield. "Here's a wire from dad."

Wahl snatched it eagerly, fingers twitching and eyes glinting, but as he read the telegram his expression changed to sour displeasure.

"Hell!" he exploded bitterly. "Is that all? Special correspondent in New Orleans for the San Francisco Tribune—space rates! Damn! I expected from what you said they'd send for me to Frisco. However, I'll make it yet—you watch!" He met young Mansfield's eyes for a moment, and showed his teeth in a determined leer. "I'd skin the wives and daughters of the whole Supreme Court to get on the Tribune staff. Some one's going to suffer, Sherry Mansfield, but I'll make it!"

CHAPTER 8.

"You are a prince and I will put my trust in you!"

The convent was never unbearable, but for the first time in her experience, Jacqueline began to find it dissatisfying. The Sister Superior took Don Andres Miro's letter literally, and "permitted Jacqueline to forget" the unpleasant incident. But it is possession, not permission, that is nine points of the law. Jacqueline possessed, and was possessed by, a sensation. Fluttering heart-beats warned her that though conditions on the surface might seem almost normal, there was something dreadful moving underneath.

Even the surface was not what it had been. You may inhibit and decree, but not the Pope himself can keep young girls from talking, more particularly in the gigglesome between-bell interludes. Two girls had told of Jacqueline's love-affair; one hundred and ninety-nine discussed it enviously; and the one who was silent was Jacqueline herself.

She was aware she was being talked about and miserable because the whole trouble seemed so unjust. What was Desmio thinking of it all? The sting lay there. She had only received one letter from him since her return to the convent, and in that he had appeared his usual courteous and generous self, quietly humorous as ever, and as usual telling her the day-by-day events of the plantation without as much as a hint that life could ever be less than dignified and sane. Not a word of Jack Calhoun—no hidden reference to him, though she tried through tears to read between the lines. And of Donna Isabella nothing, except that she was well and wished to be remembered. That silence was the dreadful part of it.

So she wrote to him in the same vein in which he wrote to her, giving him the usual news of dancing lessons and of what the visiting Jesuit lecturer had said—of a bon mot by fat old Father Pierre—and of a broken pane in one of the stained-glass windows. And she wondered whether Desmio would think she was a hypocrite.

For he knew about Jack Calhoun now, and she felt sure that Donna Isabella was busy making as much as possible of the incident. She knew Desmio would never willingly turn against her; but she also knew intuitively that, as dropping water wears away stone, a proud man may be influenced little by little until his judgment is no longer his.

At last on the day when Desmio should have come there was a summons instead from the Sister Superior, and with it wild misgivings. She stood trembling while the calm face watched her from under the bandeau.

"Don Andres Miro wishes you to return home, Jacqueline. Your trunk will be packed, and Consuelo will come for you tomorrow morning."

Blue, bewildered eyes—the puzzling frown—no, answer —only a question!

"Is he—is Don Andres well?"

"I believe so. I have not heard to the contrary."

Jacqueline was hardly conscious after that of the Sister Superior's voice; certainly no word of the brief admonition that followed penetrated through the veil of her emotion. She felt like something blown along by the wind: without volition of her own; and the wind, she felt sure, was Donna Isabella, blowing cold—so cold and comfortless that she shuddered.

"Have you caught cold, Jacqueline?"

She did not even realize that she was being spoken to. Fear gripped her, and was much more dreadful because it had no name nor any plausible excuse for being fear at all. Somehow she reached her own room, she knew that, for there she was in the room, on the chair beside the bed, with Sister Michaela speaking to her kindly, and her shoes off. Who took her shoes off? Why? She began to undress herself, and Sister Michaela laughed, although she did not interfere, and even helped her. Why should she laugh? Was there anything in the world to laugh about? It was broad daylight, but Sister Michaela drew the shade down, and how good the pillow felt! Somebody—Sister Michaela she supposed—was folding away her clothes and moving up and down the little room with matter-of-fact steps; but all that belonged to a world she had left behind—a world that had no more use for her, nor she for it—a world whose day-dreams all vanished in a mystery that she craved nothing better than escape from.

Jacqueline slept until the convent bell at dawn awoke her, and never a dream had entered to interrupt her visit to the plane where all is absolute and nothing is unsolved. Sleep wrought its miracle. She awoke refreshed, and wondering what the turmoil had been all about. Was she not going home to Desmio? What fear could lie in that?

She laughed at herself; and was singing all the while she dressed. She felt gay, and full of spirits. It seemed like the dawn of something. And the convent, funnily enough, seemed distant, although she was still in it. Nothing had been said about her not returning after this visit home, but no logic and no reasoning can change the promptings of a heart, and she knew, somewhere inside herself, that she no longer formed any part of those surroundings. As she knelt by her desk she was conscious of trying to memorize everything.

Yet afterward, whenever she did call it up from memory, there always came first that feeling of standing, or rather kneeling on the threshold of great events. Then, Sister Michaela's face looking straight at her. Thereafter, always, the gray eyes filled her memory, and the quiet voice saying:

"Put not your trust in princes! Trust your intuition, Jacqueline!"

She attended no class that morning. Consuelo came early, almost with the dew on her from rising before dawn for the forty-mile journey, and the leave-taking was hurried through as if there were something furtive about it—not orthodox and if not frowned on, wondered at. Yet Consuelo looked so red-faced and important that Jacqueline, who knew her old nurse nearly as well as the nurse knew her, could draw nothing but buoyant conclusions. That fat-hen fussiness hid secrets. Consuelo had good news up her sleeve, or else Jacqueline knew nothing.

But it was little more than nothing that she learned for two hours after they left the convent gate. Zeke tooled the car cautiously along the road below the levee, for the flood was high and there were places where the mud was hub-deep and the gangs were toiling to stop further seepage. Whenever Jacqueline asked questions, Consuelo grew violently worried about the driving and got into an argument with Zeke through the sliding glass panel. Zeke's retorts would have made an archangel furious, and Consuelo naturally did not expect to be an angel for a long time, not even in the lower ranks. So Jacqueline, although she asked a lot of questions, ascertained little and that in snatches.

"Why has Desmio sent for me, Consuelo?"

"Zeke you'll break the wheels! I'll report you to Don Andres!"

"Consuelo, why did—"

"Hush, honey! Oh, that nigger—he'll be the death of us! Zeke! Drive slowly!"

"Consuelo, is Desmio well?"

"Yes, honey."

"Why did he send for me?"

"Zeke, you'll be off the road in a minute! Can't you see that ditch?"

"Consuelo, has anything happened?"

"It will, honey, if that Zeke isn't careful. Zeke!"

"Ah's at de ole stand!"

"Drive faster! If that levee breaks—"

About a third of Consuelo's nervousness was genuine. The other two-thirds were a screen behind which she tried to disguise from Jacqueline that she was nearly bursting with information; and Jacqueline understood that perfectly.

"There! There's the last of the levee and we're safe. Now you can tell me the news, Consuelo."

"Just you wait, honey."

"Why? I'll have to know presently."

"All I hope is I can get your hair done properly before Don Andres sees you. Listen, honey: the less you know the better. Then if she sees you first, you can tell her what the dodo said to the horse-marines!"

"Then doesn't Donna Isabella know I'm coming home?"

"There's no knowing how much she guesses, honey. She'll know something's up when she orders the limousine after breakfast and discovers she can't have it. Let's hope she doesn't see you first, that's all. I've prayed to the Blessed Virgin to shut her ears and eyes for her, and strike her dumb, and—"

"Consuelo!"

"Well, I did, honey, and that's the truth!"

"Be still, Consuelo!"

"Honey, I'm too excited. I've got to say something or I'll burst!"

"Say something nice then about Donna Isabella!"

"All right, honey, I can say it. She may be this and that and the other thing, and what I know she is. But the day's gone by when she could do you a hurt."

"Then you've forgiven her, Consuelo? I did. I forgave her everything this morning at prayers before you came."

"Honey, dear, you can't forgive everything when you don't know all she's done! And when you do know what she's tried to do, you can forgive it even less!"

When the limousine rolled under the portico the front door was open, and Donna Isabella was revealed standing in the hall, a dozen feet back from the threshold, smiling a bitter-lipped welcome. She almost ignored Jacqueline, as a stern judge ignores a convicted prisoner who was once a privileged acquaintance. She knew nothing of Don Andres' plans, but felt sure that her brother was simply removing the girl from one convent to another.

"Go to your room," she said, permitting herself to be kissed respectfully on one cheek.

It was on Consuelo that the vials of wrath were poured. How had Consuelo dared to take the limousine without permission?

"Answer me—d'you hear! Don't dare to glare at me in that shameless manner!"

The din of that salvo brought up the reserves, as Consuelo hoped. Don Andres appeared, crossing the patio from the direction of the library. He stood at the end of the hall, looking and speaking as if he had heard nothing—seen nothing of the browbeating.

"Isabella—"

She turned to face him like a she-wolf interrupted. I will speak to Consuelo."

Don Andres made a gesture of the head and Consuelo followed him into the patio.

"You have brought her?"

"Yes, Don Andres. But I would like to do her hair, and—"

"Bring her into the library."

Not a word about Donna Isabella. Not even a hint. Yet Consuelo understood that she was required to offer herself again, if necessary, as a target between jealousy and Jacqueline.

So Jacqueline came dancing down the balcony steps again, with Consuelo panting in her wake, and wondered why she should be told to wait at the foot of the stairs instead of skipping across the patio and bursting in through the library door after her usual fashion. If Consuelo's manner had not been so tremulous with compressed excitement, she might have felt anxious. As it was, there was a rather pleasant sense of mystery, and she submitted to be shepherded demurely across the patio, infected by Consuelo's agitation and thrilled by expectation of something wonderful.

"God bless you, honey!" said Consuelo, and pushed her in through the library door, closing it suddenly behind her.

As Desmio rose to greet her she looked to him lovelier than she had ever looked. She wore the same organdie frock in which she had left for the convent, but no hat now, and there was nothing to throw in shadow the lake-blue brilliance of her eyes. Her attitude was half-startled, half-mischievous—suggestive of Christmas morning, when gifts lay on the library table and she was sent for to glimpse them for the first time.

That impression of her held Don Andres silent, as she hesitated near the door. Her youth, more than her beauty, reached out to him with a poignancy that was almost pain.

"Desmio—what does all this mean?"

She ran to him now, and he took her in his arms with a laugh of unmixed gratitude, kissing her on the forehead, as he always did when she returned from school. Then—unusually soon—his statelier manner returned, as he retired a pace or two and stood with his back to the fireplace.

"Jacqueline!" He very seldom called her that.

"Yes, Desmio."

"I have something to say to you, which I hope you will believe is said in earnest, after much reflection, and with thought for your best interests, not mine."

Her heart leaped. Splendid! He was going to tell her what he had heard about Jack Calhoun! No doubt he had thought of a way out of the difficulty that would bring no discredit on any one, and whatever that way was, she would take it unquestioning.

"Whoever seeks to provide for another's future, Jacqueline, needs wisdom. I have not been altogether wise, nor altogether kind to you."

"Desmio!"

She stepped closer to lay her hands on him and look up into his face. Unwise, and unkind? He was wisdom! He was kindness! It was on her lips to tell him so, but something in his eyes and bearing warned her that was not the right moment for expostulation. She waited with parted lips to hear the rest of it.

"I judge myself and I blame myself—"

That was altogether too much, and she had to speak.

"Please don't, Desmio!"

He laid one hand on her shoulder, and she nestled close to him, her eyes a few inches from the watch-chain that rose and fell over his heart. Why did his heart thump so? Why was he so agitated?

He was outwardly calm enough, and his voice was steady, as he continued:

"I have inconsiderately placed you in a false position. You have every right to expect a great deal of this world, yet no means of realizing expectations. Without me to make provision for you, you would have very little. And I shall not be here with you forever."

"Desmio, don't talk like that! I would hate the world without you in it!"

She did not see him smile as she said that, but she saw the movement of the watch-chain, and it rather scared her.

"I have consulted the best legal man in Louisiana—and incredible though it may seem—I have not the legal right even to protect you, Jacqueline."

She wished he would not call her Jacqueline. It sounded so solemn. What was he going to say? Only she wished he would hurry up and say it, because this being torn between one emotion and another was—

"I can not adopt you, owing to the terms of the Miro trust deed, according to which none but a Miro may inherit any part of the fortune. Otherwise I would have adopted you when you first came to me."

She squeezed his hand, not knowing exactly what legal adoption meant, but quite sure it meant something dignified and generous.

"And it is intolerable to me, Jacqueline, that I am in no legal position to protect you against any one—a Jack Calhoun, for instance, or —or any other individual, who, may have designs on you of which I disapprove, and, against which you are too inexperienced to protect yourself."

Good! Jack Calhoun at last! Now she would tell him all about it. She looked up at his face—and the words she intended to say died still-born. She never in her whole life saw him before with that expression. Was he afraid to tell of his decision? Why else was he nervous? And yet—he looked secretly glad about something.

"Yet, Jacqueline, I am fonder of you by far than I ever was of my own child. Your father was my closest friend, and Lanier blood is as good as Miro. I have watched you grow and develop, and I know that the Miro estates and the Miro name would be much safer in your keeping than in that of the gum shoe-maker. John Miro is my second cousin, and a Miro by blood, therefore he can inherit, and will eventually, unless I can forestall him. He would probably put one of his gum-shoe advertisements across the front of the house and asphyxiate the whole neighborhood with the smell of rubber and sulfuric acid!"

Jacqueline laughed in spite of herself. She knew it was not the time to laugh, for Desmio was in deadly earnest and was confiding to her his inmost thoughts. He was not joking about John Miro. He could hardly bring himself to read a newspaper, because of John Miro's advertisements that sometimes blared his infamous misuse of an honored name across a whole page, and San Francisco was as Sodom and Gomorrah because John Miro lived there!

"But I have thought of a way to defeat that rascal!"

Her heart thumped delightedly. Good Desmio! But had he sent for her from the convent just to tell her about his second cousin? It would seem so.

"I have never asked you any return for what I have been privileged to do for you, Conchita."

Conchita at last! She welcomed it with a smile that would have melted sterner hearts than his.

"And I would not now unless I was sure I could offer you, in return for the sacrifice I am going to request, advantages otherwise beyond your reach."

"Desmio, I will do anything in the world for you!"

"I believe you, dear. That is why I have decided to crave the honor of your hand in marriage!"

Her heart sank. What did he mean? Could the law make Jack Calhoun —

"Marriage to whom, Desmio?"

"To me, Conchita."

"You, Desmio!"

He nodded, watching her. She had stepped a pace away from him. Her face showed blank astonishment—bewilderment. She understood the meaning of his words—she knew he never said a word he did not mean—but it sounded like a fairy-tale—like—

"Desmio!"

"I want you to marry me, Conchita, and to go straight back to the convent afterward. You will be my wife in name, and when I die you will inherit these estates."

Every word he added only increased the unreality. She seemed to be wide awake—and dreaming! So this was the cause of Consuelo's suppressed excitement! Thought of Consuelo produced a smile at last, and the smile grew radiant as she remembered that whatever Desmio might wish, that would she do with her whole heart, gratefully. But his next words drove the smile away, and the frown returned.

"If there were a prospect of my living long enough to handicap your future, Conchita, I would still endeavor to find some other way out of the difficulty. However, there is very small prospect of my living, and by the time you are old enough to form your own judgment you will undoubtedly be free to exercise it."

She began to want to cry. She knew she would much rather herself suffer in any way than have anything happen to this generous friend of hers. She felt he was giving her the greatest gift within his power, and her heart warned her not to accept it, giving no reasons, because hearts are autocratic and not talkative.

"One of these days you will meet some splendid fellow, whose love will be worthy of you, and whom you will love, Conchita."

"No, Desmio! Nobody will ever take your place!" she protested, and he smiled, knowing what she said was true. But he was equally aware that he could never fill that other, greater place in her heart that would open some day.

"I wish to preserve you from present pitfalls, dear, in order that you may marry happily later on."

"Desmio, how can you talk like that! There's nobody under heaven like you! I'll never love any one as I do you!"

"You must trust me not to mislead you, Conchita. Very much wisdom is given to none of us in this world, and I am only asking you to do what seems best and wisest after a thorough consideration of all the facts, and after conference with my most intimate friends. I believe my proposal of marriage is in your highest interest; and as for myself—the privilege of having established you as mistress of these estates will be the utmost I would care to ask. But the final word is yours, dear. Would you like time to consider it?"

Time? What difference could time make in her relation to Desmio? There was nothing he could ask that she would dream of refusing. And if he loved her so much as all that, it was likely she might help him to live for twenty years yet. What was her heart tugging at her for? She stepped up to him and laid her hands on his shoulders.

"Desmio," she said, wondering to herself why she should use these words, "you are a prince and I will put my trust in you!"

"You will marry me, Conchita?"

"Yes."

"And return to the convent?"

"Desmio, I will do anything you say."

He kissed her on the forehead and she hugged him as she used to when he gave her extravagant gifts on birthdays and at Christmas.

CHAPTER 9.

"Do it again, Desmio!"

No more tugging of the heart-strings now! A new world, hand in hand with Desmio, full of new thrills—and the wildest first! It needs a little fear to make excitement perfect. There is not much fun in victory unless the enemy has teeth to gnash! And there was malice, even in Jacqueline Lanier.

Desmio rang the bell; and not for kingdoms, not for her soul's salvation would Consuelo have missed being first on the scene. She came in answer to the bell—curtsied twice—and was kissed by Jacqueline.

"Oh, honey, I'm proud! Do you see now why I wouldn't say a word!"

Don Andres cut those congratulations short; but there was a smile in his eye, and the hand that held Jacqueline's squeezed harder than he knew.

"Present my compliments to Donna Isabella, Consuelo, and request her to be good enough to come and see me here at once."

As Donna Isabella entered the library there fell the same tenseness as when duelists engage and watch each other's eyes. Desmio, with Jacqueline's hand in one of his, smiled his courtliest and was no more nervous than his sister. Her face was flint, and his steel, but his was masked by a desire to carry off the encounter without unseemliness. He was about to do the courteous thing in announcing his betrothal to his sister first, and he hoped she would recognize the courtesy.

"Isabella, I have the honor to present to you my future wife!"

"Andres—you're mad!"

Too late he realized the storm was breaking. Donna Isabella ignored Jacqueline—scorned her—conceded her no ground—and faced her brother with all the brimstone venom of her nature uppermost.

"You chicken-hearted fool! You—"

But not even she could force a domestic scene on him before a witness—not, that is, without being turned out of his counsels forever, which was the last fate she proposed for herself, since it would leave Jacqueline triumphant. His gesture checked her in mid-speech. He put his arm on Jacqueline's shoulder and whispered. Jacqueline ran, as she would run from a cyclone—out to the patio, where Consuelo greeted her with fussy tenderness and a comical, respectful homage due to her new estate.

"Oh, honey, what did she say to him? Was she furious? Tell me, honey!"

"I don't know. Desmio sent me out of the room. I'm frightened, Consuelo. Let's stay and see what happens."

"Come to your own room, honey. He's as good as ten of her! Nothing'll happen. Come to your room and tell me all about it—I'm just simply dying to listen!"

Jacqueline let herself be coaxed upstairs, and from the window they presently saw Donna Isabella beating a retreat, not looking blatantly victorious, but so prematurely aged and sour that Jacqueline was almost sorry for her.

"She called him chicken-hearted!" she said, watching with big round, reproachful eyes.

"Never you mind what she called him, honey—it was all lies! She's down and out, and you'll be mistress in less than a week! Listen, Conchita—did he tell you? You're to be married three days from now! There'll be no time to fix up a wedding like you ought to have, but Father Doutreleau and I are to do our best for you. Three days from now you'll be a Miro, and Donna Isabella takes a back seat!"

Enthusiasm was contagious. Jacqueline knew no more of what marriage means than any other young girl does who has been convent-reared, and sheltered. She began to wonder what Sister Michaela and the other girls at the convent would think when they heard the news, and which of them should be asked to the wedding, and what the sisters would say, and what it would feel like to return to the convent afterward—a married woman!

"What will I wear, Consuelo? How can I get dresses made in time!"

"God bless you, honey, we've thought of all that. Don Andres wants everything as Spanish as can be. So you're to wear the Spanish costume that he'd ordered in secret from Madrid for you to wear at your coming-out ball —nearly all lace, and a head-dress that 'ud make an angel envious! I'll show it to you presently, soon as I get my breath back. Honey, you'll be a dream! And everybody's coming. There's to be a special train from New Orleans, and reporters from the newspapers; and all the plantation hands are to have two days' holiday. The house'll be chock-a-block with guests, and we'll all go crazy but who cares! Roget of New Orleans has orders to do the catering and spare no expense. There'll be fireworks—I thought of that—and another thing I thought of was a troupe of dancers from Brazil—they've made quite a stir in New Orleans at one of the theaters, and they're on their way to San Francisco. Oh, you'll have a wedding, honey, spite of the short notice! Don Andres didn't say so, but I know he wants it in the papers so's his cousin John Miro will learn of it and know he can't inherit the estates! Yes, honey, you're to make a list of your special friends at the convent, and Zeke'll take it over this afternoon to the Sister Superior—just as many as you wish—only you can't ask every one, because we'll never know where to put them all as it is. Yes, honey, Father Doutreleau conducts the service if he isn't dead of writing invitations and sending telegrams before the time comes. And before the ceremony there's to be documents signed, with the trustees witnessing, to make it all yours—and I can hear Donna Isabella's teeth gnash now when the pen goes in the ink. There—wasn't I a wonder to keep all that in, when you asked me so many questions in the limousine!"

Consuelo, praised sufficiently, brought out the Spanish dress from its hiding place all wrapped in tissue-paper, and there was an hour of unmixed happiness as the dress was tried on. Nurse and nursling! None understood better than Consuelo the pure profundity of Jacqueline's innocence. She had kept strictly the letter and the spirit of Don Andres' instructions, and had never breathed a word to Jacqueline on the subject of marriage. This wedding, she knew, was grouped in Jacqueline's mind along with festivals, and going to the circus, and a hundred other exciting experiences.

So it was Jacqueline's party, only greater fun than any previous one had been, because to this one grown-ups were invited and Donna Isabella had no voice in anything. Father Doutreleau and Consuelo were at pains to accentuate Jacqueline's youthfulness, rather than to veil it in pretended womanhood; the wedding was a fiesta in her honor, at which Jacqueline was simply to be one party to a legal contract, the church consenting. So Donna Isabella's grim displeasure was forgotten in the whirl of exciting events.

In the seclusion of her own apartment, Donna Isabella sulked like Achilles, until she actually had to send for Beal to treat her for vertigo.

But only Beal knew about that, and he was a man whose disability for conversation amounted almost to genius. He said nothing, and not even Father Doutreleau guessed the extent of the jealousy that was eating the arrogant heart out. Beal looked worried when her name was mentioned, but Beal always looked worried about something; and the one dark domestic who was admitted to Donna Isabella's apartment did not even dare to discuss her mistress in the servants' hall. Don Andres' courteous inquiries, sent in twice daily, were ignored, and he was having to be much too careful of his own health to think of seeking her and arguing her into a more reasonable attitude.

A marriage in the Miro family could never be less than a nine-day wonder in Louisiana. This suddenly announced match between the middle-aged Don Andres and the seventeen-year-old Lanier beauty caused more local stir than any war in Europe ever did; and even Europe learned over the wires what was about to take place, since Andres Miro was persona grata at more than one European Court and had friends everywhere. There was not a prominent newspaper in the

United States, or in any of the capitals in Europe that did not at least mention the news briefly, with the consequence that cablegrams and telegrams arrived in shoals. Beal thought it safe to let Don Andres answer some of the telegrams; but he soon regretted it. There came one from San Francisco which aroused such prodigious anger that for a while he feared for his patient's life.

"Congratulations. I last saw Jacqueline when she was seven years old, and if the promise she showed then has fulfilled itself she must be fully worthy of the Miro traditions. Why not grace the great occasion suitably by shaking hands? John Miro."

"Hypocrite! Cad! Renegade!"

Andres Miro crumpled up the telegram and hurled it through the window. He was pierced through the joints in his armor, and not all the self-mastery he had learned in fifty years could suppress his indignation. He could pity a criminal, be courteous to an impudent enemy, forget gross injury—but forgive John Miro and his gum-shoes, never!

It needed Jacqueline and all her understanding sympathy to restore him to a state of mind in which Beal dared to leave him. And what stopped him at last was the realization that Jacqueline was laughing!

"You laugh, Conchita. You astonish me! I am ashamed to have sworn in your presence."

"Do it again, Desmio," she giggled. "I like it! It always sounds vulgar when other men swear. You do it with such distinction. There's nobody like you in the world!"

"You must forget that you heard me, Conchita."

She shook her head, and the lake-blue eyes laughed merrily. "You said what I feel, Desmio!"

For a moment he was puzzled, and she did not explain, but the least little gesture of her head toward the open window gave him the clue to her thoughts. He smiled at last, and the two nodded understandingly.

There came a sharp dry cough from outside the window. Donna Isabella had left her apartment, and would be present at the wedding ceremony after all.

CHAPTER 10.

"Let me speak to her!

Just one word with her!"

The wedding was set for afternoon, to allow for the arrival of the special train from New Orleans, and to give guests from neighboring counties time to come by motor. The dining-room and Don Andres' private chapel being much too small for all that crowd, a bower of flowers was set up in the garden, where the ceremony might take place in full view of every one. The wedding breakfast was to take place in the patio directly after the ceremony, and an army of experts took charge of that; the patio looked like a hanging garden in ancient Babylon roofed by

a canopy of flowers, under which the gargoyle fountain took on the resemblance of a heathen idol grinning four ways simultaneously.

By dawn the plantation darkies were already celebrating; by nine o'clock the whole countryside was swarming through the grounds, for there was no question of Don Andres' popularity, and no doubt that anything he might do would be worth recording in the annals of Louisiana. Grand seigneurs are a dying race, and out of fashion, but liberal when they let the bars down. There were probably a thousand guests, invited and uninvited (the papers said three thousand); and there were a thousand reasons for being there, not least of which was curiosity, which Jacqueline assuaged in full.

She was here, there, everywhere, enjoying the supreme day of existence and lovelier than blossom in the spring—first, down where the darkies were holding high festival and dancing mad breakdowns to melodeon and drum; then, back into the garden by the rear porch where Ramon the Brazilian and Pepita with her monkey repeated their entertainment that had made a hit in New Orleans; next, at top speed to the front door when the bus arrived from the convent with two sisters and as many of Jacqueline's schoolmates as could be crowded in. Then all to be done over again, because her friends and the sisters must see everything. And from first to last she was unconscious of the fact that she—her own innocent self—was the paramount attraction.

She had to be hunted for, and brought back from the farthest end of the grounds, when Curtis Radcliffe arrived with the legal documents and spread them before the trustees and Don Andres on the library table. Living each hour as it came, with dignity, Don Andres chose that that ceremony should be as August as the signing of a treaty between nations; so when Jacqueline came at last, with Consuelo, and Sister Michaela and, two girl friends, there was another long pause while some one went in search of Donna Isabella.

She arrived dressed in black, and refused to be seated, but stood glaring at Jacqueline across the table. Her face was like a death's head. Deep dark rings under her eyes betrayed the ravages of jealousy—that weapon whose hilt is sharper than its point and cuts deepest whoever uses it. None spoke or smiled after she came in—not even Jacqueline when she wrote her name on the line at Radcliffe's gestured invitation and gave the gold pen back to Desmio. It was he who at last broke silence:

"Isabella, will you sign your name next, at the head of the list of witnesses?"

He forced a smile, and his manner was deferent and courteous, but she answered him in a cracked dry voice from which the very juice of civility was squeezed:

"I refuse to be a party to this outrageous proceeding. I give you notice now, Andres, that my rights under that trust deed must be respected to the last letter."

She turned her back at that and left them, marching down between the flower-laden tables in the patio toward the drawing-room, like gloom's ambassador.

Donna Isabella paused in the hallway. The front door was open and it was hard to see into the light, but the footman was answering the questions of some one whose voice she thought she recognized. In another second she knew it; Jack Calhoun's! Her eyes gleamed, as she met his and beckoned him into the drawing-room.

"So you've come!"

"By God, I've come! But—"

"You've come too late!"

"Donna Isabella, what does this mean? It's an outrage! It's a rape, that's what it is! That old man marrying Jacqueline—it's incredible."

"It's true!"

"Are they married already?"

"No, but this afternoon—"

"Then I'll stop it! Donna Isabella, that girl loves me! I heard of this last night—saw it in the evening paper in New Orleans, and rushed to my lawyer's house to find out if he knew anything. He did, by gad, and he spilled the beans! Believe me, I mean to see Jacqueline and have this out with her! Where is she?"

"H-s-s-h! If Don Andres learns you're here, he'll prevent you from seeing her."

"Don't tell him, then! Let me see Jacqueline alone a moment. If not, I'll go to Miro and denounce him for a—"

"H-s-s-h."

Donna Isabella's face looked mischievous, and Jack Calhoun could be shrewd at that early stage of excitement. Storming tactics were the basis of his whole philosophy of life—go get it, and the devil take the hindmost!—but he could pause and browbeat an ally into line with him. He imagined he was forcing Donna Isabella's hand, as every Calverly-Calhoun has always thought himself the master of whoever designed to use his energy.

"It won't do any good. You're defeated—"

"Not while there's breath in me!"

"If you want to see Jacqueline your only chance is to go into the garden and wait for her there."

"I'll do that."

He was in the mid-stride for the door, turning his head to nod one of his swift adieux, when something in Donna Isabella's eye arrested him. She looked too satisfied to suit him—too mischievous.

"Are you sure you're not side-trackin' me?" he asked. "'Cause, if you think to do that, I'll—"

"H-s-s-h! Close the door again. I had hopes,—I regret you're too late—If I could prevent this ridiculous wedding, there is nothing would please me better."

He nodded. He was shrewd enough to believe her; not so shrewd as to guess that her sole motive was to submit her brother to scandal and indignity.

"Keep out of Don Andres' sight," she warned him; and he nodded again, and hurried from the room.

It was easy enough. There were crowds in the patio, and on the rear porch; crowds on the steps watching Ramon the Brazilian and his mother Cervanez, whom every one supposed was his wife; more crowds around Pepita and her monkey—crowds in the garden again. Jack Calhoun shouldered his way through, avoiding all who might have recognized and greeted him, and took his stand on the outskirts of the largest crowd of all, where people were gaping at the reporters and their cameras. From that point of vantage he watched the rear door and the steps, down which Jacqueline would have to come in order to reach the garden. He pulled his watch out—gave her fifteen minutes. If she did not appear within that time he would reenter the house and look for her. He hardly had his watch back in his pocket when a voice accosted him.

"An unexpected pleasure! Glad to meet you again, Mr. Calverly-Calhoun."

Jack turned with a smothered oath of disgust, and looked into the eyes of Clinton Wahl.

"What are you doin' here?" he demanded. His manner and tone of voice indicated that what Wahl was doing interested him less than anything on earth.

"Oh, just covering the wedding."

"Thought you were a star in the newspaper firmament. D'you condescend to this sort of thing?"

"As a rule I don't," said Wahl. "But doesn't a marriage between a seventeen-year-old beauty and a millionaire of fifty-five strike you as interesting news?"

"Suggests cradle-robbing to me!" Jack snorted, and Wahl grinned ingratiatingly. He scented a real story at last. Recalling conversations on the steamer, he was not blind to the possibility that Jack Calhoun might be in love with Jacqueline.

"Have you known Miss Lanier long?" he asked.

"Longer than I've known you," Jack answered rudely, and moved off. Whereat Wahl was convinced that it might pay him well to keep both eyes open. He could eat up impoliteness as a cormorant swallows fish, but he flattered himself none had ever snubbed him without paying for it. "Let's see—called me 'The devil's own,' didn't he? Good head-line that: 'Jack Calhoun sups with the devil!' Has he brought a long spoon, I wonder? He looks to me full-cocked on a hair-trigger. He'll bear watching."

So Wahl, who had been candidly bored by the whole proceeding, chose a garden seat behind a bank of roses, whence he could keep Calhoun in view without that individual knowing it, and began at last to take what he called a human interest.

Jack gradually edged his way back again toward the foot of the steps, where Ramon and Cervanez were finishing a dance. He was hardly noticeable in the crowd when Jacqueline appeared at last on the porch above him. She certainly did not see him. She stood with each arm around a girl friend, laughing as the crowd turned away from the Brazilians to cheer her. Some one cried out that she should dance at her own wedding, and that started a tumult of applause, she hanging back and her girl friends pushing her forward, until suddenly Don Andres himself appeared and added his voice to the rest. It was out of all question to refuse him. She nodded,

laughing, and the guitar and mandolin orchestra that had played for the Brazilian struck up a Spanish air as she came running down the steps to the stone-paved path below.

Glancing back at Desmio for his approval, she commenced one of those lively Castilian dances that make of modesty a grace adorning motion. Her girlish figure, supple, and strong, and young, lent itself more perfectly to those than to any other steps imaginable, and they had taught her at the convent, as they did whatever they touched, thoroughly. Ramon, the Brazilian, watched, nudging his companion and commenting under his breath, as she rose to the occasion—wine of applause in her head—blue eyes alight with happiness—and danced more wonderfully than her teachers ever guessed was in her, until even Desmio's enthusiasm broke bounds and Beal and Father Doutreleau, each taking an arm, forced him back into the house.

If Jacqueline had known that Jack Calhoun was there, and if she had deliberately sought to set his heart on fire, she could not have bettered that performance!

Clinton Wahl left his hiding-place behind the roses and, beckoning an assistant from over near the cameras, came as close to Jack Calhoun as he could without attracting his quarry's attention to himself.

"Go and see what sort of car Jack Calhoun came in, and who's in it now. If it's a chauffeur, get word with him. Look the car over. Find out anything you can, and bring back word to me," he whispered.

The assistant hurried off, anxious to please Wahl, whose word in a cub-reporter's favor might go far toward promotion. Wahl edged nearer yet to Jack Calhoun. He knew the signs that herald violence—knew by the look in Calhoun's eye, and by the taut-drawn tenseness of his attitude, that a story of some kind was going to break, and break swiftly, and soon.

He heard Ramon the Brazilian whisper to Cervanez next to him: "A touch—a pinch more daring—a week's experience and she would beat us all!" And he made a mental note of that, for use in his story presently, but he never once looked at Jacqueline until she ceased dancing and ran back up the steps amid storms of applause. Then Calhoun thrust himself forward through the crowd, and by the expression on his face Wahl knew that Jacqueline had seen him. It was then that he spared a moment to glance at her, and caught the look of guilt, as he diagnosed it, that checked her laughter and made her seem suddenly afraid.

Wahl's cavernous eyes grew bright then, and his lips set tightly. There was no more mercy on his face than on a weasel's. News! He scented it!

Jack Calhoun pushed his way through the crowd, and ran up the steps just as Consuelo came out of the house in search of Jacqueline. Wahl saw Consuelo interpose her bulk between the two, while Jacqueline stood hesitating, obviously in a panic, wondering whether to run or stand her ground. Wahl judged he might get thrashed if he followed Calhoun, so he started to run around the house with the idea of entering by the front door and coming on the party from the rear. Nobody noticed him.

"Senor Jack, what do you want?" Consuelo demanded angrily. She was afraid, but stood her ground, and he could not get past her to Jacqueline without knocking her over, a stage of violence that he had hardly yet reached.

"Word with Miss Jacqueline! Out of my way—quick!"

"No, Señor!" Consuelo glanced over her shoulder. "Run, Conchita!"

Jacqueline fled through the door, and Consuelo fought a rearguard action, retreating backward and actually wrestling with Jack Calhoun. Fear lent her strength. She blocked the door ahead of him, aware that Jacqueline was hugging the corner less than a yard away.

"Shall I call the servants, Señor Jack?"

"Dammit, Consuelo, I'll get even with you for this! Let me speak to her! Just one word with her!"

"No, Señor!"

Jack Calhoun drew a bow at a venture, and the shot struck, but not as he intended.

"Donna Isabella said I might."

"I don't believe you, Señor! She must give me that order personally." Then over her shoulder, "Run, Conchita! Run!"

So Jack Calhoun saw one exasperating glimpse of Jacqueline as she fled along the passageway; and even he knew better than to follow at that moment and create a scene inside the house.

"I'll report you to Donna Isabella," he said savagely, and turned his back.

So all that Wahl saw, as he came hurrying along the passage, was Consuelo, panting and as red-faced as a turkey-cock, but looking proud enough to face a hundred kings.

"Anything happened? Been an accident?" he asked sharply, using that voice of authority that cracks so many nut-shells for the press.

"Have you heard there's to be a wedding?" she retorted.

"Where's Mr. Calverly-Calhoun?"

"Smoking," she answered meaningly, and sailed past him, leaving him to draw his own conclusions. Wahl went in search of Calhoun.

Consuelo found Jacqueline in her room, pale-faced and as nervous as a young bird in view of a hawk.

"What shall I do, Consuelo? You said he was in Cuba, and—"

"Do nothing, honey. I've attended to him. He has her permission, so—"

"I'll tell Desmio."

"No, no, honey! Don't you give him another thing to worry over and strain that heart. We'll manage this between us. You go to Don Andres now—he wants to talk to you—and I'll find two or three gentlemen—Mr. Addison, and Mr. Mowblay, and Mr. Cartwright—they'll do. They'll fix Mr. Calverly-Calhoun so he'll know where he belongs."

"Don't let them hurt him, Consuelo! He's—"

"Yes, I know, Conchita—he's in love. He needs cold water. The horse-pond—"

"They mustn't, Consuelo! I won't have it! Listen to me! He's a gentleman, and—"

"The blue-blooded senor twisted my wrist till the skin nearly came off the flesh! I'll show the wrist to Mr. Addison, and see what he says. Now listen, honey; pull yourself together, and then, when you're all calm, run down to Don Andres. Don't tell him a word of this, but be quick back. I'll be waiting for you. You must hurry and get dressed, or you'll be late for your own wedding!"

The old nurse's fingers picked and pulled, setting Jacqueline's frock to rights, and rearranging her hair, so that in a minute the traces of panic were beyond all discernment by masculine eyes. Any woman would still know she had been terrified, but even women would set that down to stage fright.

"Now, be quick, honey—and use those blue eyes! Smile at him!"

She crossed the patio under close guard, Consuelo elbowing her between the tables; and as usually happened, the moment she entered the library all nervousness left her and she smiled naturally. Don Andres rose to greet her with even more than his usual eagerness; but the outworn heart was being overworked, and he nearly collapsed against the armchair. "Pardon me, Conchita."

Iron will now, and nothing else, was holding him together. He managed to master himself—to joke about his infirmity—to recover and sit upright on the arm of the chair, and even his eyes grew bright again; but he was burning up his last strength, and Jacqueline was aware of new anxiety, a thousand times more poignant than her recent dread of Jack Calhoun.

"What is it, Desmio! Are you keeping something from me?"

"Conchita, I keep nothing from you. My heart, my life, and my possessions are all yours! I invited you to come, that I might make you my final gift before the wedding."

He put an ancient locket on a golden chain over her head.

"That chain and locket were a wedding gift to the wife of the first Miro in Louisiana. Every Miro's wife since then has worn it, and the loveliest last!"

She opened the locket and looked inside it, not knowing what to say. It contained his portrait, done by hand on ivory.

"Desmio!"

"You are pleased with it?"

"It is the best of all gifts."

He smiled, but he was least of all men prone to self-deception.

"But a day will come, Conchita, when you will wish to put some other lucky fellow's portrait in there."

"No, Desmio! Never!"

"When the day does come, remember that you have my leave—that I would wish it—that my one hope is that the fortunate man may be worthy of you!"

"There won't be any one else!" His words and his gentle way of speaking made her want to cry, but she battled bravely with it. "I love this gift best, I'll wear it always!"

"I would be grieved," he answered, "if I thought your loyalty to me could spoil your future happiness or your love for some one else. In the years to come will you try to remember that?"

What did he mean? She nodded, because she could summon no words to answer him. Nor could she force herself to ask him what he meant. Thoughts came to her, that she dared not face—that she shut her mind against. And then came memory of Sister Michaela's warning: "Trust your intuition, Jacqueline!"

How trust it, when it told her nothing? All she could feel was vague fears, and not on her own account but Desmio's. What could be the use of trusting that? Should she believe then that he was dying? What then? Should she refuse at the very last minute to marry him? Would that help? Would it save his life?

"What troubles you, Conchita?"

"Nothing, Desmio—at least nothing that I understand—just thoughts." She could not force herself to lie to him.

"Tell me them."

"How ill are you, Desmio?"

He looked startled; she had caught him for once off guard.

"Not seriously ill, Conchita. I need rest, that is all. We Miros have iron constitutions."

"I feel you are in danger, Desmio."

He laughed—an old swordsman's ringing laugh. What did he care about danger! He was safeguarding her and in less than an hour she would be mistress of the Miro fortune. Let happen after that what might!

"I am in love," he answered mockingly. "They tell me love is always dangerous. But there—who is knocking?" He called, and Consuelo opened.

"Come, Conchita! Quickly, honey, or I'll never get you into your dress in time."

CHAPTER 11.

"By God! The devil's own!"

Consuelo worked with nimble fingers, tying this, adjusting that, while Jacqueline did her best not to move too often at critical moments. But you can't stand still before a looking-glass—not while a wedding frock is being hung on you that looks as if angels made it in a lacy paradise beyond the clouds. You absolutely must turn suddenly to see how it looks behind; and if you don't jump excitedly, and sway your supple body to see how perfectly it fits about the waist and under the arms, you're not human and seventeen.

It was all so exciting and wonderful that it drove Jack Calhoun out of mind, until Consuelo glanced at the clock and caught her breath.

"In seven minutes, Conchita! And I haven't found Mr. Addison, or Mr. Mowblay, or Mr. Cartwright. Stay here, honey, while I run and look for them again. I'll be back in a moment."

So Jacqueline stood alone, not in love with her own reflection, because she could not make herself believe that the marvelous being in the mirror was not some one else altogether—a stranger whom she did not know: but in a rapture, nevertheless. It was all much too good to be true, and too wonderful to be real. So she went down on her knees and prayed, turning away from the glass that she might give full attention to the prayer. And so she did not see the door move open, and though she heard it, she supposed it was Consuelo coming back. It was when she rose, from her knees that she saw Jack Calhoun's reflection in the mirror.

He was standing with his back to the door, and the door shut tight behind him. She was too afraid of him to scream. She could not speak. She could not ask him how he dared to be there. But intuition told her that the act of prayer had been her sanctuary—that he had not dared to approach her while she knelt. She turned toward the bed to throw herself on her knees again and bury her face in her hands, but he sprang between her and the bed and would not let her kneel.

"Jacqueline!"

That broke the dream-spell. It was real then! Besides, she could feel him—he had hold of her wrist, and it hurt—and her own heart was fluttering so wildly that it nearly choked her.

"Go away!" she cried suddenly, and tried to release her wrists; but his grip was like iron. His eyes burned in a way that terrified her, for they seemed not to see her dress at all, but to look through it and make her creepy and ashamed. His breath came in hot gasps through parted lips.

"I will go away, but I will take you with me, Jacqueline!"

She felt her knees weakening under her, but knew she was not going to faint; there was nothing merciful like that in sight. She opened her mouth to scream, but not a sound came, or if it did she never heard it, for Jack Calhoun began pouring forth excited words that dinned in her ears, and she felt like a bird in a trap, too paralyzed by fear to move or do anything.

"Jacqueline! I love you, and you love me! You know it!"

She shook her head.

"You can't love old Andres Miro! He can't make you marry him! He's old enough to be your grandfather! I won't permit it! I'm takin' you out of this! Come on!"

He tugged at her wrist. All she could do was to shake her head violently and hang back.

"Come on, dear! Don't be afraid!"

But he was frightening her horribly. She saw the humor of that. It was funny that he should terrify her so, and tell her not to feel fear. A smile flickered on her lips for half a second.

"There! That's better! Once you're out of the house he hasn't a legal leg to stand on. I've a car outside, and when you're in that and away he'll have to sit down and cool off! I've a marriage license—look!"

He pulled it from his pocket, shaking it so violently before her eyes that it might have been blank paper for all she knew.

"Come on, Jacqueline!"

He shoved the license back into his pocket and made as if to pick her up and carry her. She felt his strong arm around her, and it was that that gave her power of speech; fear grew so acute that it broke its own spell.

"No! Go away, please! You mustn't stay in here another second!"

"Not another second!" he answered, laughing like a maniac; and he threw the other arm around her and tried to kiss her. How she did it she never knew, but she escaped him, and part of her veil came away in his hand. There was a chair between him and her now, but she could not have answered how it got there.

Something in her face and attitude seemed to arrest him. She was gaining strength—mental strength, womanhood was dawning. Never in her whole life until now had she stood and faced danger alone. Her very innocence was coming to her aid.

"You are not behaving like a gentleman!" she said quietly. "Go out of here!"

He laughed more like a maniac than ever.

"Jacqueline! Do you love that old man? Are you crazy? Are you fool enough to throw away your young life, when you know I love you! God! It's horrible! Tell me—do you think you love him!"

She was actually calm now. Dimly she was beginning to comprehend strange mysteries. She could pity him. "You don't understand," she answered. "I don't love anybody in the way you mean. I love Desmio because he is noble, and generous, and good. I don't love you at all."

She had said too much. Jack Calhoun did not believe one word of it, and all the blood of all the Caverly-Calhouns rose boiling at opposition. He desired. She could see the madness in his eyes, and shrank away from it; but a wolf does not sheathe his fangs because the lamb is frightened. His hand went to his pocket, and she glimpsed the butt of a pistol.

"Jacqueline, I'll kill you before I'll let you marry that man! Come away with me now, or take the consequences!"

"Leave the room at once!" she answered, stamping her foot.

Now it was he who had made the wrong appeal. She was not afraid of that. She would rather be killed than submit. Her eyes met his gravely, but their challenge only stirred his passion to the point where he lost all self-control. He pointed the pistol straight at her heart.

"I'll kill you, Jacqueline, if you don't come with me!"

He hesitated, hoping she would yield, for he saw sudden fear in her eyes—and did not know the door was opening behind him. She saw Desmio. He only saw her sudden change of expression.

"I'll love you forever if you come away with me. If not—"

"What does this mean, sir?"

The voice in the door was like the ring of tempered steel, and Jack Calhoun turned on his heel swiftly. One of Don Andres' hands was behind his back—the other on the door-knob. It was true, Don Andres might have had a pistol in his right hand, but Jack Calhoun was long past the thinking stage. He acted on impulse—aimed—and fired.

Thereafter nightmare—all a wild dream, blurred—yet, burned into her memory. Don Andres, face forward dead—shot through the heart; and the first into the room was Clinton Wahl, cavernous-eyed, with a mouth that smiled like the satyr's on the gargoyle fountain in the patio. He glanced down at Don Andres, not even stooping to see whether he still lived. Three strides, and he was face to face with Jacqueline.

"By God! The devil's own!"

That was Jack Calhoun's voice. It was followed instantly by a second pistol-shot. Wahl scarcely turned his head. One swift glance showed him Jack Calhoun with a hole in his brain, lying bleeding on the rug beside the bed. His eyes on Jacqueline's again, fascinated—froze her cold.

And because her heart felt dead, her very soul numb; terror and grief and amazement made her sick and weak; because all her universe had crumbled and was swept away in a moment—that little frown danced and trembled on her forehead over the clear pure eyes, and it seemed to Wahl that the eyes were mocking him.

Cherchez la femme!

He seized her wrist, as Jack Calhoun had done. "What happened?" he demanded. "Tell me all about it!" And she knew she hated him ten times worse than she had ever dreamed of hating Donna Isabella.

"Come on now—tell me!" he repeated. It was he who preserved her from actually fainting, for she hated him so that it gave her a connecting link with consciousness.

Pity? There was no more pity for her in Clinton Wahl's mind than a vivisectionist has for the stray dog he tortures. This was the story that should get him transferred to the Tribune. News! Front-page headlines! Feed the public what it wants, and it will make you famous! He shook her.

"Now out with it! How did Calhoun get in here?"

Then Consuelo—hurrying in like a hen whose one beloved chick is in danger—hustling Wahl—boxing his ear with a stinging smack like another pistol-shot, that did nothing to soften Wahl's asperity. Then Father Doutreleau. And then the crowd.

Memory grew vaguer after that. She knew she flung herself on Desmio's body—and there was blood on her hands and on the torn bridal veil, and in blotches on the lace of the Spanish dress. She knew she kissed his lips, but they were lifeless. Next, she was sobbing on Consuelo's bosom, being petted, and drawing no comfort whatever from the words:

"Oh, Conchita! Oh, my poor child! Oh, my baby!"

She did not want to be comforted. There was nothing left she did want—no Desmio, nor anything in all the world except Wahl's hateful eyes and leering lips, accusing her—accusing her—of what? And Desmio dead! Did he think she had killed him? That million-times worse brute than Jack Calhoun—did he—didn't he know she would have torn her heart out with her own hands rather than let one least injury be done to Desmio!

Jack Calhoun had he shot himself, or had Wahl killed him? She was vague about that. She could only remember Jack Calhoun's bitter laugh and his last words:

"By God! The devil's own!"

Was Wahl the devil? He looked like it!

Then along the balcony and downstairs, Consuelo coaxing her, and across the patio between the loaded tables amid a murmur of voices, under the gaze of what felt like a thousand eyes, with her face all smothered in her veil on Consuelo's shoulder; and once—only once she looked up. Why? What made her do it? Was there no hiding-place? Was she in hell? For there stood Donna Isabella blocking the way in front of her between two tables, glaring and pointing with a lean forefinger at the blood on her hands and dress.

"You wicked, wicked girl! Is that my brother Andres' reward for caring for you?"

Suddenly a smash—of crockery she supposed—and a chorus of "Oh! Ah! Say! Did you see that?" Consuelo threw a plate, or a dish, or something at Donna Isabella, and upset the table, and everybody cried out. And what became of Donna Isabella she did not know, but the next she remembered she was burying her face in the pillow on the bed in Consuelo's room, and Consuelo was trying to get her wedding dress off, sobbing, and crying.

"Oh, Conchita! Oh, honey! Oh, my poor darling baby! Oh, how could the Holy Virgin let this happen!"

The door was locked, for she heard people knocking but no one could get in. Once Consuelo went to the door, she remembered, and scolded through it—scolded scandalously. There were threats from some one in the passage, and she thought she heard Wahl's voice, and cried out!

"Don't let him in! Don't you dare let him in! He's the devil, Consuelo!"

After that there was nothing to remember except agony of mind and emptiness—grief too dreadful to be recognized for what it was, transmuting itself into physical pain, when her thought grew too numb to register impressions, and racking her whole body in nervous torture until she screamed aloud. No unconsciousness. No peace. No hiding-place from something indescribable—not a thought, for it had no name—nor a thing, for it was shapeless—but a haunting pale-green fear that she felt, that she knew would hound her until she turned on it.

And she was too afraid to turn on it—did not know how. And Desmio was gone forever. She cried aloud to God to bring him back to life and to let her die instead of him, while Consuelo tried to comfort her, coaxing.

"Hush, honey! Hush, Conchita! Oh, my baby dear, you don't know what you're saying, child! Oh, honey dear, do hush!"

CHAPTER 12.

"Me—I'm made!"

Wahl was in his element. First on the scene—the only man who had thought of watching Jack Calhoun—witness of the last half of the tragedy—personal success at stake—he went to work with the cold determined zeal of the kind that crowns efforts. He could visualize the headlines, even hear the newsboys, while he conned the situation.

He made no notes, asked hardly any questions. No need. It was Wahl's fingers that removed the marriage license from Jack Calhoun's side-pocket; his eyes that read it first; and he put it back into the pocket lest the other reporters should see it too soon and spoil his "beat." He had all the makings of a perfect scoop.

Jacqueline Lanier—beautiful, young, talented—convent-reared—cold-hearted—dancing like Herod's daughter, while her lover looked on, throwing smiles to the gray-haired Miro, whom she was presently to marry for his money—guiltily startled as she sees her lover—flight—the lover pursues her to her bedroom—knows the way to it!—the lover pleads, offers to marry her at once, and shows the license—she sneers and refuses. Enter old Miro. High words. Double tragedy! Outcry? Fainting? Not a bit of it! Calmness—eyes full of mocking laughter! A modern Borgia! A Catherine de Medici at seventeen! Herodias!

Principals—the richest and best known planter in Louisiana, cousin of the famous gum-shoe magnate! The profligate son of the famous Frank Calhoun, who owned the most successful blockade-runners in the Civil War and afterward founded the Lion line of steamships in San Francisco—a man as well known in California as in the South! The orphan daughter of the last of the Laniers, a family that for generations past had been intimate with all the highest in the land, and the beauty of whose women was a by-word. Perfect! Why ask questions? Let the League of Nations and the next elections rot! Wahl had a story—a whale of a story!

There were questions, though, that he did ask. He had a gift for going straight to the meat of things and probing sources others overlooked. He found Donna Isabella—forced his way into her

apartment— scandalized her into hysteria—and by darkly hinting that she might possibly be blamed, induced her to scream her version at him.

Jacqueline was a heartless, impudent, designing minx, who had nearly broken Don Andres' and her own heart by flirting with Jack Calhoun, and then had hypnotized Don Andres to the point of marrying her, so that she might have his money and estates! But she had missed her mark, thank heaven! Don Andres' death had come an hour too soon, and she was penniless. She, Isabella Miro, who had loved the girl and had tried to be kind and affectionate, had been rewarded by a plate of cakes thrown in her face. Mr.—what was his name?—Clinton Wahl must excuse her from further conversation; she was crushed on account of her dear brother's death. And if truth were in question, she looked it. Wahl bowed himself out, and heard the key turn on the inside. Perfect! She would see no more reporters.

An effort then to find Jacqueline and force a confession from her; but there he failed. He discovered which room she was in by the sobbing and the cries of Consuelo trying to comfort her. He hammered on the door—used threats—tried to force the door down with his shoulder. But Consuelo answered threat for threat, and vowed she would kill him if he passed the threshold.

Then occurred what might have enlightened Wahl, if he had been seeking light and not sensation. There came a Negro footman down the passage; Wahl offered him twenty dollars to help force the door down. He was not much of a Negro—none too big; but he and Wahl could have broken the door between them. He showed the whites of his eyes, and Wahl raised the offer of twenty dollars to fifty. The next he knew, he was reeling backward along the passage from a smash in the jaw from the footman's fist. There was plainly some one in the house besides her nurse who thought the world of Jacqueline. Negro footmen don't hit white men in Louisiana without knowing they undertake a gruesome risk. Wahl might have drawn deductions, had he seen fit.

But rubbing his jaw, he ran into the garden, and around the house in search of the window of Consuelo's room—found it—heard sobbing—and started to swing himself up on the window-sill. A Negro gardener came running, threatened him with a rake and began shouting for help. One beating by a Negro was enough for even Wahl's enthusiasm, so he ran for his car and drove off in a whirl of dust for the nearest telegraph office, mapping out his story while he broke all speed-laws.

He would be in time for the evening edition in New Orleans and San Francisco, provided he rushed and had the copy at his finger's ends; and that was his specialty—all brain work and no notes—clean copy, headlines and all. He could dictate it straight to the telegrapher if only the fellow had sufficient skill.

"Hunches beat a full house! I'd a hunch to cover this wedding," he reflected. "Gee! The story of the year, and my first to the Tribune! I'll bet I'm on my way to Frisco in a week! I'd a hunch Jack Calhoun would break out on the front page presently—and holy smoke, that Lanier girl's a pippin! Me—I'm made!"

CHAPTER 13.

"Facts presented with a punch!"

There were no women on the San Francisco Tribune staff. John Covert Mansfield so decreed—the "Iron Old Man," whose vitriolic pen and point of view, reinforced by a beaver's energy, had raised the Tribune from tenth to third place among daily newspapers. He was more than owner and managing editor; he was the power, the newspaper itself, and notorious as the ablest and most exacting editor alive. It was an education—a cachet for advancement elsewhere—to have worked under Mansfield on the Tribune.

He had a son, so he must have had a wife, and there was a legend, seldom mentioned, that an unfortunate marriage had embittered him against all women. "Dad" Lawrence, the Tribune's social reporter, who had been on the paper longer than any one except Mansfield himself, knew more about the facts than he generally cared to tell. "Dad" was privileged—almost intimate with Mansfield—even had a key to Mansfield's so-called "cabin" in the mountains and spent his rare vacations up there, and was about the only man in the Tribune Building who ever dared to oppose the old man's wishes or to criticize him to his face.

Once in a while, when the subject cropped up in some twenty-minute breathing spell between editions, Dad would have a word or two to say. He never entered into details, but he had his own philosophy of life, which differed in most respects from that of the Tribune as chalk does from cheese.

"I never married—and for the same reason that the old man never should have; only in his case there's ten times more reason. Look at him, he has a hotel apartment, that he visits every other day or so, and there's even a telephone beside the bath. Most nights he sleeps on a couch in the office, and grudges the time spent eating and shaving. Eighteen hours out of twenty-four, he works; during five, he's asleep, more or less; that leaves an hour for meals and all the rest of it. Where does a wife come in? He married the Tribune when he took it; over-tried for a while to be a bigamist—and failed. I don't blame Mrs. Mansfield, or any other woman who would kick under such conditions. I don't blame Mansfield either. He's the Tribune. That's all there is to him."

"He's sure got teeth!" said Barnes, the city editor. Barnes had just come out from a stormy session with Mansfield and spoke with feeling.

"He knows news! He can smell it. I believe there's something in his bones that tells him half an hour before a story breaks," remarked Gunning, of the telegraph desk. "He's restless now."

"You bet he is!" said Barnes. "He'll walk me, if I don't step on her."

"He knows what the public wants, that's his secret. And he feeds it to 'em peppered and smoking hot," said Gunning. "Here she comes!—I told you —special-rush—exclusive—Clinton Wahl—that's the New Orleans man—hello—Calverly-Calhoun—that's the Lion Line outfit—Miro—Lanier—Gee whiz! Boy! The whole bench is asleep, Goddamit! Boy!"

Two minutes later Mansfield strode in, holding a roughly scribbled sheet of copy-paper in his right hand. He took no notice of any one, except the three at the telegraph desk at one end of the big news-room, where Dad and Barnes were watching Gunning. Gunning, pencil in hand, was reading telegrams, with his left hand ready to snatch the next sheet from the operator at the desk beside him. Saying nothing, Mansfield looked over Gunning's shoulder, watching for several minutes as sheet after sheet of Wahl's message came off the wire.

"Special!" he said, nodding. "Great stuff. Now, boys, for God's sake don't mess it this time! Boy! Tell Mr. Trig I want him." He pulled out his watch. "We've forty minutes. Make over the whole

front page and spread this on four columns thirty-six point head. Spike the Board of Trade stuff. Dad— cover Calhoun, and all the dope about his father. What do you know of the Laniers? Dig 'em out of the morgue, and play it uprush now!"

Dad ran to his desk. Trig came hurrying from the stone, wiping black hands on a cotton waste and dashed away again, grinning. Mansfield returned to his office to telephone the circulation manager, and a new, acute, accentuated din was added to the normal clatter of the news-room as the story of Jacqueline Lanier was rushed through the string of miracles that tread on one another's heels in the throes of birth of a special edition—until the huge building began to tremble to the thump of mighty engines, and the big vans backed into the alley-ways to receive the finished bundled copies.

In the pause that followed, when the last big van had roared away, Dad strolled into Mansfield's office and found him reading the front page, smiling over it.

"That's a good story," said Mansfield, looking up at Dad and laying down the paper. "I'm going to send for Wahl."

"He has a fair 'rep,'" Dad answered.

"'Rep' be damned! He has brains! He's turned in a big beat! Give me one a day like that, and I'll treble the circulation. Look at his stuff compared with yours! Good God, you've written up the Calverly-Calhouns as if they'd just donated something to the Y.M.C.A.—and the Laniers—old ladies' tea-fight! Read Wahl's stuff. There's a man who knows how to cover a story."

Dad picked up the paper and read the heavy black type down to the foot of the column. (His own was on the inside page.)

"It's sensational enough," he said presently.

"Sensational? It's facts presented with a punch,"

"Oh, it's cleverly written," Dad conceded. "There's nothing there, I suppose, that's libelous. But suppose the facts have been misrepresented? Her reputation's gone. It's cruel."

"Cruel? So is life!" said Mansfield. "We're face to face with life. Our business is to let the public know what's going on. News is the breath they breathe, and we supply it."

"That's the dope ring's argument, and the bootleggers' standby," Dad retorted. "They claim they give the public what it wants. The question is —just what is news?"

Mansfield laughed. Dad's point of view always amused him. He liked the man, and kept him on the paper more because he dared to beard him in his den than for any other reason.

"News is neither law, nor religion, nor morals; it's sometimes about law, religion and morals—sometimes about other things. How often must I tell you that?" asked Mansfield with an air of rather weary patience. "The public pays, and calls the tune. We dance to it. A paper has to interest the public and anything that interests it is news. Come over here and watch."

He walked to the window and beckoned Dad to follow him. For several minutes they stood in silence watching the home-going crowds on the sidewalk and the newsboys at the street-corner

over the way yelling the "EXTRA" —"DOUBLE TRAGEDY!" headlines. They were selling papers as fast as they could hand them out.

"That, Dad, is news and what it does," said Mansfield. "A peace conference in Europe, or a political convention, would sell less than half as many papers. That's why I'm sending for Wahl, and why I'm troubled about my boy, Sherry."

"What's wrong with Sherry?" demanded Dad.

"Nothing but a sentimental streak. He's soft somewhere. He's bright —did splendidly at college—and he's keen. I've taught him to mistrust women, and done all I can to toughen him. I don't think he'll fall for the usual traps and he'll go far—but run a successful newspaper? —I doubt it. A man like Wahl may do him good. I think I'll let Sherry work under Wahl for a year or so."

"I've never met Wahl," Dad answered, "but I love Sherry. He's the nicest boy I know. I've read Wahl's stuff, and I hate it. My bet is that Sherry has guts enough to stand off you and Wahl both, and to carve his own line."

"We'll see," said Mansfield dryly. "Wahl has promised us a two-page feature and some photos for the Sunday Section. Let's hope he lands a good one of the Lanier girl. Get all you can about Jack Calhoun's record in Frisco, and be ready to feed Wahl the minute he comes. Let Wahl write the stuff, but feed him facts. And by the way, when Wahl comes, treat him nicely. Take him for a week-end to my cabin in the mountains, or something. Now get out of here—I'm busy!"

CHAPTER 14.

"Consuelo—what is a coroner?"

Women suffer more than men. For millions of years they have undergone the agony, while men provided it. Capacity to suffer is inherent in the whole sex, and to recover and forget in the joy of having brought forth. But where was joy for Jacqueline Lanier? What had she brought forth but disillusion?

She lay on the bed in Consuelo's room during uncounted hours, eating when Consuelo told her to, not knowing what she ate, not caring what should happen, not even trying to escape one pang of grief; for she hoped the grief would kill her. She did not cry any longer; there was nothing left to cry about. She did not pray; there was nothing to pray for. When Consuelo knelt and prayed before the image of the Virgin on the little table in the corner, she watched and wondered dumbly what was the use.

Consuelo did much more than pray, however. She saved Jacqueline's life —saved her reason. She recognized the instinct, that humans share with animals, to hide in a dark place when wounded. Consuelo drew the shades down, set furniture against the door, and held that fort against all comers, not wasting words on her patient when her own first paroxysms of despair were over, but watching, letting nature take its own course.

And it was no joke holding that fort. Police—one lone policeman, rather deferent, extremely curious, and not so sure of his rights. Then Donna Isabella.

"You may pack up and leave the house at once, Consuelo. I'm not going to keep you a minute longer."

"You never kept me yet! I'm here in spite of you! I'll go when I'm ready, and no sooner!"

"Oh, very well, I'll have to have you put out!"

"You dare! Just you dare, that's all! Wait and see what I'll say at the inquest! Wait till they ask me on oath who sent me with a letter to the convent from Calhoun! Wait till I've told all I know about you! I've not talked to the reporters yet. Turn me out of here, and straight I go to them!"

"You're a false, ungrateful, wicked woman!" snarled Donna Isabella. "What is Jacqueline doing in your room?"

"Dying, for anything you'd care!"

"She may go to her own room and stay there until I send for her!"

"She'll do nothing of the sort!"

"Well, your wages ceased yesterday. And Jacqueline has no claim on the estate. She may take her own belongings, but you may tell her not to look to me for—"

"She'll find she has more friends than you have!" Consuelo snapped, and slammed the door in Donna Isabella's face.

None of those encounters made the least impression on Jacqueline, though they were noisy enough. She heard, and simply did not care. Donna Isabella's venom stung no longer, and there was no future—could be none—nothing but the vision of Desmio lying dead in a pool of blood, with Wahl's terrible face looking into hers and saying "Now then, out with it!" She buried her face in the pillow and screamed when she thought of Wahl.

"It was the devil, Consuelo! Jack Calhoun cried out he was the devil's own! He haunts me!"

"Hush, honey dear. You've never seen the devil and never will. Try to forget him."

"I can't. I see his face all the time!"

"Come, Conchita, drink a little warm milk, there's a honey, and then sleep."

She was obedient, but she could not sleep. But there was no time when Donna Isabella's malice slept. They brought her the New Orleans papers—four or five of them—and all with screaming headlines, photographs of Don Andres Miro, Jacqueline, Jack Calhoun, and even of herself. Of leaded type the shame of the Miro's stared her in the face, a million times more degrading than the gum shoe-maker's half-page display on the back sheet.

Only one paper—Wahl's—the New Orleans Star gave her any comfort. As she read that she almost forgave Wahl for having dared to burst into her room. That paper told the whole truth. It showed up Jacqueline—described her as a monster of iniquity—pictured her as a vampire, with two love-affairs at seventeen, and a laugh on her lips and lying eyes when the bodies of lover and aged bridegroom lay dead at her feet.

But, oh, the black, aching shame of it! The Miro name dragged into the mud! The Miro pride humbled for the mob to laugh about! They spoke of the inquest, and of the facts that were expected to be brought out, of the witnesses who would be examined—herself, Consuelo, Jacqueline, the servants. She the proudest woman in Louisiana, was to be pilloried in public and browbeaten by a shoddy coroner—confronted with Consuelo's lies no doubt—and all because of Jacqueline!

Well, Consuelo and her tongue notwithstanding, at least she would show that girl what she had brought down on the house that had befriended her. She hunted for her keys. There was a pass-key on the ring, that opened all doors in the house except those behind which Don Andres had kept his private papers. Then she rang her bell.

"Let me know when Consuelo goes to the kitchen. Don't say a word to her."

Spite ran its full course. Donna Isabella tiptoed along the corridor, and entered Consuelo's room, closing the door quietly. She laid the copy of the New Orleans Star on the pillow close to Jacqueline's face, and stood watching, thin-lipped, saying nothing. But Jacqueline did not stir.

"Read it!" she said suddenly, and Jacqueline looked up at last, but showed no surprise, no interest.

"Read it, you wicked girl, and see what you've brought down on others!"

She pointed to the newspaper and left the room, not exactly anxious to be caught in there by Consuelo. Jacqueline sat up and held the paper to the dim light coming through the blind; and the first thing she saw was her own portrait! Then Desmio's and Jack Calhoun's enclosed in circles in the middle of the page. Then, slowly, big black type took shape, and she could not tear her eyes away from it.

Each line she read was like a stab at the heart which she had thought could feel no longer. Was this what the world would now believe of her? It likened her to Herodias*—and she knew that story. It called her a seventeen year-old Jezebel. It as good as said she had killed Desmio, and that she laughed to see him lying dead. It said her eyes mocked the reporter, and that she threw crockery in the face of the aged Donna Isabella, in the presence of scores of people, because Donna Isabella sent her to her room. It said she had locked herself into her room and would be seen by nobody, but hurled foul invective through the door when any one tried to gain admission. It said she would be haled before the coroner—whoever he might be—and made to give explanation; that the courtroom was expected to be crowded

"Who is the coroner?" she asked quite quietly, as Consuelo entered with the beef tea. It was the quietness of absolute despair, and Consuelo recognized it.

"Mother of God! Who gave you that, child? Where did you get the newspaper?"

Consuelo snatched it away from her and tore it up savagely. She had already seen a copy in the kitchen.

"Donna Isabella brought it in. What is a coroner, Consuelo?"

"That woman's worse than a murderess! Here, honey, be good now and take some beef-tea!"

"Consuelo, I want to know what a coroner is."

"Never you mind, honey."

"I must know. You must tell me. I'm to be hauled before a coroner tomorrow afternoon. What is a coroner?"

"Take your beef-tea, honey!"

"Not until you tell me what a coroner is."

"He's a sort of judge, dear. He'll ask questions, and you'll have to answer him."

"I won't! I won't answer people who believe those things of me!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to, honey. It won't be so bad. I'll be there, and I'll sit beside you while you just say yes or no to what he asks you. Then we'll—"

"I won't go, Consuelo."

"But they'll make you, Conchita. They'll come and fetch you, and me too, honey. You must make up your mind to—"

"It's made up! I shall not be here when they come for me, Consuelo. I won't answer people who believe those things of me!"

"Honey dear, don't talk nonsense."

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Conchita, what do you mean?"

"I'm going away."

"Where, honey?"

"I don't know. I'm just going. I shall not be here when they come for me."

There was no mistaking the note now. It was calm, without emphasis, without trace of hysteria. But she would go, or she would die. It was Consuelo who felt hysterical.

"But, Conchita, you've no money, and nowhere to go, and none to look after you—and the Holy Virgin knows you can't look after yourself."

"I'm going."

"When?"

"Now. Tonight."

"Honey dear, don't be absurd! D'you think I'd let you go? Be good now, and take your beef-tea, it's getting cold. You couldn't walk—they'd find you in an hour!—and who's to carry your things? You can't go without anything!"

"I'm going, Consuelo."

"Take your beef-tea, honey. Would you leave me to face it all alone?"

"You may come with me if you wish," Jacqueline answered, in the same quiet voice.

Consuelo set the cup and saucer down and cried; but it was no use. Jacqueline was unemotional, but firmer than a rock; no longer terrified, long past the stage where fear could touch her. There was a courage in the blue eyes now, and the hint of a faraway vision, as if she saw one little ray of hope beyond the edge of things. It unnerved Consuelo, and then made her stare until she crossed herself and shuddered. She knew it was no use urging; she must give in, or there would be another death, or madness on her hands.

"Sister Michaela told me to trust my intuition. That's why I'm going, Consuelo. I'm going to turn my back on everything."

"Honey dear, wait until morning. We can't walk. We must take clothes with us. I've money in the savings bank, and we can draw that out. Give me until morning, and I'll pack meanwhile and see if I can't get a car, and some things to eat in a basket, and—"

"We must be gone before daybreak, Consuelo."

"Honey, you're too impatient! They don't open banks that early, and —"

"You needn't come unless you want to. I'd just as soon go now."

"Will you go to sleep, honey, if I leave you and pack your things?"

"If you promise, Consuelo."

"Yes, I promise, dearie. We'll go before daylight, even if we have to walk."

Jacqueline let her head fall on the pillow and was asleep within five minutes, relaxed, and breathing steadily. So hope can change all in a moment. There was something certain—one step visible ahead; and the past was gone; and youth resumed its sway. Consuelo watched her for a while; then, sure she was sleeping, locked her in and hurried by the back way into the garden—down through the gate in the wall at the end, and across three fields in the dark to a row of cottages where the colored hands lived.

"Zeke! Zeke!"

"Here I is, Miss Consuelo."

Only the glow of his pipe and the whites of his eyes were visible. He was sitting on a log under the shadow of a tree between two cottages, and his manner was much more deferential than it had been recently; he even got to his feet and set his thumb over the bowl of the pipe. Consuelo paused to get her breath, and took in the situation with a general eye.

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you indoors?"

"There's ha'nts in there, miss."

"Are you a good Catholic, Zeke?"

"Ah is, but Ah's scared mos' nearly daid."

"That's because you took the bribe from Mr. Jack Calhoun—"

"Miss Consuelo, you ain't gwine tell ag'in me 'bout that 'fore de coroner?"

"If we weren't here, we wouldn't have to go before the coroner."

"Where's we gwine?"

"You may drive Miss Jacqueline."

"Where's she gwine?"

"Never you mind. She'll tell you. If you're outside the garden gate with one of the cars an hour before daylight, the coroner can whistle, can't he?"

Zeke shook his head, beginning slowly and increasing the speed until the whites of his eyes made a horizontal streak in the darkness.

"Why not?"

"Dey's done locked de garage, an' took mah key."

For a second, Consuelo was nonplussed, but she had laid bare Zeke's obsessing terror, and pursued her advantage blindly.

"Can't you get another car? Not for Miss Jacqueline's sake? Not to do a good deed for Don Andres now he's dead? Remember, the coroner—"

"Where's Ah gwine git him, honey?"

"Horses then?"

"Yo' means plantation horses? Dey's some. Dey's mos' dat ole dey's 'bout daid. Bes' ones was all 'spatched fer de 'mergency. Dey's haulin' dirt for de levee t'ree days now." .

"Well, if there are two left, you can take them without being seen, can't you?"

"Ah s'pose."

"Take one of the old four-wheel buggies from the barn, harness the two best horses, and be at the garden gate an hour before daylight, Zeke. If you're there, and hold your tongue, I'll hold mine. You understand me?"

"Dat buggy hain't had no grease put in him sence—"

"Grease it yourself, then, you lazy nigger! I can't waste time talking to you. Either you do or you don't; which is it? I shall tell the coroner—"

"Miss Consuelo, Ah's yo' bes' frien'! Ah's gwine grease dat buggy good. Ah's gwine drive you-all anywhere! Ah sho'ly is."

"If you're late—"

"Ah's gwine be dere, miss!"

But Zeke's promise was nothing much to build on; there were too many possibilities of greater fears that might occur to him, or that he might take some one into his confidence, or be seen taking the horses, and Consuelo returned to the house with her heart in her throat.

She found Jacqueline awake again and already dressed, moving up and down the room restlessly, packing Consuelo's clothes into a straw valise—to save time, as she explained it—with no more idea what to pack, and what to leave behind, than she had of where she was going.

"There, Conchita—wasn't that thoughtful of you!"

Consuelo swallowed her chagrin and left her occupied while she crept up to Jacqueline's room and crowded bare necessities into a dressing-bag, including all the jewelry—wry-faced as she reflected that the trinkets and the few good stones were only too likely to change owners presently.

That task accomplished, she began to wish she had ordered Zeke to be ready sooner. She used up an hour undoing Jacqueline's handiwork, and another fifteen minutes foraging in the larder for provisions to take with them; but then there was nothing left to do but sit and wait—hour after interminable hour of inaction, with Jacqueline demanding to know why. Once she went out to find Zeke, but failed in her search, and that only increased anxiety. If Zeke had decided to run away on his own account, as was quite likely, they were done for!

"Where shall we go?" she asked at last, hoping to give Jacqueline something to occupy her mind. She had made up her own mind on that point long ago.

"Oh, anywhere."

"We'll go first to the city, honey, where I can find something to do. I'll try the employment agencies, and then perhaps I can get something in another state and take you along. But we mustn't take the train from our station. We must drive thirty miles to the junction, and buy tickets in the wrong direction, so's to put them off the scent."

"Have you any money, Consuelo?"

"Enough for the fares, honey."

More than an hour before Zeke was due they were waiting for him in the shadow of the garden wall, startled by every sound and racked with anxiety. But a buggy that had not been greased came squeaking through the dark at last, and they climbed in, Zeke saying nothing.

"Drive along the levee to the junction, Zeke."

"Dat ole levee's per'lous near bu'stin'!"

"Did you hear me tell you!"

"Sho—Ah ain't deaf—Giddap!"

And so they left behind the haven of Jacqueline's girlhood and girlhood with it. Desmio's mansion and the wall surrounding it passed away behind them into darkness like a dream, and were out of sight when morning came. But Jacqueline never looked back for a last glimpse; some sort of future had been born in travail and heavy labor; the past was dead, and she had no more use for it, nor it for her—nor much use for the future, though it had begun to glimmer dimly, like the morning, when the creaking wheels moved.

There was a light mist like a bridal-veil along the bottoms in the shelter of the levee, and she thanked heaven for it, since, though the wheels squeaked a mournful warning to all the countryside, they were hardly visible at twenty paces. And they passed very few people, even after daybreak. Those who saw them were mostly Negroes, and all hurrying one way in answer to the whistles that announced danger at a point along the levee—the awful summons to every able-bodied man to turn out and help pile dirt. None of those straggling, sparse laborers was likely to turn back and report having seen them.

Later, they began to pass fugitives driving cows and hurrying toward them in carts loaded high with household goods. Those shouted warnings that terrified Zeke nearly out of his senses. The levee looked like breaking at a point about a mile ahead.

"She ain't agwine las' anuvver hour! You-all bes' turn dem horses aroun'!"

Zeke elected to follow that advice, but the wheels were in soft ruts nearly hub-deep and though the horses plunged under the whip they only nearly broke the pole, and one of the wheels cracked ominously.

"Oh, Oh, what'll we do? Oh, honey dear, you'll drown!"

More fugitives came pouring down on them, blocking the road, and Zeke jumped on to a passing cart, yelling to them to follow suit. Consuelo wrung her hands in impotent despair, and then bethought of her image of the Blessed Virgin, which she had packed in the straw suit-case with underwear tucked carefully around it. She crossed herself, unpacked it, held it up:

"Now!" she cried. "Now! I've prayed to you often enough! Preserve us now!"

It was Jacqueline whose courage rose to the occasion. Fear seemed to hold no further terrors, or if it did, she faced the horror that she did not know in front, in preference to the terror she had turned her back on. She climbed up to the driver's seat and took the reins that Zeke had draped over the dashboard.

"Conchita! Conchita! You're crazy! Come down here!"

But the buggy went forward with a lurch and Consuelo sat down on the rear seat suddenly. They plunged into the mist, that by a freak of wind had gathered suddenly and rolled toward them. Out

of the mist and silence ahead a man's voice cried out—a mile, or a hundred yards away, there was no telling, but as clear as the summons of Judgment Day:

"Christ! She's going, boys! Jump!"

Something thundered like wind in a sail, and the horses reared and broke the pole at last. There came a roar like a waterfall. The levee on their left hand broke apart like lumps of chocolate on the edge of a cake. The world shook. Three converging floods of dark-brown water, darker than the mist and yet a part of it, swept down on them exactly as the scenes change in a dream. The panorama swung. Dream-horses, kicking madly in the tangled harness, came over backward into the buggy on a dark-brown wave.

"Conchita!"

"Consuelo!"

Two screams, drowned in the deafening roar of water, and then a sense of being swept along forever, whirling, whirling, tossed up and down again, half-conscious, in a skirt that wrapped itself around helpless legs, with logs and dead things, and the timber of broken houses plunging to right and left—a momentary glimpse of sky—then mouth, eyes, all under water again—up once more, to gasp and cling to something that gave way—again the deluge.

Jacqueline was glad! She was drowning—dying! She felt young again! Her heart sang, the while her lungs ached and her ears tortured her, and every nerve and instinct in her fought for life! She struggled without knowing it—clung to branches without knowing that she clung—welcomed death, and fought it as a young life fights forever—until a barn-roof swinging in mid-stream, nearly knocked the last life out of her, and she held on, not knowing that she held. A great branch, backed up by an eddy, hove itself from beneath her. Roof and branch turned inward in opposing circles, and the movement tossed her, unconscious at last, on the roof as it whirled away downstream.

CHAPTER 15.

"Conchita!"

To Wahl's surprise, and hardly veiled contempt, Sherry Mansfield declined to be shown around New Orleans—refused to take lunch—did not wish to be introduced to local celebrities—consented to visit the Star office, but turned down Wahl's handsome offer to send him as his own substitute to cover the Miro wedding, news of which had just come in over the wire—and asked nothing but to be led to the best garage in town, where he might hire a car in which, as he called it, to head up-country.

"I told you what the floods'll be," said Wahl.

"My dad said floods. I'll cover 'em!"

"You'll learn to take his orders and put your own interpretation on them some day," Wahl assured him.

"Wait till you've met dad."

So Sherry bought blankets and a thermos bottle, chucked the lot into a hired car, invented a rig to hold his typewriter so that he might use it on the run, and ordered the darky driver to follow the left bank of the Mississippi until further orders.

"Step on her. I'll pay the fine," said Sherry. "If there is a flood, I'll write it!"

After four days of tireless activity, he learned what fifteen minutes' inquiry in New Orleans would have supplied him at no expense—the exact position of the real danger-point. And there he planted his car with its wheels hub-deep in mud, face to the enemy, and waited, writing down the symptoms of the sick brown bank. He knew to a decimal point how many tons of dirt the dump-carts brought—how many thousand bags of sand were piled—how many men were working. And the levee held. Sherry Mansfield nearly wept.

He was mortified when Wahl showed up in a big car, late one afternoon and turned his satyr-smile on the situation. If he could, he would have sunk into the ground before Wahl saw him, but there was very little that Wahl did not see—even to the brief-bag full of typewritten description.

"Glad I found you, youngster."

Sherry made note of the change of address, and was not too glad, and looked it.

"You missed a big thing when you turned that wedding down. Double tragedy. Best story of the year."

"Wait till the levee breaks!"

"It won't. Never does when it's watched. I wired the story of that wedding to the Tribune. Your dad sent for me at once—got his wire last night. Thought I'd do you a turn in exchange—you see, I owe it to you two ways; for recommending me in the first place, and for making me cover the wedding myself! So I decided to catch the Limited at the junction, and make it by road on the chance of running into you. I've brought a copy of the paper—here, take it—whole front page."

Sherry took the paper absent-mindedly and stuffed it in his pocket, which annoyed Wahl.

"Be advised, and read it, youngster. That's a story. It's what got me on the Tribune."

Sherry looked rather more interested, but his eye was on the levee all the while, and on a man in overalls on top of the bank who stood remarkably still, with his hands in his pockets, whistling. Wahl continued:

"It occurred to me you'd like a chance to clean up on the story. You'll get more of it than from the Mississippi in a hundred years. I've got to go—I'm wired for, and the Limited won't wait. You pick up the story where I left off. It's your big chance!"

Sherry met his eyes—nodded—looked back at the levee. He was hardly listening.

"The girl's name's Lanier. Jacqueline Lanier. Get her story from her own lips. I hadn't time to make her talk, and she won't see any one, but they'll haul her out before the coroner tomorrow;

but she's one of those deep-eyed wise ones, who won't tell much. You use your wits and get next to her somehow. Believe me, you'll have a story you can sign!"

Sherry glanced down at the paper protruding from his pocket and smiled politely.

"Thanks," he said, "I'll read it."

"Well, I'm off. See you in Frisco, I suppose. Good-by."

"Good-by," said Sherry, suddenly remembering to shake hands. "Good of you, I'm sure. Thanks awfully." He had almost forgotten the incident—had forgotten the paper entirely, before Wahl's car was out of sight. He was dreaming dreams and seeing visions—planning—letting ideas come to him from where they would—imagining a future Mississippi Valley, drained and safely banked with all the flood-waters stored up a thousand or more miles away—being a boy with a man's brain. The boy watched like a lynx to see the mud-bank go. The man schemed reconstruction.

It was the whistling man with hands deep in his pockets on the levee who invited him at last to join him in a launch and see the night patrol through by water.

"Suit yourse'f, son, but of you'll excuse me the observation, you seem interested. If so minded, you may sleep, suh. But if you'd keep that searchlight moving in the bow, you'd see more, and help me. How about it?"

All that night long Sherry stayed awake, plying the electric searchlight as the launch patrolled the bank, returning again and again to the point of most imminent danger, while the leisurely individual who gave the orders stood by the whistle to sound the alarm, and the gangs ashore kept toiling under kerosene flares.

"Ef the river don't drop by dawn, she'll open up," was the only comment the inspector made; but he made it more than once.

However, dawn came, and the levee held. The searchlight paled and was switched off. Sherry yawned, considering coffee and a razor. An hour after dawn, the inspector ran the boat's nose against the bank, threw a line to some one ashore, glanced behind him casually—and sprang for the whistle like a fiend let loose. He gave three long blasts; and as if that were the signal for the whole world's end, the levee broke at the danger-point three hundred yards below them. A new brown river burst through to the bottom-lands. The very river-current changed, and the launch at full speed forward fought to keep the rope from breaking.

"Drowned the gangs?" asked Sherry.

"Mebbe."

The levee kept going in sections, leaving islands here and there that cut up the flood into hurrying torrents in which it looked impossible for anything to live. The inspector cut the bow-rope with an ax, and after thirty paralyzing seconds at the helm contrived to work the launch out into the river, where he headed up-stream and worked slowly around in a semicircle until they were a hundred yards above the scene of the first break.

"Time to make it's now, I guess," he said quietly, in Sherry's ear.

"Make what?"

"Pick up a few. There'll be some swimmin'—an' some not. You swim, son?"

Sherry nodded.

"Soak her all she has now, Mose!"

It was gorgeous madness, and Sherry laughed aloud. The long lean inspector at the wheel pulled out a plug of tobacco from his overalls, bit off a piece, and handed the rest to Sherry.

"Gee, she's openin' up! She'll fill the bottoms most a hundred mile one way. There'll be funerals. Ain't she got no more'n that, Mose? Hang on, all!"

The launch plunged like a bit of driftwood but the inspector kept her headed almost straight for the middle of the broadest gap, where a torrent a quarter-mile wide now poured with a roar like Niagara.

"Get y'r boat-hook, son, an' ketch 'em if you see one. You'll have to make it snappy."

Sherry unfastened the boat-hook from its rack and stood amidships. But it was impossible to see anything except driftwood and drowned cattle in that hurrying brown flood. It was fifteen minutes before they reached water that was slack enough for the engine to hold its own, and five minutes after that before Sherry stuck the boat-hook into something black that was jammed in the fork of a floating tree.

"What ye got, son?"

"Woman, I guess."

"Kickin' too, by the look of her! Lend a hand, Mose!"

She was less than half-drowned, but all-hysterical, and angrier at the boat-hook than a she-tiger at the cleaner's rake; what with wet clothes and a basket she still clung to, her weight was enormous; but they hauled her aboard between them, and set her gasping against the engine housing.

"Name, please," Sherry asked her, remembering his chosen profession.

"Consuelo Martinez."

The answer was automatic—the subconscious functioning of a mind nearly unhinged by the experience she had come through. Her first act was equally automatic. She undid the basket and pulled out an image of the Virgin, beginning to cry as she saw the paint and gilt had suffered.

"Friends?" asked Sherry, feeling for his pencil and scrap of paper. "Relatives? Any one with you when you got lost?"

For a second she looked blankly at him, then set the image of the Virgin down, rose staggering to her feet, and screamed: "Conchita! Conchita!"

"Who's she?" asked Sherry, while the launch chugged steadily ahead in search of other victims.

"Conchita! Oh! Oh! Conchita! My baby! Conchita! Conchita!"

She leaned over the side of the launch and screamed at the brown flood, striking angrily at Sherry when he tried to calm her, pointing at driftwood—at dead cattle—at anything that moved or showed itself for a second on the water.

"There she is! There she is! Conchita!"

"I'll put her ashore first chance," said the inspector, and Sherry left off trying to question her. But it made no difference; she ran from one to the other, striking at them, even wrenching at the wheel, demanding that they find Conchita, then returning to lean overside and spread her arms out, crying the same name again and again until her voice cracked and nothing came forth but a hoarse whisper. The inspector touched his forehead, and Sherry nodded.

They pulled out two drowned men after that, and towed a living horse behind them to a bank, where a raised road checked the flood and people were already building fires. There were several corpses laid out in a row, and there were signs that the inevitable somebody had taken charge and had begun to form the nucleus of a rescue station.

"You bes' stan' by that woman till she's fixed up," said the inspector, as they landed the dead freight feet-first. Consuelo was trying to jump ashore, still screaming, still imagining she saw Conchita everywhere. Sherry went to help her and she fell on him, bearing him down head-under into the water at the bank's edge, but she scrambled out first and up the bank ahead of him, crying to the groups of men beside the fires and wringing her hands. Sherry took her basket and went after her, and before he could turn his head the launch had gone.

Consuelo collapsed at last from lack of breath, and Sherry found a woman who promised to look after her. With breathlessness came a trace of returning sanity. She clung to Sherry, begging him to find Conchita and even trying to describe her:

"Blue eyes—dark hair—seventeen—"

"I'll look for her," said Sherry.

"Promise me!"

When he promised she let go of him—drove him away—screamed at him to make haste, and the last he heard as he followed the road toward what looked like a village a mile away, was her cracked, hoarse shriek: "Conchita! Conchita!"

He could not have forgotten the name if he had tried. A few minutes later he found a man struggling to launch a flat-bottomed plank boat that had been cast up against the bank with oars still chained to the rowlocks. He helped him, and volunteered to row with him in search of victims, so they set off, paddling slowly until the current swept them around a bend and outward toward the main stream. Then the other man broke his oar in frenzied efforts to force the half-filled boat's head shoreward, and one oar was worse than useless. Sherry sat still.

"Suit yourself!" said the other man suddenly, and jumped for a tree that rolled and whirled by.

Sherry did suit himself, and sat still in the sinking boat, while the great tree rolled and bobbed and ducked, and he lost sight of the man altogether. Then he saw something moving faster than the water, fifty yards away to his right, toward mid-stream, and began to kick his boots off. The boat would sink in a minute or two. He might as well go and lend that strong swimmer encouragement, if nothing more. So he ran his belt through his coat sleeves, tied his boots to it by the laces and, towing the coat, plunged in.

He used the crawl stroke, and he was a strong enough swimmer to have reached shore by quartering the current, but that obviously living head being borne along in front of him was a challenge that stirred his pluck, and he struck out in pursuit. It was about the time that the current began to get the mastery and to sweep him farther toward mid-stream that he discovered he was following a dog.

He drew abreast, and the dog looked at him piteously, beating the water to raise itself and coughing up a plaintive whine.

"All right, doglums!" he cried out, and swam closer, keeping far enough away to prevent the dog from pawing him.

A minute or two later he overhauled a section of an old board fence, and seizing the dog's collar helped him on to it. Swimming was easier then; he clung to the planks and more or less floated with the stream, only the fool dog would not keep still, although he cursed him loud and fervently. At last, barking his mongrel head off at a barn-roof, the dog tipped the planks too far, lost his balance, and fell into the water panic-stricken, swimming in rings. Sherry seized him by the collar, and struck out for the barn-roof; but he hardly made it; he was more tired than he knew, and the flood was running with the full weight of the Mississippi heaped behind it.

But the barn-roof swung, and he caught a corner of it with his left hand. He had to let go of the dog to do that, and the dog yelped miserably as the current carried him away. Sherry did not like half-doing things. Or it was possibly the streak of sentiment, that gave his father so much uneasiness. He went back for the dog.

Then the roof swung around again toward him in the vortex of the flood. He seized the side of it—threw the dog up high and dry—and hauled himself out with his last remaining strength. After that he did not remember much for a long time, except that he was sleepy and that the sky turned around and around overhead.

CHAPTER 16.

Sherry and nuts

A cold wet nose thrust into her ear awoke Jacqueline. She tried to brush it away and go on sleeping, for there was a rather delightful sensation of being rocked gently in a cradle, although her left hip ached a little where she lay on something hard. But the wet nose reasserted itself several times, and she opened her eyes; whereat a mongrel dog promptly began licking her face, and she was aware of brown water everywhere, and a blue sky overhead.

The funny part was that she felt—if not exactly happy—confident; perhaps because the dog was friendly; first impressions when you wake make a world of difference. She sat up, pulled her

shoes off, and poured the lees of water out of them. She was wet to the skin, but not so very wet; her clothes felt as if they were drying—tickled horribly, and she stood up to let the wind blow through them.

That gave her a view of the whole horizon, for the low-pitched roof on which she found herself was slowly revolving in mid-stream. There was a shore on either side, but a long way off, and there seemed no end to the water in the direction the roof was taking.

"Consuelo!" she called.

Then she remembered that Consuelo was certainly drowned—and felt very sorry for Consuelo, but not for herself—and wondered why not. What she did not know was that she had been crushed to the limit of endurance, that youth was now asserting its resilience and that there would come a sort of ground-swell of depression presently. She tried to feel ashamed of not wanting to cry because Consuelo had gone with every other thing she ever cared for. But she could neither cry nor feel ashamed.

Then she felt hungry and wondered if the dog was hungry too. The dog had climbed up to the ridge of the roof and was barking. He disappeared over the top, was gone a minute and returned to bark at her again. He was a shaggy affectionate fool of a mongrel dog, of the sort that you like in spite of him, or because of his comic lack of anything resembling class. Again he disappeared, and returned, barking. There was something on the other side of the roof, she supposed. It might even be Consuelo. Her heart leaped at that thought. She climbed up on hands and knees to see, tearing her stocking on a shingle-nail.

She checked a scream, and her blood ran cold as she peered over the top, for a young man's face looked into hers hardly two feet away. He, had a crumpled collar—a two days' growth of dark whiskers—and his coat was hanging to his waist from his belt. He looked as annoyed to see her as she was to discover him; and the fool dog stood on the ridge between them wriggling with delight and trying to lick both their faces. Some one had to speak. One says idiotic things on such occasions.

"I was looking for Consuelo," she remarked.

"Oh, are you Miss Conchita?"

"Yes."

"Oh! Well, your mother's all right. I fished her out with a boat-hook. She's ashore somewhere and being looked after. Better sit on the ridge, hadn't you? It's easier. Here, use my coat."

He undid his coat from the belt and made a cushion for her on the ridge.

"There. Sit on that."

It was interesting to be ordered about, and she was too dazed to resent it. She sat facing one way, and he perched himself on the ridge about two yards away from her, facing the other way. Then he called the dog and began petting him.

"Had a long swim, didn't you, doglums!"

She wondered what sort of a person he was. You could not possibly tell from his clothes, for they were wrinkled and soiled; and the two days' growth of whiskers made him look rather tough. But he spoke nicely, although his voice was a shade sullen, and he was certainly kind to the dog.

"What are we going to do?" she asked him presently.

"Sit here, I suppose. This roof'll hit something sometime."

"Can't you swim?" she asked.

"Yes, but I can't leave you here."

She did not feel embarrassed—and he did, which was funny. It ought to have been the other way around, for it was the first time in all her life that she had been alone with a male of anywhere near her own age. She did not dare to ask about Consuelo, for fear of being questioned in turn; she had begun to remember that she mustn't tell any one who she was, and his one idea seemed to be to avoid saying anything, if possible. She decided she was not a bit afraid of him, and wondered again and again whether, after all, it would not be safe to ask about Consuelo, but decided not to for a while. But she thought he was distinctly rude.

"Is this your roof?" she asked him presently.

"No," he said looking at her sharply.

"Why?"

"Oh, I thought perhaps it was."

He laughed at that, and though the tone of it was hardly courteous his whole face lit up when he smiled, and she decided at once that she liked him.

"I beg pardon," he said. "Haven't I done what I can to make you comfortable? Would you like my shirt too?"

He looked as if he expected her to say yes, and for the life of her she did not know why she was not angry with him. But something rather wistful about his mouth and eyes made her keep on looking at him when she thought he was not looking at her; and that was quite easy to do, because he seemed to turn his eyes the other way as much as possible.

"Have you lost everybody, too?" she asked at last.

"No," he said curtly, then glanced at her sharply again.

"I told you your mother's safe. She's dry by now."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that Consuelo was not her relative, but she suddenly remembered the shrieking headlines of the newspaper, and in a panic she decided to say nothing. He played with the dog until the dog crawled on to his lap, curled up and went to sleep.

"What is the dog's name?" she asked at last, feeling that was surely a safe subject.

"I don't know."

"Isn't he your dog?"

"From now on yes, probably. I fished him out of the water."

"Oh, then let's give him a name!"

"Not 'Buster'!" he said instantly. "Every dam-dog anybody finds gets called that."

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Mansfield—Sherry Mansfield. San Francisco's my home. Sorry—I ought to have mentioned it."

"Sherry? That's rather nice. Nuts go with sherry, don't they? Call him 'Nut.'"

He nodded, reappraising her. "His name is Nut from now on," he answered. "What's yours? I've told mine."

He looked straight at her and she shrank back with reawakened panic—fearing above all that he might see that she was afraid. So that little frown that always mocked her real emotion began dancing above the blue eyes, and he thought she was puzzled by his own stupidity.

"Oh, of course," he said, "I remember. Conchita—let's see, what was your mother's name—Martinez—Conchita Martinez then. Spanish, eh?"

"Spanish ancestry," she answered, wondering at her own readiness, and thankful she had not told a downright lie. The Lanier blood is mixed of French and Spanish and New England.

"Your mother looked more like a—"

"Like a Dago?" she suggested, looking mischievous. Anything to keep him going!

"More like a Spaniard than you do," he said, laughing. "My own folks come from England, but we're mixed up like all the rest. I'd a hot tamale grandmother—never saw the lady, but they say she turned my granddad's head over the top of a fan in Mexico City, and killed him finally."

"Oh! How old was he when—"

"When he checked out? Ninety. They say he died all tired out."

He was perfectly serious. Her little answering bubble of laughter puzzled him, and that made her laugh all the more, until it got beyond control, and the dog woke up and wagged his tail, and barked in sympathy. So Sherry Mansfield had to laugh too. She did not sound hysterical, although she felt so.

"Hey! We're going to miss it!" he said suddenly, and jumped up. "Give me your hand—quick! Bring my coat! Where are your shoes?"

"I've got them."

"Come on now—and jump when I tell you!"

She could jump and she did not need assistance. But she liked the way he told her to carry his coat, and she liked the way he thought about her shoes; so she let him hold her hand, and ran down the roof beside him. They had drifted close to a barn that stood hay-loft-high out of the water, and the roof they were on was slowly swinging so that a corner of it would miss the barn by not much.

"Now never mind if you fall in—I'll look after you. Come here, Nut!"

He picked up the dog and seized Jacqueline unceremoniously by the wrist.

"Now!"

They jumped in together through a hay-loft door, the dog struggled free from Sherry's arms to go careering about, barking at imaginary rats and what not. At one end there was a sort of cubicle without a door, and the rest of the space was a kind of general storehouse, in which all sorts of odds and ends looked as if they had been accumulating for a generation. There was very little hay. The cubicle faced a stair-head and Sherry went at once with a businesslike air to see where the stairs might lead to. He turned back looking glum.

"The second step down's under water," he said. "We're still marooned."

Jacqueline shrugged her shoulders, which seemed to surprise him. He returned to the open door and swung himself outward to look for a means of escape; but there was nothing in view except water, and beyond that miles of mud. Suddenly the dog began barking furiously in a corner where the hay was heaped, and Jacqueline ran to see what the matter might be.

"Quickly-call him off!" she cried out.

"What's wrong?"

"Cat—and bits of baby kittens!"

Sherry came over and watched the engagement. Nut knew better than to go too near. The cat and five kittens had their backs up against the hay. Nut was satisfied to annoy them from outside scratching-range.

"Call Nut off!" Jacqueline insisted, down on her knees, trying to soothe the cat's fears.

"I wouldn't worry if I were you," Sherry answered rudely.

Jacqueline heaped the kittens into her lap and drove Nut away with a broken piece of wood, the first thing handy.

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking up at Sherry with puzzled frown, that he thought mocked him.

"I mean she's not a woman, she'll look after her own young," he answered.

"Will you keep the dog away?" she demanded.

She felt her own temper rising. Something in his manner, rather than his words, had stung like a rebuke, and she was not in the least accustomed to being rebuked by strangers.

Not answering, he found a piece of twine and tied Nut to one of the cubicle stanchions. Then he began whistling as if he had forgotten the incident altogether and started to explore the cubicle.

"Oh, good!" he called out. "Eats! Lots of 'em! These coons seem to cache stuff just like magpies! Nearly a whole case of canned soup—peanuts —stale bread—soap—shaving-brush—oh, hell! Just my luck: It's an old-fashioned one."

"Old-fashioned what?"

"Razor. I use a safety. And there's no mirror. Damn!"

"It looks like a coon's shaving brush!" she said, coming to peer over his shoulder.

"I don't care if a dozen coons have used it. I'm going to shave! Maybe you'd like to eat, though. I'll open a can of soup."

"No, you may shave first. Perhaps you'll talk more nicely when you look clean."

He flashed another of his sudden, searching glances at her.

"Have I been rude?" he said. "I'm sorry."

But again, in a moment, he seemed to dismiss the thought from mind. Next minute he was whistling again, and trying to sharpen the razor on an old piece of leather harness.

"Care if I do this in this light?" he asked. "If I bleed much you can look the other way."

He smiled as he said that, and she knew intuitively that however he might talk, he was no savage. She guessed he would not willingly hurt anything or any one—unless perhaps himself.

"You might wait behind the partition," he suggested.

But the cubicle was dark and rather smelly. She preferred to watch him, and sat down in the hay beside cat the and kittens. She had seen men being shaved through barber-shop windows on her rare visits to New Orleans, and had watched the Negroes shaving one another in the lane outside the shacks on Don Andres' estate; it had always struck her as a comical performance, but reaction from the terror she had passed through made this one seem utterly ridiculous.

"Let me help," she suggested, giggling.

"Wish you'd find a mirror!" he answered testily.

He lay on his stomach and leaned as far as he dared out through the barn door, trying to see his reflection in the muddy water. But that was no good; he could not even use his arms in that position, and he was getting angrier every minute. Jacqueline, sputtering with laughter, went and hunted in the cubicle, but the nearest thing she could find to a mirror was a soup-can. She held that, end toward him; but the tin was too dull, and she could not hold it nearly still enough because of suppressed giggles.

"Damn!" he exploded at last. "I wish I hadn't begun this."

"Shall I try to finish it?" she asked him.

"Yes! You can't do worse than I've done!"

She had not expected him to answer yes, and she would have given a million dollars that minute, if she had them, to take her words back. But he pulled out a box, and sat on it with his face to the light in such a matter-of-fact, determined way that she did not see how to refuse. She wondered what Consuelo would think about it, if she knew, and that made her smile.

"Dip your brush in the water at the foot of the stairs and put more soap on first," he said. "Then scrape the soap off with the edge of the razor. Never mind if I swear—I don't mean anything."

She had never been spoken to exactly like that before in all her life. There was not a trace of flattery or of anything false or assumed in his manner. He addressed her as an equal, except that he gave her orders; and he even gave orders as if it were the most natural thing in the world, with no possibility of his attitude being misunderstood. She could imagine him taking orders from some one else in the same way.

It was the strangest experience she had ever had, but she left off laughing, for in a convent they do not teach you how to shave men and she was mortally afraid of cutting him. She remembered having seen old-fashioned prints in which the barber held his victim by the nose (presumably to keep his head from wagging) and she wondered whether he would be able to breathe if she did that.

"Carve away!" he urged.

So she tried holding his nose, and he laughed so that she nearly dropped the razor.

"If I'm not to hold your nose, how are you to keep your head still?" she asked after one or two dangerous experiments. "Oh, look! I've got some hair off already!"

She showed him the hairs on the razor-edge. "But you'll have to hold still, you know."

He tried leaning back with his head against the side of the barn, but she could not get at him that way. He tried standing up, but that was worse. Finally he sat down on the box again, and leaned against her, letting his head fall back against her shoulder, she steadying herself with one knee on the box behind him. Which was a rather intimate arrangement, but it worked. She made a few small cuts on his cheek but shaved him clean, and laughed triumphantly.

"I'm much obliged," he said, and went to wash the soap and blood off at the stairway. Jacqueline watched him with her frown going sixteen to the dozen. Some how he might have said more than that. He might have looked back at her and smiled. And yet—he did not give her the impression now of being rude exactly. All of the men she had known hitherto would have spent the time loading her with compliments, and yet not one of them would have inspired her with the confidence that this blunt individual did. She would have felt afraid to be alone with any of the others. She did not feel alone with this man—did not need the least protection from him—knew she could trust him absolutely.

Then came one of those strange freaks of memory, that persist in the most unlikely places, apropos of nothing. Sister Michaela's gray eyes, and sober face, and quiet voice

"Trust your intuition, Jacqueline!"

And she in a barn—with a man—with the floods all around, and no relief in sight—and a soapy razor in her hand! She looked at the razor wondering. What had Desmio meant when he said the world was dangerous? It did not seem to be!

Sherry Mansfield broke into her reverie by bringing out three cans of soup and opening them with a broken axe. There were no plates or spoons. They had to dip stale bread into the stuff, and use fingers, and laugh, and act like savages, feeding Nut and the cat between-times, and discovering that Nut could do tricks. Then peanuts for dessert, and soup brown water to drink that Sherry dipped up in one of the empty cans and swore was better than the coffee they gave him in France. She hoped Consuelo was having real bread and hot coffee. She felt she had known Sherry a hundred years when the meal was over, and, girl-like, wondered whether he might be the individual who got the socks she knitted during the war. She even asked him whether he thought it possible.

"Dunno," he answered. "I know I got some awful misfits."

Not a shadow of a smile. He was stating a fact simply.

"Have you a mother?" she asked him suddenly. It was the subject of socks that connected up the train of thought. She was thinking wildly of anything that would keep the past out of her mind and was only putting the first question that occurred to her as she sat watching him from the other end of the hay bale. He looked as if he had a mother.

But the very mention of the word brought a frown to his face. He got up without answering her, and went to rummage in the cubicle, turning things over and taking a long time about it. He seemed to spend as much time in there as he could find excuse for, rearranging everything, and setting the cans of soup in a row along the wall. When he came out at last his manner was distant. He said nothing, but went and stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets, staring out at the flood.

She felt sorry for him and wondered why. He was rude, and she should have been angry. But his face, as he watched the water, had resumed that wistful expression she had noticed when they first met, and the effect it had on her was to make her feel he needed sympathy.

She found him so intensely interesting that he helped her to forget her own predicament, and only wondered how she could find out what the matter was with him without offending him once more. It hurt her to offend him as much as it seemed to hurt him. For all his bluntness he seemed astonishingly sensitive—in fact he seemed to try to cover it up with bluntness.

Sherry Mansfield watched the frown over her eyes with deep, almost embarrassing interest.

"What puzzles you?" he asked at last.

"You, Mr. Mansfield!"

"I don't feel like a mystery. What's the conundrum?"

"I was wondering—don't be angry, please—"

"Go on. Ask anything. What is it?"

"Are you—I promise not to tell, but—that is—have you, done anything bad? Are you dangerous? I don't mean that, I mean—"

His roars of laughter stopped her—huge, amused, immense laughter, followed by a look of pity that cut her to the bone, although he meant it kindly and she knew it. He got up, looked about him, and brought her the razor, holding it out on the palm of his hand.

"Take this and keep it by you to protect yourself!" he said, grinning.

She took the thing and flung it through the open door into the flood. She rose and tried to glare at him. But the glare would not work; the frown danced funnily above the blue eyes and brought an answering smile from him.

"Now you can't shave me any more!" he said.

"At least you know I'm not afraid of you!" she retorted; but she could not make it sound brave, for her voice was choking.

"If I thought you were afraid of me I'd swim off and leave you," he answered, puzzled.

She was panic-stricken instantly. She would kill herself if left alone with her own thoughts. She sat down on the hay and started crying, hating herself, yet crying more the more she struggled not to. She felt suddenly alone, and sick at heart—aching, yearning to be comforted. She longed for Consuelo. The dog came and pushed his nose between her hands. She hugged him to herself, squeezing him so tightly that he whimpered. She wished this man would go away leave her—swim off as he had threatened to. But he kept on standing near her, not touching her or saying anything, but just standing still. Perhaps he was waiting for his dog. She let the dog go.

"Say: please tell me what it's all about," Sherry asked at last, in a different tone of voice to any he had used yet. She shook her head violently, her face between her hands, wishing he would not stand there.

"Is it me? Have I done anything?"

His appeal was simply pitiful; she could not endure it. She left off crying as suddenly as she had begun, and sat up, staring at him through the tears.

"Why did you laugh at me?" she asked. "You looked sad and I was sorry for you. Weren't you cruel to laugh?"

He looked utterly incapable of cruelty; that truth forced itself on her as he stood dumbly wondering what to say. He looked like a big bewildered boy with his eyes full of tenderness.

"I don't see why you felt sorry for me," he said, as if he were groping for the reason. "I know I feel mighty sorry if I've made you feel badly. I don't know what I did. Won't you tell me?"

Neither did she know what he did, now that he asked her! She only did know that she felt compassion for him—that his tenderness and his wistfulness, so utterly different from the other brusque manner, were due to some great grief inside him. Her heart told her that.

He sat down on the other end of the hay-bale, waiting for her to tell him wherein he had wronged her, as puzzled as she was, only much more master of himself.

"I think you ought to tell me," he said quietly.

There was nothing to tell! She watched him for a full long minute, he keeping his eyes averted in order not to increase her embarrassment. She began to feel not embarrassed, and to know that he was to understand that she had injured him, not he her.

"What did you mean—?" she asked suddenly; then stopped. It was none of her business after all. He was a stranger. He had respected her privilege —had asked her nothing that she might not care to answer.

"Ask anything you like," he said quietly, still looking straight in front of him. "I'll answer if I can."

"What did you mean by saying what you did about the cat and her kittens?"

His eyes looked swiftly, straightly into hers. They were challenging —on guard instantly. Her frown was working busily, but it had begun to dawn on him that it might not mean mockery, else why the tears? The blue eyes underneath were brimming with honesty. Wondering, she watched the change of his expression, as he deliberately lowered his guard. He had made up his mind to trust her—she knew it—thrilled.

"I'd bore you if I told you that."

"No you wouldn't!" she answered, pleading with him and when Jacqueline was in that mood none less adamant than Donna Isabella could resist.

"You recall you asked me if I have a mother?"

She nodded. The dog came and fussed with her. She laid a hand on him to keep him still.

"Well, I have—or I had—I don't know which to call it." He was looking away again and his lips were set as if he hated to tell what was coming.

"I knew my mother until I was nine years old. She meant a lot to me. I loved her. So did dad. She left him—quit him and me. He divorced her. Now you know."

"But—but why did she go away?"

"God knows. Dad says because she was a woman! She broke his heart all right, and he's a man, mind you."

"Because she was a woman?"

"Sure. Women are the only creatures, except fish and alligators, that desert their young! That cat wouldn't. She'd fight all-comers."

"So—so you hate all women?"

"No. I'd find it easy if I did. But I've seen what happened to dad. And if she—my mother—acted that way, where are you going to draw the line?"

"You hate your mother?"

"No."

Jacqueline let out a huge sigh of relief, that made him look at her again. The frown was busy but he could not doubt her eyes. He was conscious that he had not half-explained himself and went on, forcing out the words, but looking straight at her now.

"You see—when you love anybody that much—and—she deserts you—you don't care to talk about it, but you can't grin even when you think about it. Get me?" he ended savagely.

"Are you sure she—deserted you, as you call it?"

"She went away. She left us flat—and not a word of explanation."

"Perhaps it was something she couldn't explain."

Sherry stared at her. There was a choke in Jacqueline's voice as she went on:

"It has happened to women that they were forced into a position, in which no explanation was possible or would do any good—because they wouldn't be believed. So they just ran away, and said nothing—and tried to forget."

"She forgot me all right!"

"Are you sure!"

He nodded.

"Have you forgotten her?"

"You see I haven't."

"Then how do you know she's forgotten you, Mr. Mansfield?"

He got up and began to walk about the floor, with his head down and his hands behind him.

"I hadn't thought of that," he said, flashing another of his swift penetrating glances at her.

"I feel quite sure your mother's a darling," she said with the all-challenging conviction of innocence and seventeen.

He stopped and stood in front of her again.

"All I know is, she made dad bitter—and he's made me bitter —and it stays put. He did it thoroughly. Most women don't make any difference. But I can't talk to a woman I like real well, without the image of my mother cropping up, and coming in between. There's nothing to it after that. I quit."

He went to the door—sat down with his back against the frame —found a can of damp tobacco and his pipe—and, smoked in silence, staring out at the flood.

"Some one'll come sometime," he said at the end of ten minutes.

Then, at the end of twenty minutes more:

"Tell me when you want something to eat."

Half an hour after that he again found his tongue:

"I'll fix you a soft place in the hay whenever you feel like lying down. Say: look at that cat and dog!"

Cat, dog and kittens were all coiled up in a lump together, fast asleep.

CHAPTER 17.

"Who'd believe a word of it?"

Perhaps it was the dog and cats. Force of example is enormous. There was Brace and the spider, for instance. We are as easily moved by trifles into courses as a horse is by heel and rein.

It grew dark, and Sherry Mansfield opened more soup, arguing that they must eat while they could see to do it. Then he found a pitchfork, broke up the bale of hay, and arranged a comfortable bed for Jacqueline.

"Where are you going to sleep?" she demanded.

"Oh, anywhere. I'll be all right."

"I'm not going to take all the hay and leave you uncomfortable," she answered.

"I'll have to watch for rescue-parties. They'll be coming with searchlights before long."

"I'll sit up, too." She did not dare to lie down in darkness, for fear of the thoughts that might overtake her.

"I won't let you sit up."

She went over to the door and stood there watching the first pale stars appear. Sherry went on forking hay, piling it into a heap against the wall and spreading it. "There," he said at last, "it's all ready."

"I told you, I don't want to."

He came over and stood beside her in the doorway, leaning on the pitchfork, smiling.

"I say, don't let's quarrel."

She could not help smiling when he did.

"Make a bed for yourself," she answered.

"There isn't enough hay for two. We'd both be cold and comfortless instead of one of us. What's the use? You're the woman."

"That's not my fault, Mr. Mansfield."

"But you are."

Undoubtedly she was. She sat down in the doorway with her back against the frame and hands crossed over her knees.

"Look. The moon's rising," she answered. The moonlight was wan and lonely- looking but better than the darkness.

Sherry was totally uninterested in the moon. He walked back to the hay and prodded it in the dark. The dog yelped.

"Damn!" he grumbled. "The whole menagerie has gone and camped on your bed. Can you beat that? She's toted all her kittens up here!"

"Did you hurt Nut?" she asked anxiously.

"No, nothing serious—just struck him sidewise with a prong. Get off that hay, you rascal!"

"No, let them all stay there. I'm not going to use it."

He walked back to the doorway, and sat down facing her.

"Now listen, Miss Martinez, won't you be reasonable?" he began. He could see her face quite clearly in the moonlight now, and she could see his. He looked delightfully worried, and that was satisfying, though she did not know why. Reason did not enter into it.

"Why don't you lie down?" she suggested. "I'm not tired yet."

There was a long pause. He found his pipe and began smoking.

"I believe you are afraid of me," he said after a while.

Jacqueline was looking at the moonlight on the water, but she knew he had not once taken his eyes off her face.

"Not one little, tiny bit!" she answered, still not looking at him.

"You're quite right, of course—and yet—I suppose— somehow, you ought to be," he said awkwardly.

"Why?" she asked, meeting his eyes at last. She was not afraid of him, she would be terrified if he should go away and leave her. The frown began working overtime.

He did not answer, and there was another long silence, broken only by the lapping of water, and a rustling as the dog settled down more snugly into the hay.

"I'm damned if I see any sense in this!" he said, looking at her suddenly. "The dog and the cats are the only ones who are scoring!"

"I'm going to sit here just as long as you do!" she answered.

Jacqueline did not know just why she said that, except that it was interesting to oppose him and see him frown. She wondered at herself. She knew that if she could only contrive to let Consuelo know she was all right she would not feel downhearted in the least—only frightened of her own thoughts. She began to hope there was only an allowance of so much misery to each individual, and she had used all hers.

"Why should you worry about me?" she asked him. He flashed another of his sharp glances at her.

"Don't you women like us to worry about you?"

She had not grown used yet to being spoken of as a woman. But she confessed to herself that she felt like one; she had left the convent days, years behind, although only the day before yesterday—

She checked that thought. It hurt. She did not dare to look backward.

"Do you worry about your mother?" she asked him.

"Always. I can't talk to dad about her, for he simply blows up. But I'm always wondering where she is, and what she's doing—and whether she'd laugh if she knew I worried—and—"

"Oh, I know she wouldn't!"

"How do you know? According to dad, you women are all alike, and you like nothing better than to have a man eating his heart out. He says the best of you are like that secretly, only some of you can keep up the pretense longer than others."

"Do you believe him, Mr. Mansfield?" she asked; if he could have seen her frown he might have thought his father was quite right after all. But all he could see was her eyes. They were hurt—wondering.

"Sometimes," he answered. "Dad's dead wise about most things."

"I think you're both horrid!" she exploded.

She got up, and walked over to the hay, where she lay down presently between the animals and the wall, grateful for the cat's luxurious purring because it made her feel less lonely, and watching Sherry's silhouette against the stars in the doorway. She did not think he was horrid, but it made her angry that he should deceive himself with such thoughts. And then she began to worry because she knew that Consuelo would be worrying. Poor Consuelo would think she was drowned and would be crying.

Sherry sat frowning for a long while in the doorway, and at last relit his pipe. He supposed she was right; he was horrid—felt so, anyway. Well, he couldn't help that. Dad had lectured him, and shown him God knew how many hundred examples in print, and had told him he must cut women out of his life until he was at least thirty—had even made that condition of advancement on the Tribune. He supposed a fellow must pay a price for everything, and it was best, no doubt, that this girl should think him a monster. He only wished he thought the same of her! He did not—damn it!

He was a fool not to swim away and leave her. Should he do that? Absolutely no! There was not one hint of a doubt in his mind on that score! He had never seen anything in all his life half so beautiful—and her eyes were incredible—haunted him—they seemed to hold torture hidden in their blue depths.

Bah! They were just eyes. One pair of eyes is the same as another, and the whole world is full of them! But what a strange thing that hers should be that fathomless blue when her mother's, he remembered, were brown and quite ordinary. She did not resemble her mother in any way in fact. This girl, even in crumpled dress and disordered hair, seemed to have breeding in every inch of her; and she spoke deliciously—no other word for it—deliciously.

Damn! He would think about somebody else. For instance, Wahl. He wondered what Wahl was doing. Had the Limited got through? Or had the track been washed away, and was Wahl back again covering the flood-stuff after all? It made him smile to think of Wahl doing the story he despised so heartily.

Then—he heard her crying. It was unlike the outburst of the afternoon that had held the reaction of hysteria. It was stealthy—as if she were afraid he would hear—and pitiful and forlorn, broken now and then by sobs that brought back memories of a big room—solitude—and a child sobbing for his mother.

He crossed to her, cursing himself for a thoughtless brute, and knelt beside her.

"Oh, I say—Miss Martinez—don't cry. Are you worried about your mother?"

The crying stopped. Jacqueline became still—he could sense the effort for control.

"Have I been rude again?" She shook her head. "I'm sorry. Would you like me to talk to you? Would that help any?"

A hand, tear-wet from being beneath her cheek, touched his. "Nobody can help me, Mr. Mansfield, and please don't worry. You must be tired. There's lots of room for you on the outside of the hay."

He was dumb for nearly half a minute. Was his father right? Or was he right? He was willing to bet she was as innocent as her voice sounded. And he knew his own attitude. But would he be

doing the right thing to accept the invitation? Suppose some one came and found them? Suppose Wahl found them!

"I can't see you in the dark," he said at last. "I might crowd you or roll over on the cats or something."

"Be careful then!" she answered.

Well—that was a sensible answer. Maybe the most sensible thing to do was to take her at her word and lie down. He crawled on to the outside edge of the pile, and after he had done pulling hay out of his ears and neck, lay for a long time listening to her breathing, and to the occasional rustling of the menagerie that lay between them, and then at last his own weariness overcame him and he fell asleep.

When he awoke it was just beginning to be daylight. He felt something on his shoulder that touched his chin, and thought for a second it must be the dog who had wearied of the cats' company. He was going to shake it off, when it occurred to him it could not be the dog—not heavy enough—not hairy. Hardly moving his head, he managed to look slantwise along his face. Jacqueline's fingers were touching his chin. Her arm was on his shoulder.

He lay still and considered that for a few minutes—liked it decidedly, but wondered what to do. At last he turned over, inches at a time. She was lying face toward him, fast asleep, with a great lock of dark hair falling loose over her shoulder, and her head pillowed on his folded jacket. She looked as if she had been crying again, but that, he figured, was impossible—he would have heard her. The cats and dog were equally fast asleep in a glomeration near her knees. He managed to roll clear without waking her, and spent five minutes in mid-floor studying the situation.

"Who'd believe a word of it?" he asked himself. "Not Wahl, at any rate!"

"That girl's good!" he muttered. "She's O.K. I wish I knew what's wrong!"

Then Nut woke up and yawned, and the cat followed suit; but Jacqueline went on sleeping. Sherry went to the door and stared out at the flood, but there was no relief in sight.

He tried to see around the barn, but failed, so stripped off everything except his underclothing and plunged in, Nut following. But although he swam around the barn he did not learn much, except that the flood-water was wider than he thought. They seemed to be about two miles away from the nearest shore.

Even Nut, barking and shaking himself, did not wake Jacqueline. That did not happen until the kittens started climbing all over her and she sat up, slipping them. But she buried her face in the folded coat again, at once. Sleep—why couldn't she sleep forever? She felt she could not bear the load of returning consciousness. Memory made her brain ache and her heart numb. It was long, long minutes before she recalled who Sherry was, and that he had been kind to her the day before. She wished though, that he would not stand there looking at her.

"Don't you wish we had some coffee?" asked Sherry.

He felt overwhelmingly sentimental all at once, and extravagant. He would like to give that girl not only coffee but coffee in a Dresden china cup, served on snow-white napery amid luxurious

surroundings. She ought to be wearing wonderful clothes, and to have servants waiting on her. She ought to have everything her heart desired.

After breakfast he found some old nails, and with the aid of broken bits of wood contrived steps by which to climb on to the roof. She insisted on climbing up after him, and he was surprised by the thrill it gave him to put his arms under hers and lift her bodily up the last stage of the climb. He had danced with scores of girls, and lifted lots of them over awkward places; most of them had annoyed him—one, he recalled—had kissed him; and nine out of ten had expected to be kissed, or at least flirted with. He had never experienced this thrill before, or the feeling that he held something precious in his arms. It made him speechless.

They sat together on the roof, until the sun got too hot, watching for rescuers; but none came within hail, although they saw boats moving in the distance. There was no doubt they would be rescued before long, and he wondered vaguely why he did not welcome the thought. Several times, when he turned to look at her, he discovered she was looking at him, which embarrassed both of them, and they both pretended at once that they were looking at something else.

"You'll get sunstroke if you sit here any longer," he said at last. "I'll help you down."

"Thanks, I'm used to the sun."

"Nonsense! You've no hat. Give me your hand, and I'll lower you to the top step. Both hands!"

He was as masterful as if he owned her, and as considerate as if she owned him! He had to kneel, and her laughing blue eyes came close to his. He could have kissed her easily—would have loved to—she was adorable as she smiled up at him with parted lips. And he knew he would no more kiss her than let her fall.

When he reached the hay-loft he sat down in the doorway and began smoking—not that he wanted to smoke, or that tobacco tasted good, but because he felt the need of mastering himself and of studying the situation.

Damn! He would see straight or bu'st! Here was a girl—Gosh, what a girl! Prettier than blazes—breeding in every inch of her—and plucky—There he was again, looking at only one side of it!

Spike that—admit it if you like—who is she? How much did he know about her? Nothing! Funny old fat mother with hysterics and elastic-sided boots and cotton stockings. He smiled as he remembered the fat legs.

"What are you smiling at?" she asked.

She was sitting on the hay-pile, fooling with the kittens and keeping the jealous Nut away from them with one hand.

"Oh, was I smiling? Some darned thought—I forget now what it was!"

Suppose he should come right out and ask her who she was? Why not? The question would be civil. He was quite willing to tell her who he was. Would it be fair? Perfectly. But would it? And how about her? She knew nothing whatever about him—except that he made some beastly rude remarks to her about women in general. She was all alone; and she was trusting him implicitly

had paid him the compliment of never once doubting him. The white thing to do was to wait until he found her friends, and had backing, and could use unembarrassed judgment. Then—

"Oh, look!" she exclaimed suddenly. "I've found something for you to read! It must have fallen out of your coat pocket."

She held up a folded newspaper, torn and pulpy-looking from having been soaked through—then suddenly threw it away from her, biting her lip. She wished she had bitten her tongue off before she spoke. A newspaper meant only one thing to her—Wahl and his story!

"Let's look through the advertisements!" said Sherry. He picked the paper up and sat beside her.

Jacqueline steeled herself and set her teeth. Sherry unfolded the paper, back page first, but it was not very legible; the ink was rubbed off where the folds had been. There was a column of "swaps" that made humorous reading, and he laughed over that for a while, rather wondering why she did not laugh too. Then he turned to the front page, and remembered why Wahl had given him the paper.

There was a triangular tear extending one-third down the page, and one illustration was missing; but Wahl's face was there sure enough—"our special correspondent"—grinning in his "box" on top of column one, and most of the headlines were intact. It was the story of Jacqueline Lanier, and Sherry in front of Jacqueline—she looking over his shoulder, with her hair three inches from his face—began reading it aloud.

It was a full minute before it dawned on him that something was the matter. He glanced over his shoulder. Jacqueline was not reading the paper; she was staring at it. Her hands were trembling. Her face was horror-stricken, and deathly white.

"What's wrong?" he asked her. He was afraid she was going to faint.

She did not answer. Instead, she snatched the paper, tore it down the middle, crumpled it in both hands, and threw it to the floor, where Nut promptly pounced on it and finished the destruction, ripping it into a thousand pieces. Sherry decided she was not going to faint; her eyes were blazing with indignation, and she watched Nut tearing up the paper as if that gave her comfort.

"Do tell me what's wrong," he begged her.

She made no answer, and the indignation in her eyes seemed to melt into something else that he could not quite place; but it was tragic—he was sure of that.

"Won't you tell me?"

She shook her head.

"Was it the paper?"

She nodded.

He saw tears brimming very near the surface, and knew she was fighting gamely to keep them back. He admired that. He found it hard to take his eyes off her, she looked so tragically unhappy, and brave, and more beautiful than anything he remembered to have seen. But it was

only decent to turn his back, to give her a chance, he occupied himself with picking up the scraps of newspaper and throwing them out into the flood.

"Damn that man Wahl! He's a jinx!" he muttered. When he turned at last to look she was still sitting on the hay-pile, staring straight in front of her, but her expression had changed. She looked as if everything she ever loved was lost; he never saw such grief, or such a proud, brave air of hopelessness.

"Say," he said, "you stirred my memories yesterday, and did me lots of good by talking to me about them. If you'd like to tell me yours, maybe I can help you."

Her eyes seemed to be searching his desperately. She was hanging on to something—hanging on like grim death.

"Did you—did you read that paper?" she asked him breathlessly.

"No—didn't have time to."

He was going to say something else, but checked himself. The look of relief that suddenly crossed her face was just as if acute physical torture had come to an end.

"I'm glad you didn't."

"Why?"

"It was cruel. I think it was as cruel as what happened to your mother."

"I don't quite get you. My mother simply left us—went away without a word of—"

"I tell you I know she ran away because she simply had to! There was no other way out. She had reached a place where she couldn't endure life another minute, and she ran—ran—ran—hoping nobody would ever find or recognize her. And you all said she was a criminal. And then she read the papers, I suppose, and—and of course she couldn't ever come back."

"But how are the cases similar? That was the story of a girl named Lanier, wasn't it? Wahl asked me to interview her—said she was a scheming little vamp, who—"

He checked himself again. There was fear now, as well as anger in her face. He had said something that hurt her terribly, he was sure of that.

"Who—who did you say asked you to interview her?"

"Clinton Wahl. He's a reporter—special correspondent—just joined the Tribune. My dad owns the San Francisco Tribune. Why—why —what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Mr. Mansfield!"

She got up and left him—walked over to the hay-loft door. For a moment he thought she was going to throw herself into the water, and every muscle in his body tightened to spring after her.

But Jacqueline did not do that because she knew very well he would jump after her. She had nothing left but pride. The world was gone again. She did not propose to be fished back and made to face her agony. Her heart was numb, and her head was dizzy with that last blow. But she would face it. The world might beat her down; but she would face it. Desmio would have done that.

She would turn and face this gentleman—this kind and most considerate gentleman—this friend of the devil's own—and not let him know she was stung in the heart—sick, lonely, and afraid.

She did turn, standing bravely upright, just fingering the locket with Desmio's picture in it, because that seemed to give her courage.

"Isn't it time the animals were fed?" she asked; and her own voice surprised her, it was so natural and unstrained.

CHAPTER 18.

"Tell me—Conchita—"

The meal, however, progressed under difficulties. Even Nut seemed to sense a tension and refused to sit up or look interested.

"Maybe he's tired of soup," Jacqueline said, with a wan attempt at humor.

Sherry's answering laugh failed to suggest mirth.

"I'll go up to the roof and watch for rescuers," he announced, avoiding her eyes.

Jacqueline made no effort to stop him. Why should she? He wasn't hers. She had nothing—never could belong to any one—not even to Consuelo. All morning and all afternoon she lay, and tossed, and let her heart ache, hoping it would break and kill her. Why had this man been allowed to come into her life to hurt her cruelly again with the thought of what companionship might have been?

Sherry swung himself into the doorway at last and stood looking in her direction, with the evening glow behind him accustoming his eyes to the darkness within.

"No rescue in sight?" she asked, feeling she must say something; he looked so solemn and determined.

"No. Not yet. At least I haven't seen any—Conchita."

She felt startled—electrified. She almost jumped, and her heart beat so that it frightened her.

"That is your name, isn't it?"

"It's one of my names."

She could not lie to him! She would not lie to him. If he asked for her real name, she would simply refuse to answer.

"Would you mind coming over to the light? I can't see you in there. I want to see your face distinctly."

Had he seen that newspaper before it was torn, and was he going to try to identify her from memory? If so, she would lie to him! There she stood looking at him, she against one side of the frame, he against the other. It was a long time before he spoke, even then, but he began with a rush at last, as if he had to force himself to it and the resistance had broken suddenly.

"Conchita—I've been pondering all afternoon how to tell you what I want to say—and I don't know now—but I'm going to say it—and I want you to listen, please. And by the way, my name's Sherry. I don't want you to call me Mr. Mansfield any longer."

Heart-beats—so furious that she could not say a word! As for Sherry it was already obvious enough to him that he was in for failure, so he set his jaw hard.

"Will you please call me Sherry?"

"Yes, Sherry."

Gee! That sounded better. Hitherto he had always rather disliked his name—wished it were George, or Frank, or something regular.

"You don't know much about me—"

Except that she liked him awfully!

"And I don't want you to tell me a word about yourself—until afterward. Any one with half an eye can see you're in trouble, Conchita. I want you to understand that I'm going it blind—that I don't know what the trouble is, and don't care, except that I hate to see you in trouble of any kind. And it's awful nerve of me, and all that—I know it is; and I wouldn't say what I'm going to, if I wasn't sure you're in a difficulty and may need some one who has a right to stand by you and raise hell generally. I'll stand by you. I'm good at that."

Good at it? He looked like bravery itself! Tears came into her eyes. How was she ever going to lie to him?

"You see—I want you to know that I love you as the way I find you. I don't care a damn what sort mix-up you've got into; I'm for you. You can tell me all about it afterward; and when you've told me, I'll tell you again, what I say now, that I love you. But I want you to understand that part first—that there aren't any strings to it. I'll fight a way for you out of any sort of mess."

She could not speak. She wanted to stop him, but not a word would come. She held her hand up, but let it fall again.

He misinterpreted the gesture, naturally.

"Well—I know I have made a bad break, Conchita. I'd no right to talk to you this way. But you've changed my whole ideas about women. I know now there's one woman in the world, at

any rate, who isn't mean and selfish; and you've made me see that my mother may have been so badly up against it that she couldn't help herself. Damn! I can't put it into words. I've seen your soul! I love you! There you are. If I've said anything offensive—if I've done wrong—I'm sorry. I haven't meant to offend."

"Mr. Mansfield—Sherry! But you haven't! I'm so grateful I don't know what to say, but—"

"But what, Conchita?"

It was getting very dark. He could hardly see her eyes now—only her outline leaning back against the door-frame, and he thought she looked more distressed, and terribly weary, than grateful.

"But there are reasons, Sherry—serious reasons why—"

"Why what?"

"Why I can't—"

"Can't what? You haven't got to tell me anything. What I've said stands forever, without—"

"Why I can't!"

"Of course, if you can't love me—is that it?" he asked, and his tone was resolute; there was no self-pity in it.

She shook her head. She could not lie to him. She meant to say she did not love him; but she did—she did! She loved him desperately, and her heart was faint at the thought of having to refuse him.

"That isn't it, Conchita?"

No answer. She could not speak. He came a pace toward her, and she struggled desperately to summon all her resolution—thought of Desmio—of Sister Michaela—of Consuelo. Then for a second Wahl's cavernous eyes leered between her and Sherry; Sherry's replaced them, and looked into hers. She could feel his breath, and oh! how her heart was beating. She had no resolution—none whatever! She simply loved him.

"Tell me, little girl. Do you love me, too?"

Silence—averted eyes.

"Conchita—do you?"

"Yes!"

Then oh, what utter heaven for a minute as he took her into his arms! They were strong arms—comforting—and she could lean on him. He was kissing the top of her head, for her face was buried in his shoulder, and she was not even thinking, she was living. Desmio seemed quite near—and he was right, wasn't he, after all? He said, someday there would be another man, and—

"Lookup first, Conchita. Won't you lookup?"

Their lips had not yet touched when a blinding ray of light swept by them —back again— wavered a moment, and then played on them steadily. Nut began barking. The light came from a pin-point in the distance, and they heard the chugging of a motor-launch.

"Damn!" exclaimed Sherry. "They've come for us!"

They held hands and watched the light. To Jacqueline it was the hideous eye of doom—of nemesis, from which there was no escape. She expected to see Wahl in the launch. She did not hear what Sherry said to her although she knew he was saying something; she stood dumb, numbed again, shuddering at nameless fear. She might have known this dream was too good to be true.

"Cold? Here, put my coat on!"

He slipped the coat over her shoulders, hugged her a moment, and ran to gather up the cats, herding them into a basket he found on a nail on the wall. Then he came back and waited beside her, holding the dog on a string.

"Soon as we get ashore we'll find your—was that your mother by the way?"

She did not answer, for a man's voice called out of the night:

"How long have you all been here? Are you all right? Just two of you? Steady now—back her a bit—that'll do, Mose. Why—hello, feller! You again?"

The inspector of levees, gaunt and unshaven, held out a lean hand to Jacqueline, and she stepped down into the world she dreaded. Sherry followed and spilled cats on the seat beside her.

"Go ahead, Mose."

CHAPTER 19.

"You to repay—"

The launch ran down a lane between two shimmering reflections of the watch fires, and shoved its nose into a bank where a state militiaman leaned on a rifle and yelled "Hi, there! Here's two more!" There was a murmur of voices, and a great deal of moving to and fro in the shadows between the fires—dogs barking—the lowing of a cow—a chorus of squalling infants. Army tents loomed out of the gloom. There was a smell of wet clothes, and hot soup; and some one—a small boy probably—was beating an empty bucket with an iron spoon.

"Step lively," advised the militiaman, "there's others waiting."

Jacqueline took Sherry's hand and stepped on to the bank. Nut barked like an idiot, and the cats all tried to get out of the basket at the same time, until Sherry took the lot to a Negro mammy, who laughed and said "La-a-an' sakes!" and walked off with them, nobody could guess where.

"Back her a bit, Mose! So-o-easy now. Go ahead!"

The launch chugged away and was lost between the liquid lanes of firelight. Sherry put his arm around Jacqueline's waist and led her toward a great tree where some boxes were piled in disorder and another militiaman stood half in shadow with firelight gleaming on his rifle barrel and on the brass of his accouterments.

"Now, sweetheart mine," said Sherry, "will you sit on a box right here while I scout around a bit! Stay put, though, won't you! Looks like a thousand people here. I'll never find you again if you move away."

He spoke to the militiaman, who nodded. Jacqueline sat still, feeling as if she were dreaming, and watched Sherry walk off with Nut at his heels. She watched him pass into the firelight by a tent not fifty paces off, and pause there to ask a question of some one in the tent. A man came running out—shook hands with Sherry. She felt herself trembling; but she wasn't cold. She had Sherry's coat on.

She heard the man's voice, and thought she recognized it.

"—No, they took no chances—stopped the Limited before the levee broke, so I had to do flood-stuff after all. Fair story, too. Where have you been? Say: did you read that newspaper I gave you? The Lanier girl bolted—I told you she was a bad lot. The latest is that she got caught in the flood and was drowned—they've found the horses, and got the nigger who drove her. He says he thinks she was drowned, but he doesn't know, and I've a hunch she wasn't. Now if you can find her, we can make this flood read like history!"

He turned with his face toward the firelight. She nearly screamed. It was Wahl!

Flight—instant flight—anywhere! Only a pause for a second to lay Sherry's coat down on the box. Then off into the shadows—running—running. The militiaman called something after her, but that only lent her wings. She was fleet of foot always—ran like a roused doe—anywhere—out into the night, away from the people and the fires—away from Wahl, with his ghoul's eyes haunting her—and the bedroom scene burning in her brain, and Wahl's hand on her wrist, and his mean voice: "Now then—out with it! Tell me all you know!"

She stumbled—hit things in the dark—ran on, sobbing for breath—fell—rose again—was frightened nearly out of her wits by a big dog that gave chase, but stumbled over a stick, picked it up, and struck the dog, sending him off yelping—ran on again, and at last fell breathless at the root of a tree, where she lay sobbing with a stitch that gnawed her side. When her head ceased swimming at last she could see the outline of the camp a mile away, and people moving back and forth before the fires.

She had no notion what to do, except to keep on going as soon as her body would let her. Sherry would tell Wahl about her—why shouldn't he? —and Wahl would recognize the description. They were both newspaper men. Sherry would believe Wahl. Of course he would. Why not? So she must never see Sherry again. And oh, how that thought hurt. It was far worse than the pain in her side. Never mind, she was glad—she was glad! He had loved her for a minute. She would love him forever!

Up again—voices—she must run. No path now, only a track that might lead anywhere, and was full of places where you fell, and things that stuck out and struck you, and strange noises. On—on—stockings torn, hands bruised, and Wahl's face ever behind her, grinning out from the circle

at the top of a page, or leering at her over Desmio's body. She could not get away from him, and yet she must, or she would go mad.

Black darkness—forward! A blind step—and nothing underfoot —down—down, forever it seemed—and then soft earth came up and hit her, and she lay for a minute squeezing mud between her fingers, moving herself carefully, to learn if anything was broken. But she was only bruised, and Wahl was there behind her. On again!

Then light between chinks in a shutter straight ahead—house? —cabin?—it was something, anyhow—somewhere to hide. Perhaps they would let her stay there a little while, until she was able to go on again. She was dreadfully tired. They wouldn't know who she was, and she would be gone before morning. She must think of something to say though. Well, she couldn't think just then. She would do that later.

What an awful time they were about opening the door! She could hear them —could hear them talking. Wouldn't they ever come? She would fall down dead, if they didn't open in a minute! Ah!

Light flashed in her face, and a woman screamed.

"Conchita!"

She shut her eyes and fell forward into Consuelo's arms, half-consciously aware of curious faces that peered over-shoulder at her—and of cigarette smoke—and of a fire that burned brightly in a grate. Then she was on the floor, with her head in Consuelo's lap, and Consuelo sobbing over her, running fingers through her hair and crying to the Blessed Virgin. There was a child fast asleep in blankets before the fire, and some kind of animal coiled up beside the child. And she could see a man's feet; he had bell-bottomed trousers, and was sitting in a chair that was tilted backward on two legs. She wondered how long the chair would balance that way without falling. The man was speaking to some one, and she could not see who the other person was, but after a while she caught a word or two. They were talking some foreign language. Funny: it sounded like Spanish, and yet she could not understand a word of it, although she knew Spanish rather well. The man had a pleasant voice; the other was a woman's—not Consuelo's, and not so pleasant. It jarred a little.

Another funny thing: she knew that Consuelo understood what they were saying. Not that Consuelo joined in the conversation, or said anything, or made any sign. She just knew it, that was all, the way you know things in a dream. They were talking about herself, and Consuelo was listening without letting them know she understood. She was as sure about that as if Consuelo had told her so.

Presently the man began to speak in English to Consuelo; and now it was Jacqueline's turn to listen without anybody knowing it. She closed her eyes. The man spoke as if he were smiling, and she could almost see him flourishing a cigarette.

"Senora, we have—my mother and I—have made—what is it?—a spic—no, speculation. We do ourselves the honor to propose—as a favor to you—and assuming to ourselves a certain risk—that if la bella senorita is consenting—you and she —she and you should favor us with your accompaniment to San Francisco."

"That's a long way. We've no money," Consuelo answered sternly, almost belligerently.

"Gracias a Deus, Senora, we—I and my mother, that is—are —less unfavorably situated. At the moment we have a small sufficiency. We do ourselves the honor to propose to you—a small loan—in proportion to our no great affluence a trifle a mere bagatelle—in ordinary circumstances—doubtless—beneath your distinguished consideration—but sufficient for such pressing needs as billets de voyage. Repayable—to my mother and to me—at your honorable convenience."

"And on your terms, I suppose!" Consuelo almost snapped the words at him.

"The Senora may justly be pardoned for speaking with—acerbity. But we are not—I and my mother are not—money-lenders. There does appear—nevertheless—Senora, the indication of a predicament, in which you—discover yourself—and out of the vast fortune that—

"You think you can make money out of us! How?" snapped Consuelo.

"It amuses the Senora to be sarcastic. Surely—does the Senora think—"

"Never you mind what I think just at present, Senor Ramon. You're not offering to lend me money for my good looks. What's in your head? I'm listening."

The man hesitated. "You recall, doubtless, Senora, that my mother and I were privileged to—"

"You were at the wedding, yes."

"La Conchita danced."

"So that's it? You expect her to go on the stage? To dance at garden parties? To—"

He laughed apologetically. "Pardon, Senora, one moment! There would have to be preliminaries before that could happen. It is true, La Conchita dances like a seraph, but the public does not pay to be entertained seraphically. There is lacking—what is the word?—what the French name diablerie."*

"You'd like to make her devilish? The Lord forbid!"

"Senora, it is the—assumption of diablerie that entertains. The article itself is of no value. Permit me to assure you that—the greater the appearance of diablerie—and the less there actually is of it—the more the public is eager to pay for admission. But surely there is no need to discuss that—my mother and I—"

"You'll have to show me!" snapped Consuelo.

"Senora, why not? To one of your noted intelligence and serious concern for the beloved—"

"She's asleep now. When she wakes, we'll hear what she says. But understand this, Senor Ramon: If she accepts any money from you, she'll never be out of my sight for a minute!"

"Senora, you fill me with admiration! The adorable Conchita is indeed fortunate! My compliments!"

Consuelo seemed to care very little for his compliments.

"Put your proposal into plain words," she demanded.

"A brief memorandum of agreement, Senora. We—my mother and I—advance expenses. You to repay—"

"Suppose we can't repay?"

He laughed that ridiculous suggestion to the four winds.

"Oh—in that case—hah! absurd—why build imaginary pictures?—still, in that case hah—conceive of it—then I would have to teach the pep-zip-snap! Could she not dance! Is she not beautiful! The world is full of money and if we please the public, some of the money becomes ours—why not?"

Consuelo was merely sparring with him—inclined to clutch at straws, but thoroughly distrustful. These people knew who Jacqueline was, and understood perfectly that she was running away, and why, for they had seen the newspaper. Her only chance of getting them to hold their tongues would be to accept their proposal, otherwise they would almost certainly give information for the sake of possible reward.

"Leave us alone. I will talk to her," she demanded.

"There is but the one room, Senora."

"There is outdoors, isn't there?"

The door was slammed as if one person, if not two, resented an imposition. Then Jacqueline opened her eyes—sat up—and looked around the cabin.

"What place is this?"

"It's a foreman's cabin, dear. Ramon paid him for the use of it, so as to get away from the refugees. Were you asleep, honey, or were you listening?"

"I heard."

"What do you think of it?"

"I'm not thinking, Consuelo. I can't. I want to run away forever!"

"Honey child, you're starving! Where have you been? What happened? No, don't tell me now—there isn't time. We must make up our minds about Ramon's offer."

Jacqueline had no intention of telling. She knew that, if nothing else. She would never tell any one in all the world about Sherry Mansfield. That was her secret, to be hugged in her heart and remembered.

"It makes no difference to me what happens, Consuelo, as long as we go where nobody can find us."

"Listen, honey. Ramon and his mother were talking Portuguese, and I understand it, although I can't talk it much. They think you'll have money by and by. Cervanez was saying to Ramon that you're only running away from scandal, and that's true, honey, you know that. Cervanez thinks that sooner or later the lawyers will have to advertise for you, and then they'll get a big reward for having taken care of you. We must do something, honey. I've lost the bank-book, and the good Lord knows how long it's going to take to get my three hundred dollars; and if I ever get it, it'll be gone in no time. We've lost all your jewelry. We've simply nothing. They offer to pay our expenses to San Francisco. Shall we let them?"

Jacqueline nodded. There was something about the word San Francisco that suggested vague forebodings; but her thoughts were hardly functioning. She did not consciously associate Sherry or Wahl with San Francisco—did not associate them, in fact, with any place. Wahl was the devil's own—the absolute of evil—darkness. Sherry was heaven's own—light.

"We must run away. I saw Wahl," she said quietly, and Consuelo shuddered. Reason may fail, when fear has become an obsession, and there was something ominous in Jacqueline's lack of interest.

"I will get you some food now, honey."

Jacqueline shook her head.

Beyond a doubt Consuelo saved Jacqueline's life, for the desire to live was lacking. Even seventeen was hopeless. Hope had to be supplied by some one else, and no hope could have reached her without love's all-penetrating flux. Consuelo alternately prayed, coaxed, petted, scolded, stormed—came near to slapping her!—then hugged and babied her back to some semblance of animation.

But the rest of that night, and all the next day, and the next were like a waking dream to Jacqueline. She remembered that at dawn they began to walk interminable miles, that a monkey sat on her shoulder part of the time, and that some one named Pepita cried a great deal and was scolded. But she had been in a train two days before she began to respond to Pepita's sympathy; the child climbed on her lap and baby-talked in broken English until Jacqueline found herself responding—and awoke.

It was not until then that she knew how her hands and knees hurt, where she had bruised them in falling; or that she was dressed in Cervanez' second- best skirt; or that people in the train were curious about her. Life began to be interesting—as if she had died, and were beginning life all over once more somewhere else. Ramon came in from the smoking-car at intervals and made himself agreeable. He was very respectful—called her *senorita*—and seemed to be a handsome, care-free, amusing fellow. When the train waited in a station long enough, he took them all to the baggage car to visit with the monkey, who chattered and clung to Pepita every time, but seemed to like Jacqueline next best. And in the dining-car Ramon turned every meal into a great event, even making funny, little speeches in mispronounced English that caused roars of laughter. He was good-tempered even when his mother, Cervanez, scolded him for extravagance, and no matter how much Cervanez nudged him, or what pointed hints she let fall, he always ordered odds and ends of things, such as celery and olives, that made the fare appetizing.

Although he was Brazilian, not Spanish, he had all the graceful Spanish manners, and the little, straight side-whiskers he wore gave him a picturesque appearance that went well with his laughing eyes and his romantic way of walking. He did everything gracefully, even when he

gave the dining-car waiter about half the usual tip, and—although he smoked incessantly he never had to buy cigars or cigarettes because the men in the smoking-room forced theirs on him.

"He is perfect—best of all men in the world, my son!" Cervanez confided in one of her more melting moods. "Nothing never happen too bad but he succeed always! Only always spending too much," she added. "By and by he is spending too much money for you. I watch him!"

Pepita, Jacqueline learned, was an adopted orphan whom Ramon hoped to educate into a great dancer one of these days.

Little by little Jacqueline awoke to what was happening, feeling her way as it were into a new universe, with which the old had no connection. Being naturally strong and healthy, her body recovered first; so that Ramon, and others, began to admire her before her own intelligence made her aware of the fact. Consuelo said very little to her on the train, but watched as meticulously as Cervanez watched Ramon, not knowing whether to be alarmed or gratified by what she observed.

For a strange process was going on. Life grows out of death in every phase of nature, and Jacqueline was no exception. Protection, seclusion, sheltered affluence all gone; the past dead; the future unrevealed; a new ability was dawning. There was being born in Jacqueline, as gradually yet as certainly as sap springs in trees at winter's end, a power to adjoin herself to new conditions. It came as a shock to Consuelo to discover that the child had grown into a woman almost overnight, and that as her brain recovered from its dazed condition she accepted, as if they were natural, conditions against which the older woman's habit-bound soul stubbornly revolted. It began to be Consuelo who was lonely and bewildered; Jacqueline who knew how to make the best of things.

What made it worse for Consuelo was conviction that Jacqueline was keeping a secret from her; that in order to keep her secret she preferred Cervanez' and Pepita's company; and that the secret was not just a mood, but something definite that had taken place. For you can't deceive an old nurse, though you can keep her in the dark.

CHAPTER 20.

"Not easy to trace."

Plunge hot metal into cold water, and you learn its nature. Steel takes on temper. Sherry Mansfield talked with Wahl, turned back to find Jacqueline—and did not lose his head for a fraction of a second. But he reacted. The Gods who forge men on the anvils of circumstance had chosen good steel—and the moment.

"Where did she go?" he asked the militiaman.

"Search me! Looked that a-way—seen somethin'—an' jes' ran."

"Which way?"

"Any of way, if you ast me! Me, I yells to her, but' she's crazy, I guess. Skeered out of her wits."

Wahl—slowly for the first ten strides, then swiftly, making no noise—approached from the direction of the tent, and Sherry was first aware of him when the militia-man moved his eyes. He faced about, conscious of a revolution in his own attitude. He suddenly mistrusted Wahl.

"What's wrong?" Wahl demanded, possessed of a new sharp air of authority since he had heard from Mansfield senior.

"Nothing serious," Sherry answered.

Wahl disbelieved him. He had overheard a part of what the sentry said; but he also recognized the hint of something sealed in Sherry's face. He decided to pump Sherry first, and the sentry later.

"There's your choice of bootleg, cocoa or coffee in the tent. Come and tell me where you've been."

Sherry went with him. Anything to throw Wahl off the scent. As clearly as that pin-point of light from the launch had shone on the hayloft door, and as suddenly it had dawned on Sherry that the subject of Wahl's whole front page in the New Orleans Star, and the girl he knew he loved, might be one and the same. It was a shock, and he braced himself to meet it, falling back on silence which is the first and last resource of strength.

She had not told him her real name, he remembered; or at least, she had not stated that her real name was Conchita Martinez. Was she Jacqueline Lanier? Maybe. Much nicer name! If so, was she what Wahl had said she was? Not if Sherry Mansfield knew anything! If she was Jacqueline Lanier, then she needed help; and if he was Sherry Mansfield, she should have it!

"Cocoa? Coffee? Where were you all this time?" Wahl asked him, offering an empty box to sit on. "Where did you get that mongrel? You've been in the water, I can see that."

"Oh, I swam in after the dog and nearly got drowned, but reached a floating roof, and lay on that a long time. Fellow rescued me in a launch finally."

"Anybody with you?"

"No."

"Thought I saw a girl get out of that launch when you did."

"Oh, he rescued her too."

"Before he found you, or afterward?"

"She was in the launch when I got into it."

"Know her name?"

"No."

"Good lord, man—and you a reporter!"

"I was nearly drowned," said Sherry.

Wahl turned away, to look at him suddenly sidewise in the lantern-light. He was suspicious, and Sherry was perfectly aware of that. He could hardly sit still and drink coffee for anxiety to do two things: he must go at once in search of her; and he must find that levee-inspector, and persuade him to tell Wahl nothing. But his good sense warned him that it was more important at the moment to stay where he was and checkmate Wahl.

"Have you a list of the refugees in the camp?" he asked.

Wahl tossed him several sheets of paper, and Sherry glanced them over until he found the name of Consuelo Martinez.

"What does it mean when you put three stars after a name?"

"Taken care of by some one—no longer destitute."

There were three stars after Consuelo's name.

"Where can I find out who has taken care of whom?"

"Maybe I can tell you. Who are you interested in?"

"Nobody in particular. I asked a question."

"Well, there's more or less confusion. Once they're off the destitute list they're not easy to trace."

Wahl was now more than suspicious; he was nearly positive that Sherry was concealing something. He decided to go out and question the sentry while the man's memory was still fresh.

"Will you stay here?" he asked. "I'll be back in a minute."

Wahl strolled out, not hurrying until he thought himself out of Sherry's sight. Then he moved swiftly. But the sentry had been relieved, and another man stood in his place.

"Where's the other fellow gone?" Wahl demanded.

"Search me! He'd be turnin' in, only they wanted men to go an' round up stray cows or somethin'. Bill knows cows, so the sergeant ordered him to volunteer."

Wahl returned to the tent in disgust. The tin cup, half full of coffee yet, stood exactly in the middle of the box, on which Sherry had been sitting. Sherry was missing. Wahl went to the tent-door and shouted. Another reporter came hurrying, eager to know what the great Clinton Wahl could be in so much stew about.

"Harris—Look here: There's a launch starting before daylight to make connections with the train above where the levee broke. I'm off for San Francisco; here's a chance for you. You know who Jacqueline Lanier is!"

You bet! You've told the world that all right!"

"She's around here somewhere!"

"Hell, no! She was drowned—they found the horses and buggy."

"Don't you believe it! She's been rescued. She's hiding somewhere probably under a false name. Now listen: you find her, and wire the San Francisco Tribune. Bet on me to make it worth your while. Get her story if you can, and if you do, wire that. But let's know the minute you've found her. It'll be the biggest thing you've ever done, and I'll see you get credit."

"Say, that's mighty decent of you! Say—"

"Get busy!" Wahl interrupted.

Wahl himself went in search of the launch that had rescued Sherry, and found it after a while nosing into the bank lower down. Again he was too late; the inspector and engineer had been relieved, and had gone away to sleep, nobody knew where. So he went in search of Sherry, but might as well have hunted for a needle in a haystack.

Sherry Mansfield's brain was working with a kind of cold frenzy. He never wavered once. He faced the possibility that that girl was Jacqueline Lanier, and that some one of her actions might have justified Wahl in mistaking her for an adventuress, and he did not care. Wahl presumably had all the evidence, and he, Sherry Mansfield, had none. He needed none. He would back one look into her eyes against all Wahl's reasoning and experience. She was good. She was pure and innocent. What was more—and he said it again and again, for the sheer joy of stabbing at his own dead misconceptions—he, Sherry, loved her.

"God, I'll prove it too!" he muttered.

But to begin to prove it, he must find her. He thought at first that the dog might recognize her scent, but either Nut was no sort of bloodhound, or else too many other folk had crossed the trail. Nut's chief ambition seemed to be not to lose sight of his new owner. Urging was sheer waste of time.

Then he thought of Consuelo Martinez; but she had been marked with three stars, and though he went to the tent inquire for her, all that the woman in charge could tell him was that Consuelo had recognized some friends and had gone away with them.

"I seem to remember they were foreigners, but I'm not sure. The poor woman was distracted, but she suddenly saw people she knew and ran to them. They said they had somewhere to go, and some money, and agreed to look after her. At least, I think that's right. There's been much—"

But Sherry had gone already, and she found herself talking to the night.

"Funny!" he told himself. "Two days ago I'd have been cynical about that. Another case of a mother deserting her child! Makes me feel sure now that that fat old thing wasn't her mother after all. God! I hope her name is Jacqueline; I like it."

More systematically than he ever rooted at a story Sherry searched the camp all night in widening rings, and when dawn came he met Harris in the mouth of the porters' tent—both men in search of food.

"Doing anything?" asked Harris, with his mouth full of bread and cocoa. "Tell you why. I've been tipped off that Jacqueline Lanier's somewhere about. Like to help me find her?"

Sherry nodded, looking over the edge of a tin mug, sizing up his man. He could lick him; he was sure of it. If they two should find Jacqueline, there would only be one who would identify her!

"Saw you talking to Clinton Wahl," said Harris. "Know him well?"

"Only slightly."

"What paper are you for?"

"None just now."

That was cold truth. There was not a newspaper under heaven that could come just then between Sherry Mansfield and his quest. He had made up his mind to face his father, and if need be, to defy him. There was nothing to argue about; nothing to compromise. Whether or not that girl was Jacqueline Lanier, she was his girl—his forever.

"Finished? Come on then," said Harris. "There are some cabins down on the bottoms beyond here. Let's search them first."

At the end of twenty minutes' rather random walking they crossed a trail where Sherry saw small footprints in the mud, and Nut grew unaccountably excited—not behaving as a hunting dog would, but as the good-for-nothing, cheery mongrel that he was, who recognized something familiar.

"This way," said Sherry.

"That way's no good, that's a cow-path."

"Suit yourself."

Sherry took his own line, turning to the right, and Harris followed more for the sake of preventing Sherry from forestalling him than because he thought it a likely trail to follow. It was not very long before the track led down a steep bank, with imprints in the mud below that looked as if someone had fallen there. And two hundred yards beyond that, in a hollow, there was a neat, clean cabin with a faint wisp of smoke emerging from the chimney.

"Hell! Who'd ha' thought it?" said Harris.

But Sherry said nothing; only his clenched fist went into his hip pocket for some reason.

"This is my story. I'll go ahead," said Harris.

"No, you won't."

"Say—look here—"

"You heard me!"

"Who the hell—"

"You'll wait here until I see what's in there. Would you rather fight?"

That right fist was still in the hip pocket, and Harris suspected a gun.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded.

"If you think you can lick me, go ahead and try!"

"I'll watch," said Harris.

"Stay right here then!"

Sherry walked ahead, and Harris, who was awfully tired and sleepy, sat down. Whatever his other argument was, he kept it to himself. The cabin door was latched, but not locked; Sherry opened it, and entered.

There was nobody there, but the embers of a dying fire were smoking on the hearth and there was plenty of evidence that the place had been occupied quite recently. However, the chair-seats were no longer warm, although mud in several places on the floor was hardly dry. Some one had probably left within the hour; within two hours at the utmost.

He found a hairpin, and threw it in the fire, lest Harris should find it too, and draw conclusions. Next his eye fell on a scrap of torn lace on the floor not far from the hearth. It was crumpled and mud-stained, but he could almost swear that it tallied with the pattern of the edging and collar of the dress she had worn. No mere man, he admitted, could be quite sure of a thing like that from memory; but he had a strong hunch, and Nut was acting interested.

There was a rug between mid-room and hearth; it looked as if someone had sat on it, for it was rumpled. Sherry kicked up the rumpled edge and suddenly pounced on a piece of pale blue ribbon.

"It's been in the water. It's knotted and tied the same way. Same color. Same—"

He held it to the light. Six or eight strands of long dark hair were caught tightly in the knot.

"I'll bet my last dollar!"

He folded the ribbon and hair into the same envelope, and began to look about for further evidence, but there was nothing; and he was presently aware of Harris peeking through the chink of the half-open door. The key was on the inside.

"You can come in if you want to," he called.

"Found anything?" asked Harris.

"No. You have a look."

They passed each other in the doorway. Sherry took the key with him. The moment Harris was inside Sherry shut the door quietly and locked him in: whereafter he walked around the cabin and observed that the shutters were all in place and fastened on the outside with iron bars.

So much for Harris. Sherry began quartering the ground in front of the cabin, and presently found footsteps in the mud. There was no doubt of the direction. They were the footprints of three women and a man, and he set out along the muddy track as fast as he could lay foot to the ground.

But the track turned up a high bank to a road, and on the road he lost all trace of footprints; nor was Nut the least use. It was more than an hour before he found an old darky, who told him the road would lead to a railroad depot if he followed it far enough. But the darky didn't know how far— couldn't 'member.

Sherry lost more time questioning strangers whom he met; and several times he went far off the road to inquire at cabins, but without result. It was nearly noon before he reached a railroad station, and learned that there would be no more trains northward until evening. He questioned the station agent.

"Refugees? Scores of 'em. Three full train-loads this morning."

"Any buy tickets here?"

"Some. Most had passes from the Relief Committee."

Sherry described Jacqueline as accurately as he could. She had two legs, for instance—two arms—was about so high—dark hair —probably no hat—

"She wore a locket on a gold chain—"

"Blue eyes, you say? Deep blue? Sure—I guess I 'member 'em. Pretty little miss, all tired out, layin' her head on a big fat woman's shoulder over on the bench there. No, they didn't buy no tickets. Lemme see."

The agent scratched his head.

"Yeah. There was a—Wop—or a Dago, mebbe—'n' another woman with him, 'n' a kid yes, sure there was a kid. Aye,—'n' they had a monkey—or the kid had. Four an' a half to Frisco, 'n' two sections was what they wanted. Told 'em I couldn't do it. Had to send 'em on to the junction, but I phoned for 'em, I 'member. Sure—Frisco—that's it. Yeah—the Wop had the money. It was all one party. I 'member. N-o-o, son. Six o'clock to the junction's your first train, 'n' you can catch the midnight on from there for Frisco by way o' St. Louis."

Sherry wished now he had kept that newspaper, instead of letting the dog tear it into shreds. At least he could have read Wahl's story, and have analyzed it; that would be better than pacing the platform and waiting for a damned slow train. He was pretty nearly sure now that Conchita's name was really Jacqueline; and absolutely sure that by that, or any other name, she was wonderful, and that he loved her.

But why had she run away from him? The militiaman said she looked scared to death. What suddenly frightened her? Wahl? He wished he knew what Wahl had done to her when he got that story. It was possible she saw Wahl when he came out of the tent.

Why had he ever liked Wahl, he wondered. Clever devil, certainly; but a devil—a mean devil, with a mean face. And who was this gang she was with? A kid and a monkey sounded like an organ grinder's outfit. The big fat woman might be Consuelo Martinez. But who were the Wop, or the Dago, and the other woman?

Sherry was still pacing the platform when two sisters in convent dress approached the station agent, and one of them questioned him so persistently that he scratched his head. Sherry did not pay much attention to them but, once, he saw the station agent jerk a thumb in his direction—heard him address one of the women as Sister Michaela—and saw the sister's gray eyes focused on himself.

The next time he passed them his ears caught one sentence, spoken in a voice as level as the gray eyes: "Will you please not give information about this, then, to anybody else?"

And after that, for fifteen minutes, he was conscious of Sister Michaela's gray eyes watching him, until the six o'clock train rolled in, and he boarded it and left both sisters standing on the platform.

CHAPTER 21.

Bells obey the ears that listen

No star, however small and distant, leaves its course without a Cosmos feeling it. Convents are small universes. None in the convent spoke openly of Jacqueline, for that was forbidden. Sister Michaela's duty had been done; the pistol-shots had hardly more than announced a tragedy in Miro's house before she gathered up her brood of bidden guests, herded them into the bus and hurried them back to safety within convent walls. They knew practically nothing of what had happened, and she instructed them to tell not even that much. But the convent drooped none the less, and even the bell tolled miserably. Bells obey the ears that listen.

A week went by in silence, emphasized by routine sounds, none naming tragedy, yet everybody conscious of it. Lessons continued, and the silence gradually took effect. The waves on the surface ceased. But there was a ground-swell. The sisters had all read the papers. Don Andres Miro had been lavish with enduring gifts. All had loved Jacqueline.

Routine—but Sister Michaela absent more than once, and another in her place to toll the bell, not quite successfully. No hint of where she had been on her return, except that it was known that she was closeted for hours with the Sister Superior. And none except the lay sister at the gate knew when John Miro drove up in a muddled car; and when the Sister Superior and Sister Michaela interviewed him in the drawing-room, only they three knew what took place.

John Miro was a taller, sprightlier Don Andres, with the least suggestion of more energy well gloved under a cultivated calm. He was about the same age —possessed of the same unchallengeable dignity; but one could imagine that he viewed life humorously, rather than as a procession of pious duties. Both sisters felt a little on guard against him, although they tried not

to betray that by their manner. He glanced, perhaps, a mite too keenly at their faces under the deep white bandeaux.

"I came about Jacqueline Lanier," he said abruptly, breaking ground at once.

The Sister Superior bowed in silence. It was Sister Michaela whose eyes seemed to offer a suggestion of encouragement.

"I don't propose to believe she was drowned in the flood until that's proved conclusively," he went on. "I have fifty men out searching for her, but they've found no trace, although the horses, and the carriage she drove away in were found the first day. All the other missing bodies have been found. Hers and Consuelo's are the only two unaccounted for. Presuming then that she's alive, can you give me an inkling of what might have happened to her?"

"You read the newspapers, Mr. Miro?" the Sister Superior asked him.

He smiled—exactly as Don Andres would have done—like a swordsman.

"Yes. I have also spoken with Donna Isabella. That is why I am doing everything in my power to find Jacqueline. If ever a poor little woman needed help, I think she does. She shall have it, if I can find her."

"If she is alive, she surely needs your help, Mr. Miro. But I don't think you will find her in Louisiana."

"Why not?" he asked abruptly.

"Sister Michaela believes she has traced her to a railroad station, and there seems to be a possibility that she went to San Francisco with some refugees from the flood whose names are unknown."

"Pardon me. Didn't you follow up that clue? Did you do nothing about it?"

CHAPTER 22.

The underworld

Life in lodgings is only miserable when you are old, or too used to it. At seventeen, all that is new is amusing at first, unless it actually hurts, and it was Consuelo, not Jacqueline, who cried at sight of the dingy back- bedroom they must share between them in a noisy San Francisco back street, not far from the almost equally dingy café where Ramon and Cervanez were booked for a month's engagement.

They were hardly in the place when Consuelo snorted and rebelled.

"My word! We'll soon be out of this, Conchita!"

"But how, Consuelo, since we have no money?"

"There's plenty of money in San Francisco, honey. Mr. John Miro lives here. He's rich. Just you see what happens when I've been to him and—"

"No, Consuelo! That man was Desmio's enemy."

Because she herself was loyal, Consuelo understood. Almost as much as Jacqueline, she had become imbued with Don Andres Miro's Old-World notions of fealty and pride.

"Very well, honey," she answered meekly. "But I don't think even Don Andres' enemy would let you stay in this place, if he knew."

"He'll never know," said Jacqueline, shutting her mouth tight.

It was one of those lodging-houses known to the tramping fraternity, where late hours and equally late rising were understood; where you could cook things in your bed room and do more or less as you pleased as long as your bill was paid.

Down-at-heel, but delightfully gay individuals conversed over stair-rails in shirt-sleeves. The landlady wore slippers and a cotton bath-robe. The blowsy old thing amused Jacqueline; and the things she knew that Jacqueline did not know were like new chapters, with colored illustrations, in the fascinating book of life.

"Yes, my dear, I was as pretty as you are, and the same age, when I began tramping; but the life soon wears you out. Running this joint is restful compared to it, although you needn't kid yourself the boys don't drive me crazy—and the girls are worse! You take my tip and save your money. But, love you, we're all the same way when we're young, and you'll not be guided by me! All the same, you're pretty and I'm telling you; watch the men! They're artful. They'll work you to death, and they'll spend all you earn—not that I blame 'em if there's fools enough to fall for it! Let's hope your head's screwed on right."

Consuelo gasped at that picture of the life, but Jacqueline smiled at it, because it was different from anything she had ever contemplated. It was all rather amusing, and vague, and intriguing; not to be taken seriously.

Ramon took her with him that very first afternoon down a grimy back street to the back door of a café, and up to the stage to watch him practise. Cervanez smoked cigarettes and pounded the piano, and Jacqueline watched critically.

It seemed to her that she could do as well as that—at any rate with a little practise. And then it occurred to her there was something pitiful in that man's need to dance like a marionette to support his mother and Pepita—a thought that brought a blush of shame with it. Did he work so hard for his money, and then lend to herself and Consuelo! And how were they to repay him? Did he always dance alone? No—she remembered he had danced in Louisiana with Cervanez.

Cervanez herself answered that thought, by inviting Jacqueline to play the piano for a while, so that she herself might practise new steps with her son. But Jacqueline had taken music lessons at the convent because they were compulsory, not because she had the slightest natural gift in that direction, and though she made the attempt it was worse than useless. Cervanez came and pushed her almost roughly off the piano stool. Chagrin. Self-abasement. Ramon noted it, and gallantly did what he could to put her at ease again.

"There is something the senorita can do better than us all!" he exclaimed, with one of his extravagant gestures. "Come, Senorita—do me the favor—yes?"

He danced with her and the dancing did her good; it brought the color to her cheeks, the light back into her eyes, and made her glow all over healthfully.

Consuelo burst in on the scene after a while and protested violently. But Ramon danced with her for two hours, until she could almost have dropped from weariness. He seemed to take delight in teaching her, making her do the same steps over and over again, and sometimes pausing to gesticulate with both hands and lecture her: "Senorita Conchita, permit me! You have left the convent! You are not—no longer—any more afraid to show beautiful legs, which may scandalize those who have taken the vows of religion, but which the public adores! Faces are good, but legs are very good!" He snapped his fingers. "Pep—zip—snap, Senorita! Now again!"

But whenever he glanced at his mother she would light another cigarette and nod. Consuelo sat dumb through it all, after lodging her first protest. As she tried to describe it afterward, she felt like a shepherd whose ewe-lamb has gone to the butcher.

"Honey dear, it's awful! They'll be asking you to dance in public next!"

But it did not seem awful to Jacqueline, although her legs ached and her head swam with fatigue. It was novelty, and she was doing something. She rather reveled in the recklessness.

And Ramon was cute! He strolled home afterward like a troubadour out of a story-book, flourishing a cigarette and throwing his shoulders back, paying her extravagant compliments and boasting of what they might do "poco tiempo" —soon—not very long, Senorita. Dance with me, Senorita, and the crowd he burst the walls! Then, you see! We go up, up, up! La Conchita becomes famous! Ramon, he take back seat! For Conchita—diamonds, flowers, limousine! For Ramon to salute her when she passes, hoping for just one condescension from the beautiful blue eyes! A nod in passing—no more! And Ramon will die happy!"

Evening with Consuelo was the worst part, for she locked the bedroom door and kept all-comers at bay, lest the lodging-house manners and views should defile her darling. Jacqueline wanted to lie on the bed and stretch luxuriously, or talk with the frowzy old landlady. But Consuelo would have none of that; she was as frightened as a hen that has hatched one duckling and sees it take to water. There was a wonderful fat man from the floor above, whose pants were shiny at the knees, and who came in shirt-sleeves and suspenders and sang songs to Consuelo through the key-hole, making Jacqueline nearly die of giggling but arousing such wrath in Consuelo that she finally stuck a hat-pin through the key-hole and almost pierced the fat man's eye. He pretended she had blinded him, and assured her he had one eye left, which was also at her service.

She was so tired that she slept all night without dreaming; and shortly after daybreak she had to get up to admit Pepita and her monkey. The monkey got on the bed and nearly scared Consuelo out of her senses, which would have been good fun if only Consuelo had not been so angry and hysterical. She began to be very fond of Pepita, and the monkey was a darling, with its hands in everything including Consuelo's false hair.

Breakfast at eleven o'clock Jacqueline admitted was not so good. The eggs tasted shop-worn, and there was still the blended smell of cigars and cabbage from the day before. Nobody was at his best at breakfast, and the fat man with the shiny black pants made disagreeable noises with his teeth, which were false and did not fit properly. The landlady was cross because some one had skipped in the night without paying his bill. And the coffee, to quote the fat man, tasted as if a

crocodile had wept it. Even the canary in its cage over by the window seemed melancholy, and the red-and-gray parrot on a stand in the corner dropped his head and never said a word.

However, breakfast did not last forever, and absorbing topics followed it, that blew all drabness to the winds. Cervanez opened fire, half-jealously:

"Ramon, he say you learn so good, he buy you costume if you dance instead of me!"

"Then I should only be owing you more money," answered Jacqueline.

What most surprised her was that Consuelo's prophecy should be so soon fulfilled.

"What is a little more or less?" Cervanez retorted; but there was a greedy glitter in her eye.

"Ramon, he is lending you much money—"

"Senorita—my mother means—she is not so young—not so very young and active. Rheumatism—now and then it makes her a hard agony; yet she must dance. She means—if now there were perhaps an understudy—a young lady kind enough to take her place in case of sickness—"

He was watching those lake-blue eyes, but affecting not to. He had hit the mark. He looked at her frankly at once and waved his cigarette in the grand manner that dismissed real essentials as trifles beneath consideration.

"And for an understudy there must be a costume—naturally. If the senorita consents—?"

Jacqueline could not refuse that. The request appealed to every nerve of her generosity.

"If you think I could do it in a pinch—"

And so outdoors, into the roaring city, with her arm through Ramon's;

"For in a sense we are partners now, Senorita. I am proud!"

Cervanez and Consuelo tagged along behind, Consuelo unprotesting because she knew no protest would avail. They took a trolley to a street where a costume shop was jammed between a pawnbroker's and a second-hand clothier's. In the shop was a beady-eyed fat Jewess, who seemed to know everybody in the world by the first name and to want to talk about them all at once, while she looked at you and registered impressions with a sixth sense. Presently, without so much as being asked to do it, she brought out armfuls of elaborate frocks, all of which Ramon sent back again unglanced at, with a magnificent gesture of his left hand.

There seemed to be no possible chance of their getting together on the prices, until suddenly Cervanez nudged Ramon and took Jacqueline and Consuelo out of the shop. They looked in the pawnbroker's window for about five minutes, when Ramon suddenly emerged and it seemed to Jacqueline that he was suppressing a smile of triumph. She supposed he had his own way. She caught him exchanging a swift glance with Cervanez. Yet his first words intimated that the guess was wrong.

"Senorita, it is well that I was present, or she would have charged twice—three times as much. Bear me witness that I did my utmost to reduce the cost. You begin to see now what expenses

there are in our profession. It is debt that makes us dance! The cost of traveling—the price of pork and beans—the extortions of a landlady—the unreasonable price of costumes—the salary, so low that it becomes a weekly insult —moreover, the fees to agents! It is well we dance! Believe me, it is necessary! We dance one step, and no more, ahead of the devil all the time!"

Ahead of the devil! She thought of Wahl instantly, and her face clouded. Cervanez, who noticed everything, promptly improved on Ramon's little sermon.

"Conchita, all these bills—they, mount up. You will be owing us many hundred dollars."

She did not like to be called Conchita by Cervanez, but they had agreed on that as the name she should be known by; and it was well understood that nobody was to call her Jacqueline or as much as drop hints about her past. But she liked still less the prospect of being in debt to these people, and began to be troubled about it. But, when she questioned Ramon or Cervanez they became vague, and said it all depended; and the more vague they were, the more miserable Consuelo grew.

Jacqueline was finding some sort of balance at last—at least knew what she wished to forget, and what she would always remember. She would never forget Desmio; but she would remember him as he was when he gave her that locket with his portrait in it, and told her there would some day be another man whom she would love. She would always wear the locket next her heart. And she would never forget Sherry Mansfield, although she must never see him again.

Meanwhile, there was something in life after all. The title of understudy gave her a thrill of pride. It felt almost like earning your own living, and she was not quite such a burden to these people as she had been. And so back to the practise on the shabby El Toro stage.

It needed nothing but Ramon's critical coaching to turn Jacqueline into a superb dancer. The convent had given her all the grounding necessary. She had perfect command of her muscles, poise and balance; all Ramon had to do was to subtract some elements of super-modesty, and add what he called "pep-zip-snap" in place of it.

Papa Pantopoulos, the owner of the café, in nobody's confidence yet, but with an imagination of his own, sat at a table and began to figure advertising space rates with a stub of pencil on the back of yesterday's menu card. He presently went out to buy four more secondhand tables.

Ramon was a dancer who improved incredibly if a partner inspired him to it, and he liked to lavish praise, because it cost nothing and yet made him feel generous. Jacqueline flourished under praise like a flower in the rays of the sun; it did not turn her head, but made her try harder than ever. And as it was Ramon's habit to fall cavalierly in love with every pretty girl in sight, in or out of turn, it was only a matter of hours before Jacqueline discovered a new problem on her hands.

She talked it over that night with Consuelo, but received no help of the sort she wanted. Consuelo's idea of how to keep a man at bay was limited to boiling-water, hat-pins, and looking daggers at him, with maybe some vinegary comment thrown in. So Jacqueline had to work it out for herself, and lay awake long after midnight puzzling over how to manage Consuelo too; for if Consuelo were to grow too tart with Ramon and Cervanez there would soon be an explosion, by which nobody would be the gainer.

She prayed long and earnestly. But it was Mother Eve who came to her assistance—original feminine art and an inborn gift for rising to occasions. She would flirt with Ramon. Why not?

She would let him hope all he cared to. Then, if Consuelo should grow too quarrelsome, perhaps Ramon's ambition might help to keep him good tempered.

Having reached which decision, Jacqueline slept in the same undisturbed peace that doubtless once breathed o'er Eden—calm, because she was quite sure that the Blessed Virgin had heard her prayer and answered it.

CHAPTER 23.

"The Tribune be damned!"

The Tribune Building in San Francisco hummed to the throb of the enormous presses. The news-room grew suddenly quiet, and then noisy with voices, as it always did when an edition had gone to press. Sherry Mansfield, back into routine a week ago and looking as if he had never seen dirt or muddy water, stood in the big window with both hands in his pockets, staring moodily at the street. Dad Lawrence beckoned the city editor, and walked out with him for coffee and cigarettes that were almost a part of the daily ritual, in a dingy, smoky little café down a side-street—a place where any one could find them in a hurry, and where the entire staff often drifted in during the half-hour between editions. Dad had almost reached the elevator, when John Covert Mansfield's door opened with a jerk.

"Dad—I want you."

Dad strolled in with both hands in his pockets. Mansfield senior resumed the seat at the desk, that he never vacated for a minute longer than he could help, stuck an unlighted cigar in his mouth, and looked up at Dad Lawrence with one of the peculiar dry grimaces that implied dissatisfaction coupled with combativeness.

"Seen much of Sherry since he got back?" he asked.

"About as much as usual," Dad answered.

"What's the matter with him?"

"He seems well."

Mansfield made a gesture of impatience. "I'd call in a doctor, not you, if I thought he had a bellyache!" he answered. "Is he in love, or something?"

"He hasn't said so to me."

"Find out, will you?"

"Why? Are you and he not hitting it?"

"No!" Mansfield answered, biting off the end of the cigar and looking up at Dad again. "For the first time I don't know what he's thinking about. He mopes and says nothing—work's all to hell,

too—look at that drive!" He tossed some sheets of paper across the desk. "Calls that trying his hand at editorials!"

"Any specific reason for supposing he's in love?" Dad inquired, stroking his chin and eyeing Mansfield quizzically.

"What else would have made him act like a plain born fool?" demanded Mansfield. "If he's in love, I'm going to know it, and bring him to his senses before some woman ruins him. Wahl tells me he suspects Sherry knows something about that Lanier girl—and by the way, that's a corking good Sunday feature Wahl's made of her. Have you seen it?"

"Wahl would suspect the Almighty," Dad answered. "Why don't you ask Sherry himself?"

"I have—twice. The boy's lying to me, and he never was a liar before in all his life. Wahl says Sherry was missing two days, and turned up in a launch with a girl, who disappeared a moment afterward. He says Sherry's conduct that night was elusive, to put it mildly. Wahl wanted to leave Sherry on the job to clean up that story; he doesn't believe the Lanier girl was drowned, and they haven't found her body. It's quite likely she's alive. Sherry gave Wahl the slip, so Wahl found a man named Harris and left him in charge. Now comes a letter from Harris complaining that a young man named Mansfield locked him into a cabin, and adds that he suspects this Mansfield of having aided the girl to escape. Mansfield is unquestionably Sherry. Sherry pretends to know nothing at all about it. Lie number one."

"Does sound fishy, doesn't it?" Dad agreed.

"Fishy as hell. Yesterday Sherry walked in and asked me for ten days off."

"Did he give any reason?"

"No. Refused. So I refused the request. He got off some damfool stuff about my having known him a number of years, and that it's time I could trust him without an argument."

"Well, can't you?"

"Not if he's in love!"

Dad stroked his chin again, and worked his jaw as if he were shaving.

"I think I'd trust Sherry anywhere," he answered. "But I tell you, the boy's lying! I'll bet ten thousand dollars there's a woman in it! I thought Wahl might do him good, but they don't hit it off; he seems to hate Wahl. You're no constellation, Dad, but Sherry likes you, and so do I. I'm going to turn him over to you for a while. Trot him around with you to do the social stuff, and keep your eyes peeled, but get this: I'm not asking you to run and tell me tales about him."

"No, I guessed you knew better than that," Dad said quietly.

"Watch him and give him the right steer. Use your influence to try to get him to tell me what's on his mind. I want it straight from him. I want to feel he and I are friends again."

"Suppose he came and told you he's in love?" Dad suggested.

"There'd be a fight, of course. But I'd win! I'd hold him to his promise to have no truck with women until he's thirty."

"Was that a promise that he made you definitely, with his eyes wide open?" Dad asked.

"It was a stipulation I made. If he wanted to come on the Tribune with me, that was the condition."

Dad wrinkled his mouth up and straightened it again. "Well, I'll do my best," he answered. "Have you told Sherry?"

"No, you tell him. Take him in charge until you hear again from me."

So Sherry came off the regular schedule, and roved with Dad all over the city, covering odd assignments at odd hours, interviewing hostesses, who liked to have their names in print, and attending weary social functions interspersed with occasional plays and road-house openings. Dad knew San Francisco as a dock rat knows the water-front, and had reduced to a fine art the subdivision of a crowded evening; knew where to stay longest, and where just to nose in and disappear. But there were occasional functions where they had to stay an hour or two, as at Mrs. Carstairs-Coningsby's, for instance. As the wealthy American wife of an equally wealthy Englishman, she felt it incumbent on her to know everybody and do everything; there were always surprises at her house, and she knew enough to spring them not too early in the evening. "Dance—supper—tableaux vivants"* ran the invitation; and Sherry and Dad attended, expecting to get "copy" out of it, but also to be bored.

Mrs. Carstairs-Coningsby made rather a fuss over Sherry; if not a lion just yet, he was likely to be one some day. So she took him in hand and introduced him right and left.

"His father owns the Tribune, Mr. Miro. Mr. Mansfield, surely you've heard of John Miro?"

"I support his father's paper!" Miro answered, with a glittering twinkle in his eyes. "Simply outrageous advertising rates! I presume, Mr. Mansfield, you are one of the reporters I have been hiding from."

"Haven't you Louisiana relatives?" Sherry asked him.

The smile remained, but the eyes grew subtly softer.

"Did you know Andres?" he countered. "Did you know his protégée, Miss Lanier?"

Sherry's jaw set tight. It was an utterly unconscious change of expression, and the older man diagnosed it instantly. It could only have one of two possible meanings, either of which included the fact that Sherry was on guard.

"You believe she was all that the papers said, or you don't. Which is it?" Miro asked.

"I don't," said Sherry, looking combative.

"Neither do I," Miro answered, smiling. "That's why I've refused to be interviewed about her. Have you time to talk with me?"

Sherry almost gasped. John Miro had, and enjoyed hugely, the reputation of being hard to corner. His advertisements blazed on night horizons from border to border, and coast to coast: every newspaper of importance heralded his "MIRACULOUS RUBBERS" in big black type; but he had never been interviewed. It was even rumored that he cultivated aloofness and a sort of mystery for its publicity value.

Miro glanced swiftly around the packed reception room and led the way to a lounge under a flight of stairs, offered Sherry a cigar, and lolled back against embroidered cushions without seeming to lose one atom of his subtle alertness.

Sherry in the corner faced him, with a feeling that his inmost thoughts were all going to be laid bare unless he watched himself. He bit off the end of the cigar with a vicious snap, and Miro smiled.

"So you knew Andres?"

"No, but I was covering the Mississippi floods, when Calhoun killed him."

"Did you write that stuff that appeared in the Tribune?"

"I did not!"

"No, I imagine you wouldn't. It was the most malignant fabric of lies I have ever seen," said Miro; but he was smiling as pleasantly as ever. The glitter in his eyes was not perceptible to Sherry, because of the shadow cast by the stairs. "The worst part of the tragedy was the cruelty to little Jacqueline. I only knew her as a small girl—all legs and long hair, eight, or perhaps nine years old when I last saw her. Her character was hardly formed, of course, but as I live, and must some day face my Maker, she was incapable of growing into anything but a sweet—a noble—a pure woman. In addition she had the enormous advantage over other girls of constant association with my cousin Andres."

"I was told that you and he were enemies," said Sherry.

"Hah! I admired him. I may say I loved him. He chose to quarrel with me because, when I began my national advertising, I used the family name instead of some imaginary one. When I heard he was to marry little Jacqueline I realized at once that he simply intended to make her his legal heir, and to prevent me from inheriting anything under the Miro trust deed. I admired him for it, and sent him a telegram, which he saw fit not to answer. He was a splendid fellow and his death grieved me more than I can tell you. However, we can endure grief. It is anger that insists on remedy. I am still enraged in every fiber of my being by the fate of poor Jacqueline."

He did not look enraged. His attitude suggested anything but that, and Sherry's sensation was almost that of being played with, yet not quite; there was a sort of vague tenseness.

"You are wondering," said Miro, "why I make you these confidences. I will give you the answer. You are the only individual I have met who does not believe what the newspapers say about Jacqueline. And that is all the more interesting, because you yourself are a newspaper man."

Sherry said nothing, but got up and stood where he could see Miro's face. He felt torn four ways at once, and meant to be sure of his ground before he trusted any one. He did not even know that he really knew Jacqueline. He knew he loved a girl, who might be, and probably was Jacqueline, that was all. This man might be an ally—or might be a very formidable enemy.

"Sit down again," suggested Miro pleasantly. "I propose to win your confidence. I don't believe Jacqueline was drowned."

"Why not?" Sherry demanded.

"For one reason, because you don't appear to believe it. I suspect you of knowing something. For another, because they have not found her body, although I paid fifty men for a week to search for it, and they found neither Jacqueline nor her nurse.—Every—other—person—lost—in that flood—has been accounted for. A third reason is, that I think the natural impulse of a nice girl, raised in a convent, and suddenly plunged into a cruel scandal, would be to run away and hide. In addition to all that, I have a clue."

"Did you visit the scene yourself?" asked Sherry.

"I did. I received a telegram from Isabella Miro—Andres' sister—so peculiarly worded that I took the next train. Of course I would have attended the funeral in any case. Isabella looked to me like a very sick woman, but she was dressed to receive me in the patio; and the air of conspiracy with which she greeted me—the obvious delight she took in being rid of Jacqueline—the malice she betrayed—and the things that she said to me about Jacqueline's character, all pointed to one conclusion. I suspect insanity. That is a woman poisoned by in-growing spleen. That is what might happen to any Miro, unless—as in my case—some new outlet were discovered for the racial pride, which is as inseparable from us as our breath. I said things to Donna Isabella, which I now rather regret. Truth is not good physic for the insane. She found my remarks unpalatable, and, I regret to learn, took to her bed. But what she said in reply convinced me that any proud and innocent young girl placed in Jacqueline's position would have run away, as Jacqueline in fact did. And if she had brains, as I understand Jacqueline had, she might easily take advantage of the flood to disappear entirely. Do you follow me thus far?"

Sherry nodded.

"I determined to find her," Miro continued, smoking away quietly as if determination with him entailed neither excitement nor exercise. "But I realized that it would be a mistake to advertise for her through the usual channels because, if you will pardon the expression, your damned newspaper, and others, would seize on that to excuse further scurrilous publicity. I have considered the big detective agencies.—Have you?" he asked suddenly.

Sherry frowned.

"Exactly? We are agreed again," said Miro, smiling. "Now be kind enough to tell me what you know." Sherry described his flood experience in fifty words. "And if she's the same girl, she's in San Francisco," he ended abruptly.

"What makes you imagine that?"

Sherry pulled an envelope from his pocket, showed a scrap of lace, and a piece of ribbon with several strands of long dark hair knotted into it, and told of his inquiries at the railroad station.

"She's with two Dagos, a fat woman, who's probably Consuelo Martinez, a kid of some sort, and an organ-grinder's monkey!"

"Consuelo Martinez," Miro said slowly, but his eyes were glittering again, "is Jacqueline's old nurse. I had her name from Isabella Miro. There is no doubt left in my mind that the little girl you spent two days with in a barn, and my little friend Jacqueline are one and the same."

"Are you quite sure you're her friend?" asked Sherry.

Miro smiled broadly. "Pardon me, it is still my turn to ask for confidence. You have not yet told me all you know."

"Yes I have," said Sherry.

"By inference, perhaps. I invite you to be frank. What is your motive for finding her?"

"I love her," Sherry answered promptly.

"Permit me to admire your good taste. Are you aware that she has no money?"

"Don't know anything about her affairs," Sherry answered with his jaw set rather tight again.

"Your father, is—ah—in your confidence?"

"Not he. I've lied to him."

"And if he should learn?"

"There would be one Hades of a row!"

"You are willing to face that? Have you money of your own?"

"Only my salary."

Miro smiled, and Sherry noticed it. "And you know that she has none."

"Never even stopped to consider that," said Sherry.

"You also understand how extremely difficult it will be to disprove these newspaper charges against her?"

Sherry nodded. Miro continued to smile, and for several minutes they faced each other in silence, Sherry growing more and more uneasy. He wondered whether he was not beginning to be able to see through the man's mask, perhaps because the other so intended.

"On what grounds do you base your belief in her innocence?" asked Miro.

"It's not a question of belief. I'm damned well sure of it," said Sherry.

"Love's unreason, eh? I propose we carry on the search for her together. Such enthusiasm—"

Sherry frowned again. All sorts of forebodings occurred to him, but he said nothing.

"I think I understand you perfectly," said Miro, watching his face. "And you are quite right. If she is hiding, we have no right whatever to force her into the limelight, with the inevitable consequences. The difficulty will be to avoid further publicity. I suppose, if you find her—"

"The Tribune be damned!" answered Sherry.

Miro nodded. "In my business I would fire a man who entertained any such sentiment. However, you are quite right, although it does not always pay to be right. For your sake I propose that we carry on the search independently. You do your best to keep reporters off the trail. I defray expenses. How does that suit you?"

Sherry looked sullen—jealous, suspicious. Miro seemed amused. As a bachelor he understood the reason perfectly.

"I have a few men in my organization on whom I can thoroughly depend," he said. "I have already turned them loose on San Francisco."

"Meanwhile," said Sherry, "the Tribune's going to run a brute of a Sunday special about her, and I can't stop it—daren't even try. If I said a word they'd be on to the fact that I know she's alive. They suspect me already."

"Say nothing then."

"It's a rotten job. That beast Wahl did it—the same who wrote the first story. I'm the fool who recommended him to the Tribune! If she ever sees it—"

"Sunday, eh? Five days from now. We might find her in five days," said Miro. "Poor Jacqueline! My cousin Andres undoubtedly taught her to be more sensitive than you or I would be to anything of that kind. Well—are we agreed?"

Sherry nodded, but ungraciously. He felt he had told Miro much more than he should have done. For all he knew to the contrary marrying young girls might be an hereditary predisposition with middle-aged Miros! "Millions maketh manners." His own father was a case in point. There would be no controlling Miro—no possible check on him. However, he forced a smile; for it occurred to him that, though Miro might spirit Jacqueline away, and even persuade her to marry him to escape from her predicament, that would be better for her than not to be found at all.

Miro understood his attitude, and rather liked him for it. Used to being flattered and toadied to, he enjoyed this irreverence and recognized the good stuff underneath. He stood up and offered his hand.

"I see I'm not in the same boat with little Jacqueline," he said, smiling. "You won't accept me at face value, eh? If you find yourself in difficulties, try me—and call on me for money if you need it. You know my address? Let's see—what shall I have? A headache will do, I think. If you see our hostess, please assure her that my temporary indisposition is not due to her sandwiches, because I didn't eat any. Good night."

Miro went for his coat, and Sherry found Dad by going straight toward the sandwiches and champagne.

"Let's get out of here," he urged, and Dad, having made a good supper, needed no extra persuasion. Out on the sidewalk he took Sherry's arm.

"Noticed you with Miro," he said. "Get a story?"

"No," Sherry answered brown-studying. "He did."

"Don't you know he's cousin to the Andres Miro, who was killed in Louisiana?" Dad demanded. "You young bone-head! I felt sure you were getting a column out of him. Man—he's front-page stuff! Didn't you talk to him about the Lanier girl?"

"I did."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing for publication."

Dad looked keenly at him in the light of a street lamp. He was deadly curious; but he decided that questioning might only drive Sherry more into himself.

"If you've something on your mind, why don't you tell your father?" he asked, putting a hand on Sherry's shoulder.

"Because he'd kick like hell!" Sherry answered, not exactly shaking off the hand, but widening the space between them. "I don't want to have to fight him—or you either. See?"

Dad whistled softly. He was still whistling when they boarded a car. He whistled all the way back to the Tribune office, and there were lots of flat notes, and several sharp ones. It was nothing that even resembled a hopeful or contented tune.

CHAPTER 24.

"Young nicee girlee—catchee lich man!"

It was a Sunday morning when Jacqueline was forced at last to stand and face destiny. You may make your bed in hell, as the Psalmist proposed, or in a cheap boarding-house, which is less intriguing, but problems follow you.

The moulting parrot watched the breakfast table with a melancholy eye, and the fat man from upstairs made the usual remarks about the food. Nine or ten people were buried behind the rustling sheets of the Sunday paper, and Jacqueline found nothing to do but stare at back-page advertisements and wonder why the underworld, as Consuelo insisted upon calling it, preferred breakfast in slippers and curl-papers. She had come to hate the sight of newspapers; their rustling made her nervous.

Even Cervanez, careful about appearances as a rule, because she gloried in being mistaken for Ramon's wife, came down untidy and sour—prodded fried eggs with a fork—sipped the coffee—swore in English—snatched at the magazine section of Ramon's paper, and up-ended it

against the cruet. There was no conversation. The fat man declared he had found a beetle in the prune-juice, and made remarks about it; but that was a monologue. Nobody cared.

Even the monologue had ceased, and there was nothing but the yawping of an incredulously opportunist cat to relieve monotony, when Jacqueline became uncomfortably conscious of Cervanez' eyes staring at her over the top of the newspaper. She had never before seen quite that stony look on Cervanez' face. It was no longer calculating; it had calculated—no mistaking that.

Jacqueline forced a smile, but Cervanez said nothing, which only made it worse. She nudged Ramon, and made him read the part of the newspaper that was propped open in front of her. Ramon, reading slowly, glanced up too, but with different expression. His eyes hinted that new calculations were beginning. Jacqueline felt the goose-flesh rising, and that ghastly sick sensation that accompanies vague fear. But she tried to pretend to herself that it was the breakfast odors that made her feel faint, and gave that excuse to Consuelo as she left the room.

Consuelo followed her upstairs and found her trembling on the bed.

"Consuelo, I can't stand this place a minute longer! Oh, why haven't we some money?"

"We've a little, honey. Look,—eleven dollars."

"Where did you get it, Consuelo?"

Consuelo hesitated. It is never quite easy to dissemble in the face of innocence.

"You didn't steal it, Consuelo?"

The frown danced furiously, and the lake-blue eyes looked horrified.

"Conchita! How could you think that?" (Consuelo bit her lip, though.) "I found a friend this morning, while you were asleep, and borrowed."

But Jacqueline was nervous, horror trod on horror's heels that morning. "She knows who you are, then. She'll tell! They'll discover me! Consuelo, we must run!"

"Honey, we'll go this very minute! I'd as soon die as see you stay in this place!"

Panic overwhelmed both of them. They felt like frightened animals who ran without rhyme or reason, and began packing, each in the other's way,—throwing their few belongings into a cheap straw valise. Neither of them heard the door open until Cervanez coughed. Then they faced about like detected criminals, and Consuelo, feeling cornered, flared up:

"We're going!"

"Going where?" asked Cervanez harshly, standing with one hand on her hip and her back to the door.

"Never mind where. We're going. You and your cheap restaurants and public dancing!"

Cervanez glared angrily, flourishing the Sunday paper like a weapon in front of her.

"And that money what you owe us—me and Ramon?" she demanded.

"We'll pay when we can," said Consuelo, standing her ground.

"When you can?" Cervanez screamed. "Can! Can! You make us fools! Look! Read!" She shook the paper in their faces. "It say you have no money— never! You not marry Miro—you get nothing—nix—an' you know that all along! Now you see paper and you run away! I call police! I show you! Who pay back all that money to me an' Ramon?"

Jacqueline shrank away, the New Orleans paper in mind. It did not occur to her that any other paper might be repeating the story. But Consuelo fought back:

"You won't tell how much we owe!" she retorted.

"How much? How much you pay me?" Cervanez screamed, and the noise of that brought Ramon, suave and imperturbable as ever. Cervanez moved away from the door to let him through, and he stood surveying the scene with the air of a toreador. There was triumph in his eye—a firm smile on his lips. He was magnificent.

"Ramon, they run! They get no money! They desert us!" Cervanez exclaimed tragically.

Ramon nodded comprehension. Nevertheless, he retained the air of gallantry and faced the bedroom like a lord of the arena. Poor Jacqueline shrank farther back than ever. To her his triumphant smile meant only one thing, he would betray who she was and revel in her public shame!

"Deus!" he said, smiling. "There is more money in Conchita's feet than in a mine of Minos Gaeres! She will dance. Is it not so, Senorita?"

Cervanez looked incredulous, and the tortoise-shell comb, that propped her black hair in a high pile, trembled with indignation, but she was no more angry than Consuelo. Consuelo stamped her foot, anger rising, as the other woman's fell, like fluid passing from one to the other.

"She shall not dance! She shall not be at your service! She, who is fit to be a queen, and you who are—pah!—underworld! I will take her away! I will work my hands to the bone for her! She shall not dance!"

But she reckoned without Jacqueline, whose eyes were on Ramon's. Seventeen is the midway point between youth and maturity. Childish fears and innocence persist, but riper judgment dawns, and the one gives place to the other alternately.

Pride is a constant equation, always to be reckoned with. There are limits beyond which inborn pride can not be pressed by fear.

Jacqueline stepped toward Ramon. Consuelo strode between them, trying to keep Jacqueline behind her. Ramon smiled, and signaled with one eloquent eyebrow to his mother to be still. Jacqueline avoided Consuelo's outstretched arm.

"I will speak to him, Consuelo."

Ramon bowed with sufficient dignity to cover up the hint of mockery in his handsome eyes, and Consuelo yielded *faute de mieux*,* ready, though, to slap Ramon's face at the first excuse.

"Senor Ramon, if I refuse to dance for you, will you tell who I am?"

Cervanez was about to answer, but Ramon checked her, smiling his handsomest. The swift, revengeful Latin flash that lit up his mother's eyes found no reflection in his. He was too good an actor. He could carry off a situation to the last bluff—until the last bet. His elbow, sticking out jauntily from his side as if a mantilla were draped on it, signaled to his mother to leave this play to him. He knew Jacqueline was not bluffing; nobody could fail to recognize the honesty in those blue eyes. He met dignity with dignity and honesty with something that at least held up a mirror to it.

"Senorita Conchita, I would tear out this heart with my hands before I would betray you! When I said—"

"Am I free to go?"

"Si, Senorita La Conchita is as free as she is adorable! My mother and I are happy to have been of service. That bagatelle—the insignificant sums we have advanced—accept them, Senorita, as our gift—and our apologies that we had no more to give!"

But Jacqueline could see his mother's face behind him and the malice in that pair of black eyes steeled her. Pride chilled the steel. She was willing to face anything that minute—even exposure—even Wahl, and mock heroics stirred her true heroism.

"If I go, you will tell no one my real name?"

"Never, Senorita!"

Cervanez gasped, but Ramon smiled steadily. He enjoyed the drama. He foresaw victory, and he was right.

"Then I will dance for you!" said Jacqueline.

Ramon betrayed then that his gold was tinsel; he turned his head swiftly to exchange a boastful smirk of triumph with his mother. But Jacqueline did not see that; she had Consuelo on her hands.

"No, no, honey! Never! You shall not! I will not have it! You shall not dance in public!"

But the bird had flown the nest. The child was no longer in a nurse's keeping. Pride, breeding, courage, all had charge.

"Consuelo, we can't owe these people money. We must repay them, and there isn't any other way."

"Hundreds and hundreds of dollars!" Cervanez interjected.

Consuelo flared up again at that.

"You give us no accounting! You won't say how much we owe! You! Do you expect us to work for you for ever?"

Ramon faced about swiftly, his eyes blazing. He motioned to his mother to leave the room. He did not propose to have victory spoiled by a fresh exchange of incivilities and Cervanez knew better than to disobey. But she turned on him outside the bedroom door.

"You, Ramon, you take such a hazard! You are mad!" Ramon put his arm around Cervanez' waist and kissed her, as if she were his sweetheart.

"We could sell her to the newspaper for more than she owes us!" he answered, smiling. "But why show the trump, when you can win with the low card?"

"You! Ramon! Oh, you clever rogue! But she must begin to dance. We are in debt. We run risks, Ramon. And we run greater risks if any one recognizes her, because then she will surely run away!"

He motioned Cervanez to her own room, knocked on Jacqueline's door again and entered. Consuelo stormed and ordered him out, but he appealed over her shoulder to Jacqueline with one of those cavalier gestures that graced every situation in which he found himself. He was like a toreador apologizing whimsically to the audience for the clumsiness of the bull. It made Jacqueline smile.

"Have you come to issue your commands?" she asked.

"Never, Senorita!" He bowed with his hand on his heart. "I am a suppliant!"

"For what?"

"For forgiveness."

Jacqueline blushed.

"Circumstances are relentless, Senorita."

"What do you mean, Ramon?"

"We are broke, Senorita!"

She knew well enough what that word meant, although she never associated it in her own thoughts with her own condition. She thought only of Ramon, and that instantly.

"Oh, Ramon! Consuelo—Consuelo has a friend who lends her money. Borrow some for Ramon, Consuelo!"

Never had Ramon so enjoyed a situation! No phase of it was lost on him —humor—pathos—irony—he saw it all. He even knew who Consuelo's friend was.

"Senorita, you overwhelm me! But—"

"But what?" asked Jacqueline. "Surely you—"

"I am truly embarrassed by your loyal generosity. But"—he smiled proudly—"you who are so proud will understand. And there is another way. Senorita—"

"Don't be afraid. Tell me."

Consuelo, watching from the bed, guessed how little fear he felt, but that did not prevent Ramon from acting self-abasement perfectly.

"That Greek, Senorita, who owns the café, would gladly pay us to begin dancing tomorrow, instead of next week. For me alone he offers little, but for the two of us—"

He paused as if frightened at his own boldness.

"You mean that you depend on me?" asked Jacqueline.

Ramon gestured away the scandalous notion of imposing on her.

"Deus! That would be unforgivable! But, if the senorita wishes to repay us —and it is convenient—then let the Greek serve his purpose! Why not? If the senorita should dance in a mask, none would ever recognize her, and—"

"No, Conchita! Tell him you will not!" urged Consuelo.

"Yes, Ramon, I will begin tomorrow night," Jacqueline said quietly. She was disappointed in Consuelo. To have a convenient friend who lent money, and not to be willing to borrow to help people to whom one was under obligation, was not praiseworthy. She signified with a little regal nod that Ramon had her leave to go, and when he had bowed himself out she turned to deal with the old duenna as a responsibility rather than an asset. Poor Consuelo, recognizing disdain in the beloved blue eyes, tried very hard to smile.

"You should have offered Ramon those eleven dollars that you borrowed, Consuelo."

"Honey dear!" But Consuelo could not argue—could not speak. She covered her face with her red, rough hands and wept into them.

"Come now, don't cry, Consuelo. Why are your hands so red? Why are you crying? There, there, never mind! You've had a dreadful time, haven't you? And it's not so easy for you as it is for me, because I'm young. But you've always been so loyal and generous to me that I was surprised when you didn't offer that money to Ramon. He's been good to us."

Consuelo dried her tears, pulled out a cheap apron she had packed into the straw valise, and began to tie it on. Her face became resigned—yet not without a sort of meek determination.

"Where are you going, Consuelo?"

"Nowhere special, honey. Just downstairs. I promised—I promised—I'd talk with the landlady. I'll be back soon. Lie down, dear, and take a nap."

A nap was Consuelo's perennial recipe for all complaints, or for none, she never having quite forgotten Jacqueline as a baby in arms; and much the easiest way to avoid argument was to pretend to comply, so Jacqueline lay down and Consuelo went downstairs to have her gossip. But Consuelo was gone a long time, and Jacqueline with nothing else to do, lay on the bed awake, considering things.

For one thing she wondered why Cervanez had only just discovered that she would not inherit money. Had she kept that New Orleans paper all this time and not read it until now? People were funny. She did not mind dancing with Ramon—if that were a way of getting out of debt. It is only pretentious ill-breeding that resents inferiority. Real breeding is self-reliant, and it was much less distressing to Jacqueline to associate with Ramon and Cervanez—and with Pepita and a monkey—than it was for Consuelo, who scorned the little Brazilian orphan as sincerely as she loathed the performing animal (whereas Jacqueline made pets of them both).

Anything was better than to worry about the disastrous past. Desmio's death haunted her, and the thought of Sherry Mansfield filled her with hopeless yearning, whenever she dared to think; and she could not think of the days before that—not even of Sister Michaela—without passing, as it were, through the neck of a bottle, re-living dreadful seconds in Desmio's house, with two dead bodies on the floor, and Wahl's hand on her wrist—seconds that made her feel like going mad. One thing, though, was possible. She could open the gold locket, and see Desmio's face as he was when he gave her that last wedding-gift, without letting her mind move forward to the tragedy.

She was looking at Desmio's portrait, wondering what he would think of her dancing in public, and rather sure he would approve of her earning her own living in the only way she could when Ramon knocked at the door again. There was no mistaking his knock. She made up her mind on the instant not to admit him.

So she opened the door six inches, and set her toe against it. Ramon thrust his handsome face into the gap.

"What do you want?" she asked, trying to make her voice sound unafraid. Her education had not included the art of holding a bedroom door against an amorous Brazilian.

"You, Conchita! Loveliest lady—you! Let me in!" Ramon began to use pressure and set his foot into the opening. She could not force the door shut again. She tried with all her might and lost ground inch by inch. "Go away or I'll scream!"

He laughed. He knew that house, and knew where Consuelo was. A woman would have to scream uncommonly loud and desperately before any one would think twice about it. Women in Ramon's experience, and especially young ones, like gallantry with a touch of force in it—the velvet glove and iron hand. He shoved his hardest and Jacqueline resolved to face him on her own ground. She jumped back suddenly letting him stagger into the room, which was not very dignified, and rather disconcerted him.

He tried to seize her hand and kiss it, but she snatched it away, not yielding another inch of ground.

"Conchita, I love you! I adore you!" he said, laying one hand on his heart. "Make me the happiest of men."

"I won't dance with you at all unless you're sensible."

"Adorable one, let us dance through life together!" Ramon urged. "Dance until you have limousines and diamonds—until the past is an empty dream, and the future, an assured fame! There is nothing in all the universe that those blue eyes and twinkling feet can not attain in partnership with me!"

He paused, not for lack of breath, or for words, but because she was laughing at him. Try how she might (and she was not trying very hard) she could not take Ramon seriously.

"If you behave yourself, I will dance with you until my debt is paid off," she answered. "Otherwise—"

She could not have managed him better. Unwittingly she had touched the spot that made him abject. Avarice was stronger than desire. But even so he tried to beat a retreat with dignity.

"Adorable Conchita, I am Ramon Braganza Manoel. It is love for you, not for myself that makes this heart burn! I am unselfish! Test me! Possibly you have not known me long enough—"

A cough at the door checked him suddenly. Cervanez entered, wearing that look of much too utter innocence that is more unconvincing than a stammered lie.

"Do you not mean to rehearse?" she asked.

That suited Jacqueline. She nodded. Cervanez took Ramon's arm, but he did not seem to want an interview with his mother at that moment.

"Let us escort Conchita to the stage," he said with one of his superb bows.

"No, I'll join you there," Jacqueline answered. Without analyzing, she was conscious of the upper hand over Ramon, and the natural instinct of self-preservation warned her that she might lose it unless she were careful. So she would take Consuelo with her, and encourage Ramon just sufficiently from within the protecting range of Consuelo's vision.

Ramon's mother led him from the room, and turned on him like a tigress the second the door was closed behind them.

"Lucky for you I interrupt, Ramon!"

"You listen at key-holes!" he retorted angrily.

"Yes! And I hear madness! One more minute and you promise that girl everything! She make damfool of you—"

Jacqueline listened until their voices died away on the lower stairs, and then went in search of Consuelo.

"Consuelo!" she called down the back stairs that led to the kitchen.

But there was no answer. There was a green baize door down there, intended to shut off the kitchen noises from the rest of the house. She would have to go down the back stairs and open that door before she could make Consuelo hear.

She went down gingerly, never having visited that part of the house before and feeling rather like a trespasser and anxious not to be heard or seen. The green door swung quietly on a hinge that worked both ways, and she pushed it open without making the least noise. Inside there was a long twilight passage, and a sound of something moving steadily—then of something knocking against a tin pail; and there was a smell quite unmistakable. She let the door swing shut behind her, and it was about a minute before her eyes grew used to the dimness.

"Consuelo!" she called in a low voice.

"Yes, honey! Yes! What is it?"

"I thought you were talking to the landlady." Consuelo, who was kneeling, struggled to her feet—threw a scrubbing brush into the bucket—wiped her hands—and tried to untie the wet apron; but her soap-and-hot-water-soaked fingers could not manage the knot. "What have you been doing, Consuelo?"

"Scrubbing, honey."

The tone was apologetic and ashamed.

"Why?"

"Oh, the landlady was worried, and the scrubwoman didn't turn up, so I thought I'd help her out."

"Why, Consuelo—you've scrubbed all this long passage—and the walls—they're still wet."

"It was nothing, honey—"

"You're all tired out! Have you ever done this before? Is this what made you so tired the other day—and what has made your hands so rough and red ever since the day after we came here? Consuelo—tell me the truth at once! Is this how you got those eleven dollars? Is this the friend you borrowed from?"

"Honey dear—we—we had to get some money somewhere. I've lost my bank-book, you know that—"

"And this is how you've been buying me candy and hair-ribbons?"

"Conchita, dear, don't scold me!"

"And I asked you if you stole the money! Consuelo, give me that scrubbing-brush at once! Go upstairs and wait for me!" She spoke quickly to cover a sudden choke in her throat.

"No, honey."

"Consuelo—I tell you I will do it! Do you hear me? Is this the board you kneel on? Give me your apron then."

Jacqueline undid the knot, and tied the wet apron on herself.

"Honey, dear, you can't! You don't know how!"

"I will! Go upstairs and lie down, Consuelo! Kiss me first—you dear! You dear old faithful! Now—you have your orders! Be off with you, and rest!"

Jacqueline was on her knees already, dipping soft hands into the lye.

"Please, honey!"

"Go and rest. Then put your hat on. You're to watch me rehearse."

Consuelo obeyed. There was nothing else for it; and Jacqueline splashed water on the floor—and scrubbed, and scrubbed—using both hands to the brush, and wondering however Consuelo had found strength for the task."

The Chinese cook came out through the kitchen door, and stood still, watching her. She worked all the harder, wishing her arms would not ache so. She was not going to rest while he looked at her—not going to have to make excuses to a Chinaman. Why didn't he go away?

Scrub-scrub-scrub—and how her arms ached! The Chinaman lit the gas, and watched her steadily, until she felt she would like to throw the brush at him.

"You no sabe," he said at last in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice.

She stopped scrubbing then, and looked up at him. He had a wrinkled old face, and bright eyes that looked older than the world. He was not smiling, not scowling; he simply looked at her.

"You no sabe sclubbe," he repeated.

"Nonsense! Any one can do this."

She resumed the scrubbing, but he took the pail away from her and set it down on the far side of the kitchen door.

"No can do," he announced simply, and stood and watched her again. He seemed to be a Napoleonic sort of Chinaman. She got to her feet and he took the board away.

"Bring those back!" Jacqueline commanded. "I must finish or the landlady will find fault."

"Belong my pidgen," he answered. "Landlady come back bime-by—to- mollow maybe."

"But she must be here! She paid Consuelo to do this."

He shook his head.

"Consuelo said so."

"All same tellee lie. Belong my pidgen. Me pay Consuelo 'leben dollars. This floor, dollar time. Kitchen floor, dollar-fifty time. You sabe?"

Jacqueline did "sabe." Consuelo had been working for a Chinaman! She blushed up to her ears, and was more glad than ever that she had insisted on relieving her. She would finish the job now to the bitter end!

"Bring that pail back here!" she commanded.

The Chinaman did not even move—did not frown—did not smile —just looked at her.

"No can do," he answered her in his own good time. "You young nice girlee. This old woman job. Consuelo can do—dollar—dollar-fifty —catchee little, not much. Consuelo getting no bime-by. All finish up. Dead soon. You plenty bime-by. You plitee girlee-catchee lich man. Catchee Consuelo—make sclub. You sabe?"

He was impregnable, entrenched in a philosophy totally foreign to Jacqueline's comprehension. She did not know how to answer him. But there were elements of kindness in his creed. He was willing to teach; to advise.

"You catchee lich man," he insisted. "Lamon no good. Lamon no good Portugee, catchee little money one time—bime-by all gone. You sabe? All same Consuelo then, you sclubee floor—one dollar—dollar-fifty. Lamon catchee 'nother damfool girlee. This house cheap place. You no belong cheap place. You belong big hotel. Plenty lich men come. Lich man like plitee girlee. Soft for you. You sabe?"

Jacqueline's frown was going sixteen to the dozen, and her blue eyes were rounded with astonishment. Dimly she did understand what he meant, but only dimly. Yet his manner was not impudent; and she realized it would not be the slightest use to be angry with him. It was like being talked to by an automaton.

"You no walkee stleet," he went on. "Catchee bum—catchee cop —catchee Clistian Sociation. No good. Catchee lich man, big hotel. Can do. Me fix it. Mollow—nex' day—me makee 'langement. You lun away from here dam-quick. Catchee plenty lich man, big hotel. You sabe?"

Jacqueline understood enough—enough, at all events to know she wanted no more of his advice. She turned away from him and hurried through the green baize door, glancing back over her shoulder only once as the door swung shut. He was mopping the floor dry, thrusting the pole back and forth mechanically in the gaslight, with exactly the same expression on his face that was there when she first looked up at him.

If he was thinking of her, or of anything in the world except to get that floor dry, he gave no sign of it. Down at the far end of that long passage, he looked like the automatic demon of the underworld, sure of the ultimate victory of evil, and indifferent as to how long any process took. Yet not unkind. He was the voice of the subcellar and the gas-jet.

CHAPTER 25.

"Who's that girl?"

"Papa" Pantopoulos was one hundred percent American. He could prove it. He had papers. He was no impractical theorist, but did in San Francisco as the San Franciscan does—bought protection regularly at the going rate, and supplied the best brands of bootleg to patrons who knew the ropes. With the aid of dinginess, Levantine waiters, tomato ketchup and spaghetti he had slowly built up a reputation for Bohemian excellence, and now with fresh paint, new

tablecloths and a Czechoslovakian orchestra of five pieces he was bidding for a more expensive clientele.

Bidding high, too. He had his advertising matter written by a Hebrew who had failed at Hollywood, and he was all ready to rush into print when Ramon informed him on a Sunday afternoon that La Conchita would be his partner instead of Cervanez and they would begin dancing for him the next evening, instead of a week later as expected.

He had a gorgeous poster made in three colors—painted by hand by the same gentleman who drew the duchesses in underwear for the department-store advertisements; and he himself personally nailed it up, under the new glass portico that he had bought at a bargain from an up-town failed competitor.

"El Toro," that had been a dive—a joint—a café by courtesy—was now a restaurant. And Papa Pantopoulos, even with his bank-account down somewhere near the zero mark in consequence of advertising space rates, was no small sport. Every newspaper editor in San Francisco, all the sporting writers, the dramatic and musical critics, and some of the managers of leading hotels received two free tickets for dinners on the opening night, in a pink envelope marked "Personal—Important—Rush!" The tickets had the menu printed on the back, and on the face was a portrait of "La Conchita" done in black and gold and green in memory, by an artist who had heard a good description of her from Papa himself. The black mask was the most nearly accurate part of the picture; the rest of it was mainly twirling legs and suggestiveness.

But Jacqueline knew nothing about any of that. She had been told that important people would be present; Papa Pantopoulos bragged to her about it after she and Ramon rehearsed that Sunday afternoon. But Ramon told her afterward the important people would all send substitutes, if they did anything at all, and that Papa was a fool for his pains.

"It is our dancing, Senorita, that will produce the results, not his vile cooking. We will dance until all San Francisco clamors at his door! And then we will accept a real engagement elsewhere and the crowd will follow us!"

Jacqueline thought that an ungrateful—almost an immoral proposition; but she was too excited to dare to argue, knowing very well she would get nervous if she did. It had occurred to her that Ramon, Cervanez, Pepita, Consuelo, and even the adorable monkey were all dependent on her success; and Cervanez rubbed that in unfeelingly on the way back to the boarding-house.

Consuelo was already so nervous that there was no comfort to be had from her. Jacqueline went upstairs and spent the rest of the afternoon with Pepita and the monkey, playing games she had almost forgotten and singing the old nursery songs that used to irritate Donna Isabella "because they are foolish, and the niggers sing them, Jacqueline." She could imitate a darky perfectly, and Pepita so enjoyed the fun that Jacqueline forgot all about her own troubles.

But they were all heaped on her once more at the evening meal. The fat man, who seemed to be a fixture in the upstairs hall-room and to know everybody's business, lectured her on stage fright—warned her not to eat too much—advised her to drink brandy and champagne before going on—and above all, not to say her prayers.

"The stage an' the angels ain't on speaking terms," he assured her. "I've known young girls who prayed for hours before their first appearance—went to mass an' all that—flopped, every darn one of 'em. The most successful young one I recall was a girl named Juanita—that was her stage name anyway. I tried to kiss her, and she got so mad-angry you couldn't hold her. Sore? Believe

me! She was boiling! When her turn came she went on like a whirlwind—sang an' danced 'em out o' their seats, and they called her back a dozen times. Made her! It sure did. She was a headliner from that minute—until she tripped on an untied lace one night an' went to hospital. Bu'sted her hip, or something—complications—doctors did the rest—died under chloroform, without ever thinking o' thanking me for having tried to kiss her. Would it make you angry if I kissed you—honey?" he asked, imitating Consuelo's accent and wiping cabbage from his lips with a paper napkin.

He would have made the attempt, but for Ramon's suggestive action with a table-knife. Cervanez, on the horns of anxiety, tried to turn the conversation into safer channels, but the fat man had started the ball rolling and nearly everybody at the table followed suit with tales of stage-fright and disaster. Then some one with his mouth full blurted out that Papa Pantopoulos was running El Toro on a shoestring.

"Give him one week. If your turn don't crowd the place he's done for. Those Greeks all cut each other's throats for a living. There's three Greeks he owes bills to for beef an' supplies, an' they'll take the joint over if he's a day late with the money. Has he paid you in advance Ramon? Oh, you poor boob! You've a fat chance!"

That sent Cervanez into hysterics. The meal broke up to the shrilling of her fear, all hurled at Jacqueline.

"We find her—we be good to her—Ramon squander money on her —an' now we starve! You all hear what he say—now we starve!"

They carried her upstairs kicking; but she recovered soon enough to invade Jacqueline's room while she was dressing and to chase out Pepita.

"That child is jinx, I tell you! We bring her all the way from Brazil, an' all she do is cost us money! Eat—she eat all the time! Work? Never! When it is not one excuse it is the other—truant officers—police—the doctors! She is only good for play with monkey—I get rid of her! Scat—you little nuisance!"

That helped decide the night's fate for Jacqueline. She had one more to defend and protect. Consuelo first, and now little Pepita. She would do or die, for the sake of Pepita! She would make a reputation as a dancer, and earn money, in order to be able to take that child away from such surroundings. The thought aroused all her courage. She grew angry—even as the fat man recommended—and ordered Cervanez out of the room —was obeyed too. Cervanez gasped at her, and went. Consuelo knelt before the washed-out image of the Virgin Mary in the corner by the end of the bed, and snuffled as she prayed; but Jacqueline dressed herself as if she were putting on armor—tied on the mask like a visor behind which she would do battle with the world—and announced herself ready.

Consuelo bade her kneel and say her prayers. "You'll need all the help you can get tonight, honey darling!"

"No!"

"Conchita!"

"I've done no wrong. I'm going to do my best. If Heaven won't help me tonight without my asking, I'll never pray again, Consuelo?"

She was adamant. The blue eyes blazed through the holes in the mask, and her lips were set hard beneath it. "Go and tell Ramon I am ready."

Ramon came dressed as a toreador in white and tinsel, looking handsomer than Satan, fresh from a curtain-lecture by Cervanez and carrying off his irritation under a veneer of swagger. He stumbled over a big teddy-bear that Pepita had left on the floor, and kicked it under the bed with a brimstone oath in Portuguese before he offered his arm to Jacqueline. He could not have done better. That act brought the very lees of her anger to the surface. Jacqueline refused his arm.

"Bring that back here, Ramon!"

"Senorita!"

"Do you hear me?"

"The senorita jests!"

"Oh, very well. Dance alone, then! Consuelo, don't you dare to do it for him!"

Ramon studied her a moment; but Jacqueline stood stock-still waiting for him to obey or take the consequences.

"Temperament!" he muttered. "Oh, well!"

Placing a towel on the floor he knelt on it and reached under the bed, recovering the toy and bringing it to her with an attempt at half-humorous chivalry, expecting at least a smile in return. But instead she flashed him a look of indignation, took the teddy-bear, and ran upstairs to return it to Pepita, lingering so long up there to exchange good nights that Ramon bit his fingernails and swore. Consuelo had to go at last and bring her down.

Then, on the way to the back entrance of El Toro, Cervanez indulged herself anew in the luxury of high-pitched railing against providence.

"We walk! My God, we walk like street-women! Not even a cab! We must drag ourselves through dirt like the tramps to the back door of a bum show—and all because you throw our money away, Ramon! Does that Greek not know enough to send a taxi for us?"

"But three blocks—three or four blocks—what is that?" asked Ramon.

"My dignity—is that nothing?" she retorted. "In Rio de Janeiro we would have a voiture* if we crossed the street! You bring us to the devil, Ramon! Down—down—down you bring us. Three hundred dollars for that dress that Conchita is wearing! And me—I walk!"

Jacqueline had no pity to waste on Cervanez that night. She had only scorn for ill-breeding and selfishness.

"Be still," she commanded. "You shall have your money back, and the walk will do you good."

"Money back? I like to see it! I kiss myself good-bye to it when Ramon buy you that dress!" Cervanez retorted.

So between the boarding-house and the stage-door Jacqueline was given no chance to recover her temper. She was angrier than she had ever been in all her life. When Ramon suggested she should remove her gold chain and locket before dancing, because it did not go with the dress, she could hardly keep herself from slapping him. Desmio's last present to her was the only thing she was wearing that was her very own.

"You are impertinent!" She answered. "Why are we waiting? Why don't we begin?"

The place had been a theater at one time, and the stage extended all across one end of what was now the restaurant. Papa Pantopoulos had given his last hostage to bankruptcy by ordering in potted palms and a gorgeous back-drop recommended by the electrician—a youth with the world before him, and an eye for Jacqueline, intent on making miracles to satisfy her.

There was a clatter of knives and forks from beyond the curtain, but not much laughter, and much less noise of conversation than there should have been. Papa Pantopoulos came hurrying behind the scenes, hot, napkin under arm, and almost frantic with anxiety.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "It drags. It goes like a funeral!"

"Goin' to look like one, too, without another spotlight! Don't say I didn't tell you!" warned the electrician.

"I spent too much!" Pantopoulos answered. "I close this place tomorrow! Oh, my God! Miss—" (He hurried over to where Jacqueline stood, and began to paw her hands in his anxiety.) "—do me the little favor, please! Begin! My place is full—there is not a seat left—but the black murderer in the kitchen put too much tomato in the soup, and unless you make them all forget it I am ruined! Don't wait until nine o'clock. Begin now!"

Jacqueline caught Ramon's eye. Not a word passed. She commanded him with a gesture. Pantopoulos hurried out to instruct the orchestra. Consuelo sat down on a wobbly chair in the flies and began fanning herself with a handkerchief. Cervanez struck a gong and hauled up the curtain hand-over-hand. The clatter of plates and forks increased. The stage became a sudden stunning sea of light. "Ready?" asked Ramon. She hardly waited for him.

For a moment the hum of conversation rose—then dwindled, gradually. Some one said "Bravo!" and two or three people clapped. Jacqueline grew conscious of scores of eyes all focused on her—dimly saw the heads of the orchestra below the stage, and beyond them a wilderness of faces and white tables—hated every detail of it all—and danced. —Danced like the devil—stamped her heel into the stage and outdanced Ramon—made him sweat and change and improvise to keep up with her—tossed him scornful glances over-shoulder through the mask, laughed as she thought of sudden new expedients to bewilder him—closed with him to dance the tango steps that were his special pride, and outdanced him again until he was nothing more than an accompaniment to her *pas seul*.^{*} She hated him, the audience, and all the world—cared for nothing but to pay her debt, and give the brutes their money's worth! And the audience—for whom she cared nothing—nothing!—rose in their seats to get a better view, clapping so thunderously when she finished to the last drumming chords of the cymbalum that Cervanez had to raise the curtain five times, while Jacqueline stood stock-still in mid-stage, head erect, not even nodding thanks for the applause—still furious.

"Conchita, we are famous!"

Ramon took her hand to lead her to the wings. Cervanez came running to put an arm around her. She snatched away her hand—ignored them both. Papa Pantopoulos came hurrying behind, perspiring and excited, to beam with gratitude; she turned her back on him. Consuelo threw a wrap over her shoulders, and she found a few words at last.

"We will get out of debt now, Consuelo! and you won't scrub any more!"

Ramon sulked. Cervanez sang to a new tune, setting a chair for her, standing by to flatter and rearrange stray wisps of hair that had gone adrift in the violence of dancing.

"You are marvelous, Conchita, marvelous! We make a fortune! How you dance like that? What make you inspiration?"

Inspiration came that instant. Jacqueline looked over her shoulder, her hand in Consuelo's lap. "Pepita!" she answered. "I'm dancing for her! If you're ever cruel to that child again, that will be the last time I will dance for you!"

"Oh, Pepita! The little one, eh? Hah! So she pay dividend at last!"

More inspiration! That remark disgusted Jacqueline more than if she had seen Pepita being slapped. She snatched her hand away from Consuelo, unable to endure even a true friend's petting, she was so furious. If she must dance—and she would dance, to pay the debt, and free herself, and Consuelo, and Pepita—she would give her whole attention to that. There was nothing to talk about—nothing! If she must make of herself a public spectacle, it should be no poor one—nothing to regret! Only something to hate, and hate, and hate—and triumph over!

How glad she was that Sherry did not even know her right name, and that Desmio had not lived to see her earn her living on a tawdry stage! This was that man Wahl's doing. In imagination she could see Wahl's face grinning at her—the very devil's own, delighting in her downfall! She wished he were there to see her now, and yet she knew she would run from him if he were there! She would like to prove to him that he could not destroy her with his lies; and yet she knew he could! She knew that if Wahl discovered her, and told who she was, and wrote more lies about her in the papers, she would run—run—run—perhaps even kill herself.

And in a corner of the restaurant, at a table under the balcony, Clinton Wahl sat devouring free guinea-chicken and asparagus vis-à-vis to a woman who was on much better than nodding terms with most of the men around her. Mansfield senior had received the two free tickets in pink envelopes, and had dispensed them as patronage in the usual way, to whoever had the day off and cared to ask. It amused Wahl to take a woman to a dinner that cost him nothing. He had not the remotest intention of "writing up" the El Toro restaurant or its proprietor, but Papa Pantopoulos fussed over him, and supplied him with surreptitious cocktails in coffee cups, expecting in return at least a quarter of a column on an inside page.

"Who's that girl?" Wahl asked him, ten minutes after Jacqueline's first dance, when Pantopoulos reappeared to hustle his waiters. "Is Conchita her real name?"

"Aha! She is a discovery—a mystery—my discovery!" Pantopoulos answered, grinning. "Nobody knows who she is—not even I! But listen." (he whispered behind his hand) "will you try a Conchita cocktail? That is another discovery, not quite as good, but—"

Wahl nodded. He would try anything on the free list. Pantopoulos hurried away to his secret locker.

"You got a crush on that dancer?" asked Wahl's companion. "Can't you keep it till tomorrow? You're out with me tonight."

Her face fell sulkily as she looked into Wahl's eyes. They were glittering. His face looked tense and set, as if he were trying to remember something and the memory held vestiges of humor.

"You seen her before somewhere?"

Wahl did not answer. It was a part of his creed never to answer a question unless it suited him, but to demand answers from everybody else. Papa Pantopoulos came hurrying back with a flask under his arm-pit.

"Something to help you remember La Conchita!" he whispered. "Is she not marvelous? Is she not worth a column on a front page?"

Wahl almost terrified the Greek with the sudden vehemence with which he seized his arm and pulled him closer.

"You want a write up! Front page? Introduce me to her then!"

"Ah, no, sir, she must be a mystery—for a while—for the sake of the advertising," Papa answered coaxingly. "Ask me later on, sir. Not tonight."

"Before I leave this place!" Wahl answered. "If she's who I think she is, you'll have all San Francisco in here before I'm through!"

"My God!" exclaimed the Greek. "I will do my best to feed them! Wait until after the next dance, and I will see what can be done."

"I must see her without the mask on," Wahl insisted. "Will she dance down here on the floor?"

"Not tonight, sir. Tomorrow I will move some of the tables up to the balcony, and clear a space for the guests to dance. Then perhaps I can persuade her to come down once from the stage—"

"Where does she live?" Wahl demanded.

The Greek shook his head, pretending not to know.

"I could follow her home, of course," Wahl said with one of his cold smiles.

"What—an' leave me flat?" asked his companion. Wahl ignored her. He was watching Pantopoulos, recognizing speculation in the Greek's eyes. The Greek was obviously weighing two chances in the balance.

"If I catch her outside here, I'll write her up without mentioning you, of course," Wahl assured him, tossing off the rest of the Conchita cocktail.

"I will see what I can do, sir."

Pantopoulos hurried away, still undecided, but with a new and brilliant notion in his head, which he allowed to simmer there while he ran to and fro, between restaurant and kitchen.

"Service, children! Service! Smile! Get a move on! Oh, my God! A man who runs a restaurant ought to have his head examined. Luigi, that is not the way to serve cold artichoke. Where you work last? In jail? Take that back to the kitchen!"

Cervanez rang the gong, and the curtain rose for the second dance, disclosing Ramon and La Conchita glittering white and silver in a pool of light. The orchestra swung into a lazy waltz strain that set the guests humming, and Conchita swayed slowly out of Ramon's arms. For a second Ramon was non-plussed—stood looking at her, wondering what next; but the audience thought that was part of the performance, and in a moment he was improvising, dancing up to her, pursuing her in circles, every effort he put forth serving to emphasize her art, as the obligato serves a tune. If her mood was not mischievous it surely seemed so from where the audience sat, and the black mask increased the delusion.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Wahl. "If she's the same girl, she's had teaching since. She danced like an amateur when I saw her last."

"Where did you see her?" his companion asked, trying sulkily to make the best of the situation.

"Not sure that I ever did see her," Wahl answered, watching the stage like a hawk. "But I think I've seen the man, too."

"Well? What of it?"

"Big story!" Wahl answered.

Oh, you make me sick! Why can't you give me a write up? Aren't I interesting? You said I was!"

"You wouldn't interest the public, Harriet. Humpty-Dumpty's no good after he's smashed, and you never had far enough to fall to make an echo!"

He was watching the stage—watching Jacqueline as if his eyes could pierce the mask, talking as if he were thinking aloud. He understood as well as any one in the room that the dance was marvelous, but all that did to him was to make it seem more worth while to pillory the artist, if it could be done without risk of suit for libel.

"I think you're a devil, Clinton!" his companion said suddenly. "You'd rather ruin any one than see them get away with it."

The audience had risen out of the chairs again. The orchestra had speeded up the tune in response to La Conchita's mood, and the dance was ending in a wild delirious swirl of silken skirt and stockings, with Ramon improvising faun-like leapings here and there that were a million times better than anything he had ever rehearsed. The curtain came down amid storms of clapping, and rose again repeatedly, showing La Conchita stock-still, panting, in mid-stage, and Ramon in the

background, not daring to come near her. But it looked as if he were modestly conceding her the whole applause.

Papa Pantopoulos went hurrying to the kitchen to speed up the service, and Wahl, watching the fat back disappear through the swinging door, snatched opportunity.

"Stay here, or take a taxi home, I don't care which," he said to his companion, and started in a hurry for the door beside the stage.

Why bother to wait for introductions? Why ask questions? Why not snatch that mask from the girl's face? If she turned out, as he expected, to be Jacqueline Lanier, good; if not, he could apologize. He had done more impudent things than that a score of times, and had only once been thrashed at all seriously, for he could use his fists a great deal better than the average.

But the door to the stage was locked, and he could not force it without attracting too much notice. He wanted this story to himself in order to do it justice, and to score another beat for the Tribune. There was a door leading under the stage from the curtained enclosure that half-concealed the orchestra. He ducked under the curtain, stepped behind the piano, kicked the door open and entered.

Just as he expected, there were steps leading up to a trap-door. The trap-door was bolted from below, and he had no difficulty in raising it. It brought him out into the wings to the right of the stage, opposite to where Jacqueline was sitting beside Consuelo. He started straight for her, almost running; but Cervanez, walking across-stage with her back toward him, heard him—turned suddenly—and sprang toward him, meeting him in the narrow gap between two flies.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she demanded. Instead of answering, he tried to avoid her, dodging around the fly, but she dodged the other way and met him face to face again.

"What do you want?" she insisted.

"An interview. I'm from a newspaper."

"No-thing do-ing!" Cervanez spread her elbows between the flies and blocked the way.

"Why not?" he demanded. "I'm from the Tribune. Don't you want good publicity?"

There was nothing that Cervanez wanted more; but she knew she had her choice between secrecy and losing La Conchita.

"No!" she answered, signaling wildly to Ramon with her hands behind her back. "This is private. Keep out!"

"Who is that girl? Tell me all about her."

Wahl was trying to see past her, but the stage was only dimly lit now and the shadow was confusing. What he did see was that there was no one near enough to run to this woman's assistance; and all he needed was one glimpse behind the dancer's mask. He rushed Cervanez suddenly and sent her reeling backward on her heels; but you don't dance for a living for forty years or so without becoming as wiry as a cat, and Cervanez sprang back at him, seized him by both arms, and screamed.

"Ramon! Ramon! Reporters! Run! Quick!"

"Damn you! Hold your noise!" Wahl hissed at her, struggling to wrestle loose from the strong lean hands. He struck her on the elbow, and she let go, screaming with the pain. But he was too late. As he leapt across the stage he saw a door on the far side slam, and heard a key turn. Then Papa Pantopoulos came running to know what the excitement was all about, and Cervanez appealed to the Greek noisily, rubbing her elbow and gesticulating like a fish-wife.

Nobody threatened Wahl, or talked of calling the police; he noticed that fact. Papa Pantopoulos used persuasion, and Cervanez, instead of abusing him for having struck her, began pleading.

"Please, Mr.—er—Wahl, please do not come behind here!" urged the Greek, taking him by the sleeve and trying to lead him off-stage by the door that connected with a passage between restaurant and kitchen.

"Please!" Cervanez seconded. "She is very nervous and highly temperamental! If she is frightened she will not dance!"

Wahl allowed himself to be led back to the dining-room, but he felt nearly sure now of the dancer's identity. He was wondering whether he dared to make the assertion in print that she was Jacqueline Lanier, without first getting absolute proof.

Nothing like keeping on harping on the same string, when you had a real story! Just sufficient time had elapsed since the first scandal to make its reappearance fresh and interesting. Perfect! The seventeen-year-old Herodias pretending to be drowned, and turning up in San Francisco on a cabaret stage, masked, and dancing a Bacchanale!* Did he dare?

Not yet, he decided. He must see her without that mask on.

"Take a taxi and go home," he advised the saddened Harriet. "I'm going to hang around outside here, and watch where La Conchita goes."

Papa Pantopoulos, coming up behind with cocktails to soothe injured feelings, overheard him, and the notion he had carried in his head for an hour crystallized at once into a purpose.

"There, sir—another Conchita! Genuine gin from over the line, and a secret recipe of my own. What a pity we can't advertise it! Hah-hah!"

Wahl tossed off the cocktail and bade him good night curtly, hardly giving the discouraged Harriet time to gather up her wraps. Papa Pantopoulos hurried to the stage again and summoned Ramon and Cervanez from behind the locked door, where they were guarding Jacqueline's retreat.

"Where is she? Not gone away?" he asked excitedly.

"She is hiding with Consuelo in a room upstairs."

"Ah! Listen to me. That man who came on the stage just now is from a newspaper. I heard him say he will wait outside to learn where she goes when she leaves here."

"My God! We shall lose her!" wailed Cervanez.

"Listen to me!" Pantopoulos insisted. But you couldn't listen with Consuelo coming down creaky stairs and jerking at the door to get it open.

"Who was it?" Consuelo demanded breathlessly.

"A Mr. Wahl, from the Tribune newspaper," said Pantopoulos.

"Wahl? What's his first name? Clinton?"

The Greek nodded. Consuelo turned instantly, horror-struck, to open the door and run upstairs again. Cervanez set her back against the door.

"Let me through! Let me through!" Consuelo almost screamed, tugging at the door-knob. "She will kill her self if that man finds her!"

"Listen to me—please!" Pantopoulos insisted. "If you leave this place tonight that man will see her, for he waits at the back door. Let her stay here. Why not all stay here? There is an apartment upstairs—a good apartment—several rooms, all furnished. You may have them. You must fulfill your contract. I can not afford to lose you, after all the expenses I have made. If you will stay upstairs I will charge you nothing for the apartment; and there are only two doors to upstairs—this one, and one to the kitchen; we will keep them both locked!"

Ramon stroked his chin, struck his attitude of Old-World dignity, and smiled.

"You are not the only one who can not afford things," he said suavely. "We must pay our bill at the other place before the dragon will permit me to remove our belongings. Now if the senor would make payment in advance—"

The Greek sighed. "Pay!" he exclaimed. "It is I who must pay everything! Where do I get the money, when half of the dinners tonight are not paid for? Am I Midas?"

"You are he who must decide!" smiled Ramon with a low ironic bow.

Ten minutes later Ramon left the El Toro back door with money in his pocket, striding with the swagger suitable to cash in hand. A man stepped out of a shadow suddenly, confronting him, blocking the sidewalk, thrusting cavernous eyes up close to his.

"What is your pleasure, Senor?" Ramon asked mildly.

"Aren't you La Conchita's dancing partner? Come now, tell me who she is and I'll make it worth your while!"

"But I don't know, Senor!"

"Let me see her then!"

"She left for her apartment directly after the second dance," Ramon answered without hesitating.

"Where does she live?"

"I don't know, Señor!"

"Rot!" Wahl answered. "Of course you know. See here; what's the use of your trying to hide her? I know who she is, but I want proof of it. The minute I have proof, you're famous! Can't you see the value of that?"

"But what is fame without a fortune, Señor?" Ramon asked. "No—I regret—I don't know who she is—or where she is just now—or who you are," he added.

"I'll soon prove to you who I am!"

"Of what use, Señor? The acquaintance would no doubt be very interesting to us both, but—"

He bowed magnificently. Wahl leered spitefully. Ramon strode away down- street in the opposite direction from the boarding-house, glancing over his shoulder, at the first corner to see whether he was followed. But Wahl decided not to waste time tracking him. He knew of at least one better way to get results, and began to feel sorry he had put Ramon and Pantopoulos on their guard.

CHAPTER 26.

"I hate the Tribune!"

Wahl reached the Tribune office just in time to catch Mansfield senior. They met face to face in the downstairs lobby, and Mansfield turned back to the elevator. He could read in a man's face that a story had "broken," without having to be told in so many words and neither said anything until Mansfield sat at his desk. Then Wahl cut loose in short excited sentences.

"The Lanier girl—I've found her—sure of it!"

"Go to it then!" snapped Mansfield.

"Don't dare. Can't identify her positively. Can't get to her. She's dancing masked under the name of La Conchita at that El Toro place you gave me tickets for."

"Ought to be easy," said Mansfield.

"Tisn't. She's guarded by the gang she's dancing for, I watched the back door. Nothing doing. I think she's living in rooms over the restaurant. Listen, though: if she's the girl Sherry brought back with him in the boat that night, as I suspect, he'll recognize her. Where are those photographs that came from New Orleans?"

Mansfield opened his desk drawer and laid on the blotter six pictures of Jacqueline Lanier.

"Doesn't look like a criminal, does she?" he said, examining them one by one.

"The real ones never do," Wahl answered. "Why not lay those on Sherry's desk, and watch him."

"Send for Dad," snapped Mansfield.

So Dad Lawrence left an account of Mrs. Somebody-or-other's function in the middle of a word and sauntered in with both hands in his pockets.

"Where's Sherry?" Mansfield demanded.

"Gone home."

"Get here ahead of him tomorrow, and put those on his desk. If he seems disturbed by them, try to get him to come and talk to me."

"Good lord!" Dad exclaimed. "Why don't you go home and pull him out of bed, and have it out with him? What's new now?"

"I don't care to have him tell me lies," Mansfield answered. "I'd rather he said nothing. But here's the point: Wahl thinks he has found that Lanier girl. He also thinks—and I'm inclined to agree with him—that Sherry really met the Lanier girl, and fell in love with her when he was down there in Louisiana. If so, he's in a bad way. Wahl believes the Lanier girl is dancing at a café called—what's the name of it?"

"El Toro," sad Wahl.

"And what's her alibi?"

"La Conchita."

"D'you think Sherry knows?" asked Mansfield.

Neither man could answer that. Wahl was inclined to think not. Dad ventured no opinion.

"Well—put those photos on his desk, and watch him," said Mansfield. "If he recognizes her, he'll show it. If this La Conchita really is the Lanier girl—and if that's what's the matter with Sherry—I'll break her on the wheel for his sake if for nothing else. By God! I'll not have Sherry ruined by a female of that type! We'll drive her out of San Francisco! Head-line her, until even that blind young idiot sees she's a bad lot! D'you understand me, Dad? I'm looking to you and Wahl to help me save Sherry. She's the worst type of woman there is!"

Dad stroked his chin. Wahl grinned.

"All right. See you boys tomorrow then," said Mansfield, and walked out with an unlit cigar between his teeth. Wahl and Dad stood and faced each other.

"It'll make a hell of a good story," said Wahl.

"I'm not fond of breaking women on the wheel," Dad answered, "but if she's a real bad lot—"

"She's one of the worst!"

"—and it's a case of saving Sherry—"

"He'd be pap for her! She knows his dad's a rich man. She'll play him the way she did Calhoun in Louisiana—and marry his dad under the boy's nose if she'd half a chance!" Wahl said grinning. "She's a stunner to look at —dances like the devil—and the mask adds the attractive mystery. She'll vamp young Sherry to a fare-you-well, and he's the kind of youngster who takes it seriously."

"Yes—I guess we'll have to interfere," Dad answered gloomily.

"Tell you what, then." Wahl laid a finger on the middle button of Dad's waistcoat. "I've scared 'em. They'll be on the watch for me. Suppose you go there tomorrow night and see if you can't get next to her. Worm your way in, and strip that mask off her. Get her story. Force a confession. I'll meet you outside afterward."

They agreed on that, but Dad did not like it. He did not like Wahl for one thing, and for another—he was useless as a muckraker—altogether too soft-hearted, and too inclined to help the under-dog.

However, he was no more willing than was Mansfield senior to see Sherry caught in the net of a designing female, so he fell in with Wahl's plan.

He tossed on his bed that night in the room in a boarding-house that he had occupied for fifteen years, wondering just why he felt miserable at the prospect of the task in front of him. He decided at last it was Wahl. He had utterly no use for Wahl—detested him.

"That devil can't do right—can't be on the right side of anything!" he muttered.

Strangely enough, he felt better when he came to that decision. He was glad that he, and not Wahl, had the task of cornering La Conchita and disillusioning Sherry.

Dad was not due at the office normally until three o'clock but he was there the next afternoon at two, laid the photographs of Jacqueline on Sherry's desk, and sat down at his own to smoke cigarettes and wait. Sherry came in ten minutes ahead of time and sauntered over with rather discouraged air, leaning against his desk and waiting until Dad should choose to say what the afternoon assignments were. It was several minutes before he noticed the photographs; but he showed then the kind of timber he was made of. His heart went to his mouth; he could not help giving a start of surprise; but he covered it. He turned his back toward Dad. Then, when he was sure of himself, he picked up the photos, examined them, dropped them casually on the desk and looked out of the window.

"Wahl sent for those from New Orleans," said Dad. "He thought you'd like to look them over."

"Why?" asked Sherry, without betraying the slightest interest.

"Wahl believes that girl's in San Francisco."

But Sherry was surprise-proof. He had good reason to believe that too. He knew the whole office, his father included, suspected him of having met Jacqueline Lanier, and he was not fool enough to doubt that those photos were laid on his desk for a trap. So Dad Lawrence was also league against him! He understood now why his father had turned him over to Dad to do this idiotic social stuff. All right. He was all the more glad he had not taken Dad into his confidence, as he had once thought of doing.

"Where do we go from hear?" he demanded with a bored air. "What dummy gets gilded this afternoon?"

"We'll keep together until dinner-time," Dad answered. "After that well have to divide forces. There's a concert you'll have to cover at the Auditorium while I do the El Toro."

Sherry looked relieved, but said nothing. He could cover the concert by asking for a program at the door; a fool could write up a concert without sitting through it, and that would give him several hours to hunt for Jacqueline. He had a notion this time of searching through the hospital wards for her, and after that, if there was any time left, of questioning the matron at the Y.W.C.A., although he would have to do that carefully for fear of starting others on the trail.

He did not quite deceive Dad Lawrence. Dad noticed the look of relief on his face when he learned he was to be alone that evening; and Dad had covered far too many concerts in the same way not to guess what Sherry intended. He was not quite sure that when Sherry first saw the photos he had not checked a movement of surprise; and he was more than ever, if as vaguely as ever, sure, that some sort of love-affair was at the bottom of his young friend's discontent.

"You seem to have no ambition left. What's the matter with you?" he demanded.

"I hate the Tribune, that's all!" Sherry exploded. "I'm sick of the whole damned business!"

That answer settled it, as far as Dad was concerned. Of all conceivable disasters, the worst would be for Sherry to fail to follow in his father's footsteps! It would break old Mansfield's heart a second time; and the result of that would be nothing that a man could calculate, except that it would be hell with the lid shut down! The Tribune would cease to be a newspaper; it would become a slaughterhouse! The "old man" would turn on Sherry and cast him off. Thereafter he would relapse into the condition he was in for a year after Mrs. Mansfield left him—almost a maniac, with his bitterest resentment turned on his truest friends, and obsessed by one purpose: to destroy whatever woman's reputation he could get his claws on.

Rather than that, Dad would probe any woman's anonymity, and help, if necessary, to hound her out of San Francisco!

The afternoon hardened Dad's resolution. Whether or not her name was Jacqueline Lanier—whether or not she and La Conchita were the same—some woman was having a disastrous effect on Sherry. It could not be anything else than a woman. The boy was not drinking. He was not a gambler. He had no low companions. He was simply moping; taking no interest in his work; brown-studying all the time, and looking almost sick with worry. The least that Dad felt he could do was to investigate this dancer in a mask and either expose her identity or otherwise eliminate her from the list of possibilities. Something had to be done, and done soon, or Sherry would go all to pieces.

So by the time Dad reached the El Toro restaurant he was as nearly in an iron mood as he ever had been in his life. He chose a table under the balcony, midway down the room, from which he could watch the stage without attracting attention to himself, and ordered dinner. News of La Conchita had already spread among the folk who dine in cabarets; some of the morning papers had carried short paragraphs about her; there were owners of other cabarets there, as well as a much better-dressed crowd than the El Toro had ever entertained before; the place was full, and it was not going to be easy to "pull" anything without attracting notice. Papa Pantopoulos was hurrying to and fro with illegal drinks under his jacket, doing a roaring business, sudden

prosperity going to his head, as his "Conchita cocktails" were going to the heads of some of the guests.

There were seven in the orchestra tonight, instead of five. Flowers on the tables. Four new waiters. Even the balcony was crowded. The space that had been cleared for dancing in the middle of the floor was as small as Papa had dared to make it, to allow for extra tables, which were jammed so close together that the guests could hardly sit without nudging one another's elbows.

Dad caught Pantopoulos by the coat-tails as he hurried by, and the Greek jumped swiftly at conclusions. "Cocktail, sir?" he whispered behind his hand. "La Conchita cocktail—very good! Have to serve it in a coffee cup and charge for 'service,' but—"

Dad nodded. "Tell me, will La Conchita come off stage?"

"Not tonight, sir. Can't persuade her. Between you and me, she's a mystery. I've heard it whispered she's a member of the Russian royal family, escaped from Siberia! I'll swear she's not used to dancing in public—though she's wonderful—wonderful! She's not so nervous as she was. Perhaps tomorrow night—my advice is, come again tomorrow night, sir! Meanwhile—"

He hurried away with a sidewise grin, to chivvy waiters and mix cocktails in a closet between dining-room and kitchen; and he was hardly gone before a gong rang and the curtain rose. For the next five minutes, Dad sat spell-bound.

He had seen more finished dancing—any amount of it; although none much more so than Ramon's. It was something indefinable about La Conchita's movements that made him oblivious to the dinner growing cold in front of him. He could not explain to himself just what it was. The black mask made her look mischievous; yet experience had taught Dad a lot about reading faces, and he could not force himself to believe that the lips below the mask were hard or calculating. They were kissable; and if there was anything else remarkable about them, they possibly suggested sadness.

Her whole appearance struck Dad as incongruous in that second-rate restaurant. It seemed to him that, while she was not at all too skillful to be dancing there, showing only great natural gift and a little stage training, she was none the less out of her element. Her dancing looked pathetic; what seemed to the rest of the crowd to be diablerie struck him as deliberate courage, although he could not analyze the impression. She was wild at moments; but it seemed to him that in those moments she had thrown her very heart away and was dancing to kill her own thoughts. When the curtain came down—and rose half a dozen times—Dad felt almost positive that she took no pleasure in the storm of applause; she stood stone-still, and looked defiant.

"Well, of course, if she's the Lanier girl she was nicely raised, and that accounts for some of it," he told himself. "But if she's a devil, she's a brand-new type. What beats me is, why—with all that talent, and those good looks, and her newspaper notoriety, if she is the Lanier girl—and if she's the devil Wahl says—why—in-the-name-of-Satan—does she dance in this joint, and hide her identity, instead of selling her soul for much fine money? Why doesn't she court publicity? There's something out of focus somewhere!"

He received the same impression during the second dance, only if anything more definitely. There was something in her dancing-partner's attitude that was more than clever trouping; something in her attitude toward Ramon that was more than art. Ramon was nervous, it seemed to Dad; he hardly dared to lay his hands on her when they came together and swayed into a tango

step, and more than once she whirled away from him when he seemed least to expect it. If the man had not been a skillful improviser the dance would have collapsed.

Probably Dad was the only individual in the room who was watching critically; the rest were swept away by La Conchita's good looks, and by the novelty of seeing anything so beautiful in such a tawdry setting. It seemed to Dad that she was doing something she detested; that she was furious at being forced to do it; and that that fury was the secret of the plan with which the dance went over.

"Which makes it possible she may be the Lanier girl," he admitted to himself.

She appeared four times, and in the intervals the guests milled in a helpless mob on the floor between the tables while the orchestra helped them to deceive themselves that they were dancing. At the end of La Conchita's fourth turn Dad began to consider ways and means, and plucked at Papa's jacket as he hurried by.

"What's it worth to introduce me to La Conchita?" he asked.

"Aha! That's what they all want!" said the Greek, and slipped away.

Dad considered the situation. It was no use trying to reach the stage by the door at the side, because everybody would be able to see him and the waiters would undoubtedly interfere. Wahl had alarmed them the night before, or so he said, and the Greek would be on the alert. There would be a back door leading from stage to street undoubtedly; in fact, Wahl had said there was; but that would almost certainly be locked. There would be a fire-escape, though—and neighboring roofs. Dad paid his bill, and went outside to see. He hesitated for a long time in the shadow of a doorway, and was at great pains to make sure there were no witnesses, before he made up his mind to try the fire-escape, which he had to reach by standing on an ash-can in order to jump and catch the lower rung.

CHAPTER 27.

"All the news the public wants."

Jacqueline's second evening was more distressing than the first. The novelty was gone. She had a feeling in her bones that the mask did not disguise her. Ramon and Papa Pantopoulos had both been bragging about the first night's success, and Ramon had shown her clippings from the morning papers. She was nervous. Cervanez made her more so by over-friendliness, trying to caress her when the one thing in the world she wanted was to be let alone.

Then Ramon grew impossible. He had entered her room upstairs on some pretext and made such a scene that Consuelo finally drove him out with a hat-pin.

"Conchita, I adore you! I idolize you! Marry me, or I will kill you and myself!"

The threat brought ghastly reminiscences—not that Jacqueline, or Ramon himself, or any one believed a word of it. Not even his mother Cervanez was in the least alarmed about his killing himself. The fact was that he and Cervanez had laid their heads together and decided it must be now or never; he must marry her before offers of better engagements should begin pouring in.

Jacqueline understood that perfectly; and Ramon had enough self-esteem to believe that no young woman could withstand his tempestuous ardor; enough imagination, too, to believe himself really in love for the moment.

"There is in me the blood of the Braganzas," he assured her when she turned away from him. "That is royal blood, Senorita. I am not of no account! My ancestor was one of the first founders of Brazil. I am poor, it is true, but I have dignity and together we might grow rich!"

It would have been comic, if it had not been so mortifying. She must dance in public, with this man! She owed him money. And she suspected, just as she could see through his amorous protests to the avarice beneath, that he would betray her at the first profitable opportunity. It made her almost physically sick to think that her fate lay in the keeping of him and his mother.

It was that afternoon that Jacqueline first thought of suicide. The meanness—the utter drabness of the life—the confinement—hiding like a felon in shabby rooms above a third-rate restaurant, with the key kept by a Greek, and the meals sent up in secret, so that even the kitchen staff should not know for certain where she was staying—the thought of what the newspapers would print about her, if they should ever discover her identity, and the likelihood that they might discover it at any minute, all seemed to be heaped on her at once and made her so homesick and wretched that death looked infinitely preferable.

She wished a thousand times over that Calhoun had shot and killed her when he killed Desmio and himself. "Pray, dear—pray to the Blessed Virgin," Consuelo urged, setting the example so often that it became monotonous to watch. But Jacqueline did not want to pray. She was rebellious against heaven. There was nothing to pray for. Desmio was dead. Sherry was dead as far as she was concerned. The devil, in the shape of Wahl, had painted her black, and she would never—never—disgrace Sherry by letting his name be associated with her in any way. She wished she had never met him—wished she had been drowned before he found her—anything! It was cruel to have met and loved him, for it made her heart ache so terribly whenever her thought dwelt on him for as much as a second—made it ache even more than when she thought of Desmio.

But you couldn't commit suicide with Consuelo looking on. And she knew it would be wicked. But what did it matter if she were wicked? What had she ever done to merit all this misery? And could anything be worse? Some one had told her that suicides go wandering for ever and ever in empty space, with nowhere to go and nobody to love them and nothing to do; but would that be worse than this?

And then came supper-time—and time to dress—and then the summons to go down and dance; and she was still alive, and still regretted it! She could hardly endure the sight or touch of Ramon. He seemed common. Her whole nature was revolting against vulgarity and against the mean expedients of poverty—against manners laid on over corking avarice, and the thought of being beholden to such people. She could have screamed when Ramon put his arm around her as the curtain rose. But courage bred and born in her; the harder it was tried the more it seemed to rally in emergency and there were deeper depths to which she might sink; she knew that since the Chinaman had talked to her in the basement about "plittee girlee catchee lich man." And so her dancing was even more full of energy and recklessness than on the preceding night. She flung herself into it. She would not fail. She would not let those people see her broken and frightened and sick at heart. She hated them all, and herself more than all of them together. But they should not know she was broken-hearted. And she would not yield to her own distress. She would be brave. Desmio had always said that bravery was the last true test of character.

The crowd was even noisier than on the previous night, but the applause meant nothing to her. The brightness in her eyes was not pleasure, nor even excitement, it was the stuff with which battles are fought; and after the fourth turn Ramon knew better than to accede to the Greek's importunity and try to persuade her to dance a fifth time. Ramon went on alone and did creditably, keeping the crowd spending its money in the hope that Jacqueline would reappear. Consuelo sat at the foot of the stairs on guard against any one who might try to invade the stage, as Wahl had done the night before. Jacqueline went upstairs alone.

She felt there was only one thing in the world that could keep her from breaking down. She must see Pepita—wake the child if necessary. She must love some one who was not afraid. Some one who was not afraid must love her. There was fear behind her—fear in front—fear in the shadows at the corners of the stair—fear of Wahl! She could see Wahl's face in the dark whichever way she looked—dreaded to see him step out from a corner—almost felt his cold hand on her wrist and behind Wahl, again was the Chinaman. "Plittee girlee—" Pepita was only afraid of bogies. Jacqueline could laugh at bogies, and that might help her to feel easy about Wahl. She must do something. Pepita was the only chance.

But when she entered the shabby bedroom at the end of a long dark passage Pepita was fast asleep, with the monkey curled up on the blankets beside her; and she had not the heart to wake either of them. She would have loved to pick up the monkey and hug it to her breast, but the little animal looked so like a child as it lay there, and so comfortable, that she could not bring herself to disturb it. She waited for several minutes, hoping Pepita would wake of her own accord; then looked about her, wondering what to do next. She knew she would grow hysterical if she went to her own room.

The gas was turned low, but her eyes soon grew accustomed to the dim light. There was a newspaper on the floor, with a pair of scissors lying near it; Pepita must have been cutting up the paper before bed-time. She stooped for the scissors, half-entertaining a wild idea of opening a vein in her wrist, as she had read of women doing in old story-books. But her eye fell on the newspaper, and she forgot the scissors. She saw her own name, and a picture beneath it. It was the magazine section of the Sunday Tribune, open at Wahl's feature story. It was signed by Clinton Wahl.

Her first impulse was to tear the paper into shreds. Her second was to know the worst that Wahl could say about her. But where should she go to read it! She could not endure her own room, and besides, Consuelo might come in there, and Consuelo would snatch the paper away. The thought of reading it had begun to fascinate her. Once in Louisiana she had crept close and peered at a dead Negro in a ditch with almost exactly the same sensation. She must see—shrunk from it, and yet could not resist.

So she tiptoed out of Pepita's room and went up another flight of stairs to the flat roof, where she had been that morning to breathe the only fresh air obtainable. There were sky-signs all around her, some of them quite close—notably a big one two blocks away announcing in letters of golden flame that—

MIRO'S MIRACULOUS RUBBERS MEAN LONG LIFE

She made up her mind that instant never to wear rubbers. She hoped to die young. Life was no good—nothing that Desmio's enemy recommended could be any good. Then, for a little while she thought of how John Miro must have come into possession of the heritage that should have been hers, and hated him a little—not on her own account, but because he had prevailed against Desmio's wishes.

The light from some of the nearer signs threw a reflection on the roof. She chose the place where the glare was strongest, and sat on the edge of a skylight to read the paper, holding it with both hands, because they trembled so and the trembling of one off-set the other. But she left off trembling after a while. She grew numb. The thing was so incredible—so indecent —so untrue that she almost lost all feeling.

There was a drawing supposed to be her in her night-dress. Another drawing represented her en deshabille* laughing over Desmio's dead body. Yet another showed her laughing while Jack Calhoun shot himself. At the bottom of the page she was represented dancing, as if with delight that her lovers were dead; and there were illustrations woven into the title at the top of the page, representing Herodias with John the Baptist's head, and Jezebel, and two or three other notorious characters, along with a great bat supposed to be a vampire.

The "story" was in keeping with the illustrations. It pointed a moral. It posed as a warning to the public against unscrupulous women. It represented her as having "vamped" an old man and a young one simultaneously—the old man for his money, and the young one for his looks—of having lured them both to their ruin, and of having been amused to see the outcome. It suggested, without exactly saying so, that Jack Calhoun had squandered all his fortune on her, and had shot himself in her presence, after killing Miro, because she sneered when he told her his fortune was all spent.

It dwelt lingeringly on the fact that Jack Calhoun had known the way to her bedroom only too well, and that he had been surprised in there with her at the very hour of wedding to the older man. The imputation, though she hardly understood it, made her sick. It gave an imaginary description of her flight in the dawn to escape the questions of the coroner, and wound up with the question "Having lost the enormous Miro fortune because she could not resist the delight of a last embrace from the handsome lover, was she really drowned in the Louisiana flood or, is she in hiding, watching for an opportunity to lure rich men's sons into her toils?"

And that was Sherry's newspaper! That was no doubt Sherry's opinion of her! Oh, how she hoped he would never discover that the girl he had met in that barn in the flooded bottoms and Jacqueline Lanier were the same! She hoped she might die before he ever could find out the truth.

There was nothing else to hope for—only that, that Sherry might never know. She turned her back to the light and walked toward the darkest corner of the roof, for there was something about darkness now that was comforting. She was no longer afraid of it. She did not want to be able even to see herself. She wanted to be nothing—nowhere!

She shrank against the brickwork of a chimney, and looked down into the street. It was a long way down. It made her shudder, and she looked up again, straight across the street. Then she almost screamed—just checked herself—she must not let anybody hear her scream. In letters of gold against the sky in front of her, perhaps a dozen blocks away, was the sky-sign over the building where they printed Sherry's father's newspaper —the one that had blackened her forever:—

THE TRIBUNE

ALL THE NEWS THE PUBLIC WANTS

She stared at the great yellow letters of fire until they all seemed to run together and make one word. NEWS! She was news! It was there on the end of a yellow forefinger, pointing at her. There was no escape from it! News, in a night-dress, with bare legs, admitting a clandestine lover through the window! News, in her underwear, laughing at dead men! News, dancing on her lover's grave!

"Obey your intuition, Jacqueline!"

She could see Sister Michaela's gray eyes, and could almost hear the words as if they were spoken from close by. Yes—she would obey her intuition. She could feel relief at last. It was in the air, waiting for her. Her heart told her this was the end. It did not need courage to fall to the street. And when they should come to pick her up, she would be all broken and unrecognizable, so that Sherry would never know. Yes—she would obey her intuition.

She climbed up on the waist-high parapet, and said one short prayer at last—the first in three days. It was for Sherry, that he might never know.

"—and please make him happy, Amen."

Then she closed her eyes tight, and let herself droop forward.

When she felt an arm close suddenly around her and lift her back on to the roof she thought at first that it was an angel's, and that she was already dead. She was rather relieved and surprised to learn that it had not hurt when she struck the sidewalk. But the voice that spoke to her was too gruff for an angel's (she had always thought of them as feminine) and the feathers she laid her cheek against felt strangely like a man's coat. So she opened her eyes, and realized that her mask was gone—that she was on the roof—in a man's arms—looking straight into a man's face.

Her heart began to flutter like a bird's now. She was coming to life again, as it were, and feeling all the terror of it. She struggled, too frightened to scream, and the man set her down on the edge of the skylight, and then sat down beside her, holding her hand very firmly and kindly. He had his heel set on the newspaper she had been reading, but he seemed to be unconscious of it. He was holding her mask in his other hand.

"Tell me, aren't you Jacqueline Lanier?" he asked her. For a second she thought of lying to him, but she looked into his eyes, and they were kind. She could not force herself to lie, it seemed so useless.

"Why, you're only a child!" he said suddenly, and with so much feeling in his voice that she could hardly keep the tears from coming; only she did not want to cry before a stranger.

"Tell me, why were you trying to jump off the roof?" he asked. "You're too young, you know, and life's too full of promise, for anything like that. Why did you want to do it?"

Life was too full of promise? She looked up, and there stared the Tribune sky-sign at her! She looked down, and there lay the Sunday Tribune at her feet!

"Oh! I get you. Have you been reading that stuff?"

She nodded. She would have choked if she had tried to say anything.

"For the first time?"

She nodded again, biting her lip to keep it from trembling.

"How much of it is true?" he asked. And he spoke so kindly that she felt he really wanted to know it wasn't true.

"None!" she answered, choking.

"None whatever?"

She managed to find words somehow:

"Jack Calhoun did shoot Desmio and then—"

"Yes, I know that. But about you? Why did you run away?"

"Things like that were in all the papers!" she answered with a shudder. "A dreadful man named Wahl—"

"Sure. Clinton Wahl. I know him."

"You—you know Wahl?"

"Sure. I'm on the same newspaper. My name's Lawrence. They call me 'Dad' Lawrence," he answered, more kindly than ever. "Now, don't be afraid of me, you poor little woman! I think I understand what's happened. I'm not Wahl. I'm not his friend. I hate him, if that's any solace to you. Don't run away—I won't hurt you. Sit here; and suppose you tell me your version of it all. You may tell me in confidence. If I think you're telling me the truth, I'll do the best I can for you. There now, sit on my overcoat. That's all right—cry if it helps any; but just tell me. Suppose I ask some questions—how'll that be?"

He put an arm around her shoulder, and she felt more comforted by it than by anything that had happened to her since she ran away from Sherry that night in the dark. She just lay her head on his shoulder and sobbed. He seemed like an angel after all!

"Did you ever meet Sherry Mansfield?" he asked.

She sat bolt-upright instantly, and her frightened blue eyes stared at him through the tears.

"I see you did," he said quietly. "Have you seen him since he came ashore in the same launch with you?"

She shook her head.

"Does he know where you are?"

"I—I hope not!" she stammered. "Please don't tell him!"

Her eyes sought the newspaper, and then the Tribune sky-sign. It was rather obvious why she did not want Sherry to know her whereabouts. Dad looked at her with emotion that very nearly had the better of him.

"No," he answered, making his mind up that instant. "I won't tell him. Tell me this, though: did you and he—here, come, Miss Lanier! I'm your friend. Tell me your whole story."

He took her hands and held them in his own, obliging her to face him, yet doing it so gently that she felt no impulse to resist.

"You won't tell Sherry?"

"No. I won't tell him a word. And I'm your friend. But that's all I promise."

Her eyes met his, and she began haltingly, almost in spite of herself. And then, at the end of the first few stammered sentences, it began to feel good to tell him. It was almost like a confession to Father Doutreleau. Dad listened with such a world of sympathy, and so obviously believed every word she said, that one thing led to another and almost before she knew it she was showing him Desmio's portrait in the locket, and discovering the same old difficulty in finding words that were good enough to sound Desmio's praises.

"Yes," he said, "yes, go on. I'm listening."

She spoke very little of the tragedy; but she told how Wahl had come in, and had seized her wrist, and of the awful things that Wahl had written in the New Orleans papers. And then of how she and Consuelo had left the house before dawn, with the idea of running away anywhere.

"Didn't know where you were going?"

"No. Where was there to go?" she asked.

"Any money?"

"No. I had some jewelry, but we lost that in the flood."

"Go on. Tell me about the flood."

That was soon told. She did not remember much of the first part, except the rush of water and the sensation of being overwhelmed, with the horses coming backward over the carriage, and then of being plunged and whirled interminably in dark-brown water.

"And then I came to on a roof that was floating—and, the sky going round and round—and a dog came and sniffed me."

"Yes, he's got the dog now. Nut, his name is—an awful mongrel, but as cute as the dickens."

"Oh, he's got Nut! Oh, I'm so glad. I did so want to know what had happened to Nut."

"Nut's all right. Tell me about him."

"I just love him, Mr. Lawrence! He crawled up one side of the roof, and I crawled up the other, and we met at the top, and you would never believe how rude he was!"

"Oh, yes I can believe it!" Dad laughed. "I know Sherry."

"But he was a perfect dear. He ordered me around, and bossed me. And he swore dreadfully, after we got into the barn and he found a blunt razor and no looking-glass. After a while I shaved him! Yes, I did. We were more friendly after that. And then we got talking about his mother—and I said what I thought about her—and he listened—and— and—"

"All Sherry ever needed was to fall in love!" Dad blurted suddenly. "I've said so to his father time and again."

"Oh, he must! I hope he will! He must fall in love with some one and forget me! I'll never forget him, but—but aren't men different?"

"Some are," Dad answered dryly. "You've promised, haven't you? You have promised? You won't say a word to Sherry?"

"Not one word!" Dad answered.

And you won't tell the newspaper you've found me?"

"I will not!"

"I'll be gone soon, Mr. Lawrence. As soon as I can pay my debt to these people I'll run away and hide again. Sherry mustn't ever know who I am. It might ruin him. The disgrace of being mixed up with me, after what the papers said, could never be lived down. Could it? And you know, he's obstinate; he might think it was his duty to go in spite of everything, when, of course, it isn't his duty at all, and—and—he is obstinate! Isn't he?"

"Yes, I hope—I mean, yes—he's a great hand to stick to anything he starts."

Jacqueline's blue eyes, as innocent and truthful as the sky, looked through the tears into Dad's, and he was not fooled by that frown of hers for a second; it only made him believe her all the more, if that were possible.

"I was only two days with him, but I know him so well, Mr. Lawrence. And it's because I know he's obstinate that I'm never going to let him find me. I don't mind what happens to me any more. I just love Sherry, and I won't have him ruined. You know him quite well of course?"

"You might say intimately," Dad answered.

"Tell me: does he—is he—do you think he has forgotten me? I want him to," she added, forcing herself to say it.

"He doesn't talk about you," Dad answered.

"Is he happy?"

"No, I don't think he is. In fact, I'm sure he's not."

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence—do you think it would make him any happier if I let them identify me, so that he'll know I'm the one they wrote all that about? Perhaps he'd hate me then, and put me out of his mind. I'll—I'll make any sacrifice for Sherry!"

She was trembling at the thought of it. Dad knew that, for he was holding her hand.

"No," he answered. "Sherry's not that kind of fellow. How long have you got to dance in this place?"

"Until I've paid my debt."

"How much do you owe them?"

"I don't know!"

Dad smiled broadly. How even Wahl could have mistaken her for a vampire was beyond him. He wished his own bank-account were not down somewhere near the twenty-dollar mark. However, he did not doubt he could borrow if he looked around, and meanwhile there was at least something he could do to help her.

"You feel better now, don't you?" he asked. "Just keep on dancing for another night or two, and meanwhile I'll do my best for you. Remember, you've got a friend. I'll stand by you through thick and thin, and if I can keep the papers from finding out who you are, I will."

"And you won't tell Sherry?"

"Oh, no, I won't tell him," Dad answered; but he could not keep the evasiveness out of his voice, and she detected it—looked alarmed. He did not choose to be committed any deeper at the moment, not having quite made up his mind what he did intend to do. "I'll have to go," he said, "or there may be some one else nosing on your trail. Is there any way of my going down through the house without being seen?"

She shook her head.

"All right. I'll use the fire-escape again. Now remember, little woman, I'm your friend! No more nonsense, eh? No jumping off roofs! Promise!"

He was gone before she could say good-by to him, but she leaned over the parapet and caught one glimpse of his face as he looked up smiling.

"Now remember," he called, "you've promised!"

Dad swung himself down from the fire-escape, shoved his hands in his pockets, and sauntered around to the main entrance. Wahl was about due. He must think of something to say to Wahl—something with a trace of probability about it; and he must get absolute control of himself, so that Wahl's too alert suspicion should not be aroused. Lord, how he hated and despised—mischievous devil! But "O mischief, thou art swift!" he quoted.

"And old Mansfield thinks he's a snorter. So he is. God Damn him! Sells newspapers. So he does—and damn the swine who buy them! We're a rotten lot of vultures raising a stink with our claws and wings in the sewer! And the public's worse—it likes to see it—pays money for it!

Wahl would crucify that girl, if the law would let him, and the public would go broke buying ringside seats! To hell with the whole dirty business!"

However, those reflections were not helping him to think up an alibi to give Wahl. He must invent something convincing, in order to gain time. Lord knew, he needed time if he were going to help the poor little woman. There was nobody—actually nobody he dared to confide in. And if old man Mansfield should ever learn that he had deliberately sidetracked the Tribune on a story, not even a thirty-year-long intimacy would stand between him and dismissal. Jobs are none too plentiful for men of Dad's age. He shoved his hands into his overcoat pockets and strode up and down under the El Toro portico, waiting for Wahl to come, and cudgeling his brains for the right solution.

But Wahl came before he had thought of the right one—Wahl with the mean grin, and the cavernous rapacious look in his eyes, evidently anticipating good news.

"Well? You had word with her?"

"No."

"Good God! Did you try? What happened?"

Dad began improvising—lying right and left at random.

"You're on the wrong scent, Wahl. It's a mare's nest. I got close to the stage, and saw her for a moment with the mask off. It came unfastened. She wears that mask to hide a long scar on her right cheek. She's nothing like the Lanier girl's pictures."

Wahl looked very keenly at him. "What's that on your knees?" he asked him. "Rust?"

Dad had forgotten that the fire-escape was rusty. He stooped, and brushed the stuff off.

"Wonder where I got that," he remarked.

"There's some on your sleeve, too," Wahl assured him. Dad removed his overcoat and slapped it vigorously.

"Did it look like a new scar or an old one?" Wahl asked, eying him keenly.

"Old. It might be a birth-mark."

"How close were you?"

"Oh, a few feet from the stage."

"Ridiculous! You couldn't possibly have seen. It may have been grease- paint—or anything."

"I'm perfectly sure," Dad answered.

But Wahl felt perfectly sure Dad was lying, and he made no effort to conceal the fact. He favored Dad with one long searching glance, and turned away without another word, walking off as if he knew exactly where he was going, and what he would do next.

"He's got a joker up his sleeve," thought Dad. "I wonder what next. Something damnable, and under the belt, I'll bet! Well: that girl has one chance—Sherry! Here goes!"

With his head down, and hands deep in his pockets, Dad walked slowly toward the Tribune Building.

CHAPTER 28.

"Does she remind you of any one?"

Dad missed Sherry that night. He found a note on his desk instead.

"Here's the program of the concert. For God's sake write it for me. Cox of the Star said three, nine and eleven were rotten, but the rest got by. House two-thirds full. The mayor and his wife were in a box—nobody else of importance. Two sticks plenty. Explanations later. Sherry."

Sherry had intended to search hospitals, but he was too gloomy and discouraged to feel really set on any course, or nothing less than violence would have changed his purpose. It was John Miro who talked him out of it. They met in the foyer of the Auditorium, where Miro had a lone seat for the evening. Sherry had just obtained his program, and was on his way out in a hurry.

"Is it going to be as rotten as all that?" asked Miro, with one of his discerning smiles.

"I'll find out from you, when it's over!" said Sherry.

"Where are you going?"

Sherry told him.

"My dear boy; you'll be simply wasting time. They account for people in hospitals day by day—you know that surely? And Sister Michaela has been to every one in the city."

"Dammit, I must look somewhere!" Sherry exploded. "I can't sit still!"

"Let me give you some advice," Miro answered, studying him thoughtfully. "You're giving discouragement the upper hand. That won't do, you know. It isn't fair to her or anybody. You'll be useless when the time comes for action."

"If it ever comes!"

"It will. It will certainly. My men are on a hot scent. I'm expecting news of her at any time. Do you play chess? Checkers? Come home with me and play checkers for an hour or two. Let's make a bargain first, though: not one word about Jacqueline! We must both think of something else."

"Are you trying to stall me, so your men will find her first?" asked Sherry rudely.

Miro took him by the arm. "Come along," he said, "I knew you needed to play at something for a while!"

He almost threw Sherry into a great limousine, and whisked him away to a mansion that was furnished with the loot of Europe. There with suits of armor grinning at them from either side of an enormous fireplace, they played checkers; Miro regaling Sherry at intervals with tales of life as he had lived it—fascinating tales—until the concert-hour was nearly over and it was time to hurry back in search of a reporter who had had sufficient sense of duty to sit through it.

"When you've turned in your notes, come back and spend the night with me," said Miro. "Then if any of my men bring news of her, you'll know it as soon as I do."

Sherry did that; but he offered Dad no explanations the following afternoon; said nothing at all, in fact, until Dad broached the subject of the evening's assignment.

"We'll go together tonight," said Dad. "There's a place called the El Toro that's been advertising heavily and made something of a stir."

"Why together? Can't you do it?" Sherry objected.

"It's your turn to write something!" Dad answered, smiling. "I wrote your concert stuff last night."

"Say, Dad, I've got something else to do tonight. It's important. I'll explain it some day. I'm not bulling you, it's urgent. Can't you go alone tonight, and let me—"

"Nothing doing!" Dad answered blandly. "You and I dine together at the place I said. That's orders; and as long as I'm your boss—"

Sherry turned away from him with a gesture of impatience, and sulked over by the window, watching the sidewalk opposite as if he hoped to recognize a lost acquaintance in every passer-by.

And inside the "old man's" private office Wahl held forth on the carpet in front of the desk. His eyes were glinting, and his long arms were moving in nervous jerks.

"But I've known Dad for thirty years," said Mansfield. "He's a duffer in a lot of ways, but there's no man in San Francisco I'd sooner trust. I don't believe he would give us a bum steer. Why should he?"

Wahl grinned cynically. "I believe he interviewed that girl," he answered. "I'm dead sure he was lying to me. I believe she put it all over him, the same way she probably put it over Sherry down in Louisiana. Dad's soft, and she simply vamped him—played on his pity, I guess. I'm willing to bet you we've got her to rights! We'll know tonight anyway. It's all O.K. with the Prohibition Chief. I told him they're selling liquor at the El Toro, and if he doesn't raid the place tonight we'll roast him good and plenty in tomorrow's paper. He gave orders, and they're going to make a real spectacular raid of it. I make my entrance with the bulls. There'll be a panic when they pull the place, and that'll give me the chance I want to corner the Conchita. I'll have that mask off, if I have to fight her for it. Then we'll know for sure, and I've got the story already written. You'll have to see the circulation manager. She'll boom!"

"All right. Have it your own way," said Mansfield. "Will they arrest the girl?"

"Yes, if they can find the least excuse for it. If there's rum behind the stage, for instance—or if her dress is cut too low—or if she makes a bolt—or anything like that. Gee! If they only pinch her, that'll make it perfect!"

"Be sure you're on hand when they pull the raid," said Mansfield. "We don't want any guess-work."

"You bet! I'll wait there at the station, and leave with the raiding squad."

It was a desultory afternoon in the office—one of those days when nothing of importance "broke" and the men who were normally most active played rummy or did rewrite stuff—the sort of day on which anything gets into the papers—a day beloved of press-agents, propagandists, et hoc genus omne.* Wahl spent the afternoon touching up his story in advance, adding high-lights here and there, improving on the head-lines, and telephoning once or twice to the police as a precaution. Dad and Sherry covered a poultry show, and by the time evening came Sherry was about as amiable as a stung bear. He walked into the El Toro behind Dad, and stood surveying the newly, cheaply gilded restaurant with an air of unmitigated disgust.

"Those lousy hens were more exciting than this!" he grumbled. "I suppose now we'll eat the birds that didn't win prizes."

The place was nearly full already, but Dad contrived to get a table at a corner of the dancing floor, and Papa Pantopoulos recognized him.

"Aha! So you took my advice! I told you! She dances one dance on the floor tonight—just one! A 'Conchita' in her honor, sir? Two? Certainly."

Sherry tossed off the cocktail, tasted his soup and answered Dad's efforts at conversation in monosyllables. His eyes were all the while roving about the room, and glancing up at every fresh arrival.

"Did you see that poster as we came in?" Dad asked.

"Ye-e-e-s."

"What did you think of it?"

"Pretty rotten. "

Dad smiled patiently. It was true, the poster was not art, but he had hoped it might suggest a memory.

"Did you notice the name on it?"

"No."

"You haven't a reporter's nose. You're no hound!" Dad assured him.

"I'm sick of being a reporter. It's a dirty business," Sherry answered. "If it weren't for—"

The orchestra struck up before he finished the sentence, and he turned to face the stage with an air of relief, as if any kind of conversation was a bore. Dad watched him keenly as the gong rang, and the curtain rose on a newly decorated stage; for Papa Pantopoulos had scraped up the wherewithal and plunged on repainted scenery.

La Conchita waltzed on from one wing, Ramon from the other and they met mid-stage, posing for a moment in the spot-light. But there was no recognition in Sherry's face—not a tremor—not a quiver of the eyelids, though Dad was watching him keenly and would have detected the slightest start.

"Does she remind you of any one?" he asked.

Sherry stuck a fork into something on his plate, and went on eating.

"No," he answered. "Does she you?"

"Something vaguely reminiscent. Can't say who," Dad answered.

Sherry looked back at the stage, and Dad thought he caught just a flash of a change of expression, as if some movement of the dancer had touched a chord of memory. But in a moment it was gone again. Sherry's memory was of a blue-eyed girl with untidy hair, in a dress all creased from being wet. The mask made La Conchita's eyes look dark and mischievous, not tender. The stage made her look taller. The dress made her look like a Spaniard and the dance deprived her of all resemblance to the Conchita he had known.

Besides, in his own mind he had taken to calling her Jacqueline since his talk with John Miro. The real name had displaced the other almost totally, as real things have a way of doing. He had imagined her poverty-stricken, crouching away somewhere in hiding, shrinking from publicity; and this girl, who looked years older than Jacqueline, dancing in the limelight with a male companion, conjured up no recognition. She almost fooled Dad Lawrence, she looked so different on the stage, and her mood had altered since the previous night. For her hope had risen since Dad found her. She was no longer rebellious (which was one reason why Papa had been able to persuade her to do one turn tonight between the dining-tables). She had a friend now whom she believed in; and she could not help feeling glad that Sherry was worried about her, even though she was more determined than ever not to let him find her. So she danced with an altogether different élan, using more art, and less sheer recklessness. On the whole, the audience was not so well pleased.

"I don't think so much of her," said Sherry when the curtain came down. He began at once to pay attention to his dinner, and did not notice the expression of comic patience on Dad's face.

During the interlude, while most of the guests left their seats to surge back and forth in a mob on the dancing floor, Sherry munched away steadily, only offering one observation in response to Dad's efforts to beguile the time.

"If you can make a story out of this joint, you're a genius!" he remarked. "The grub's bad. The service is worse. The dancing's nothing special, and the orchestra is—"

"As good as the concert you covered last night?" Dad suggested with a grin. "Where were you? You promised explanations."

But Sherry did not answer. He had become an expert in silence. He said nothing until the curtain rose again and Papa Pantopoulos jerked aside a low screen that concealed newly-placed steps leading down from stage to floor.

"Oh, darn this cabaret stuff!" Sherry grumbled then. "Don't you hate to have 'em shaking rouge all over you? Why can't they stay on the stage where they belong? They don't look so cheap at a distance."

He would not even look up when the dancers came tripping down steps, amid applause led by Papa Pantopoulos and the waiters. Papa was playing his big stake, and proposed it should go over with a flourish, and the crowd—like most crowds—behaved obediently. There was applause enough to have gratified the Russian Ballet, and for the first time Jacqueline felt fired by it. Ideas are strange intoxicating stuff. Perhaps because the unexpected friend had come to her the night before, like an angel in a rough tweed suit, she began to feel as if the room were full of friends, and to try hard to please them instead of to triumph over them.

Ramon caught the inspiration. He was wonderful at that. As subtly as if he had thought it out for weeks before, he danced in harmony to her new mood, adapting himself to it, suggesting phrases, as it were, and then—catching the approval of the audience—sweeping her into a waltz-step that exaggerated the natural youthful grace of his partner's motion. The crowd began to cheer again without any hint from Papa. Twice around the room they whirled in quickening cadences, the orchestra taking its cue from them, when suddenly in mid-room Ramon whispered to her and they parted company, flying like spinning Pierrot and Pierrette in opposite directions.

Jacqueline's tangent brought her close to Sherry's corner, and she paused there, hardly knowing what to do next. It was only accident that made her glance at Sherry's table, as she turned her head quickly to take her cue from Ramon. Dad was watching Sherry as if he expected to see him leap from his place. Sherry had looked up at Jacqueline because he could hardly help it. And so their eyes met.

She knew him instantly. Her heart leapt so, it made her gasp; it sounded like a sob. The sea of faces all about her became a haze, with Sherry's head and shoulders like a cameo set in the midst of it. He was staring at her. He would recognize her in a second! He would know her for the girl that Wahl had blackened! He would feel the shame of her dancing in a cabaret! He would —

She did not know whether he had started to his feet or not. Something happened. Something broke the spell of frozen fascination. Something—she did not know what—gave her presence of mind enough to glide into a waltz' and spin away toward Ramon, who met her in mid-room; dancing toward her.

"What is it, Conchita?" he whispered. "Courage! Courage! Pep-zip-snap!"

"Toward the steps!" She would have screamed it at him if she had had to say it twice.

He recognized emergency and whirled her in the right direction, but she could not wait to do the dance-up steps that they had practiced all afternoon. She broke away, ran up to the stage, and disappeared into the wings, leaving Ramon to improvise alone.

"My God!" Cervanez almost screamed, trying to stop her in the wings as she fled toward the stairs. "What is wrong? You ruin us!"

But Jacqueline did not care who was ruined, provided it should not be Sherry. She knew he would follow if he recognized her; and he was so obstinate that he would probably claim her before all the world, in spite of everything—and be put to open shame, as she had been—and quarrel with his father—and lose his friends. She must run—run! And there was nowhere to run to but upstairs—up to her own room, and lock the door. She must tell Consuelo, and they must think of some way of escape at once! But the bedroom was empty. Consuelo, she remembered now, was downstairs in the kitchen, having supper.

Jacqueline locked the door, and sat on the bed bewildered—nearly fainting.

Sherry, who had almost risen to his feet, sat down again and passed a hand over his eyes. He did not believe them. That could not be the girl he had met in Louisiana. Yet—

"Does she remind you now of somebody?" asked Dad, and Sherry stared at him.

"Say—are you—?" Sherry rose from his chair, his eyes fixed on Dad's and all his gloom gone. His chin came forward suddenly. "Wait here!" he said, and rushed away knocking his chair over.

Ramon was still dancing, with his back to the stage. Sherry ran past him and up the steps, straight into the wings, the way Jacqueline had gone. Cervanez screamed, and ran to intercept him, but he had seen the door leading upstairs that Jacqueline had not quite closed behind her, and ten of Cervanez could not have stopped him. Besides, Dad had followed. Cervanez found herself with two men on her hands; she turned in panic to look for Ramon, who was dancing like a marionette, oblivious of everything except that he must "hold" the audience and save a situation. The second that she wasted trying to catch Ramon's eye was enough for Sherry; he was gone through the door and upstairs; the door slammed shut and Dad stood with his back against it.

"S-h-h!" Dad warned her. "We're friends, not enemies! Don't make a scene!"

Cervanez was half-hysterical. One moment she was threatening to scratch Dad's eyes out, and the next she was wringing her hands and running to lower the curtain. But she could not pull the curtain down so long as Ramon was on the floor; and Ramon was remembering old acrobatic stunts, compelling the audience to keep their eyes on him. Papa Pantopoulos was at the far end of the restaurant, near the door, trying to organize applause as the best way out of the predicament. If he had run to the stage, about half the audience would very likely have followed him.

Sherry ran upstairs three steps at a time, and found himself in an ill-lit passage with doors to the right and left. There was no sound, although he held his breath and listened until he had to let his breath out in a sudden gasp. He seized the knob of the nearest door—opened it—drew blank—a dark room—nobody in there. He tried the next one; it was locked on the inside. He struck the panel three or four times with his knuckles, and listened again.

"Is that you, Consuelo?"

He would have known that voice in a thousand! But he did not dare to answer. He rapped with the palm of his hand on the panel and rattled the knob, hoping that was what Consuelo would do in the stress of excitement. He heard the key turn cautiously. That was enough! He burst into the room, shut the door, turned the key behind him, and stood still.

Jacqueline had jumped backward toward the bed, or his violence to the door would have knocked her down. She was still wearing the mask; some instinct of self-preservation had made her retain it, although she usually threw it off the moment she reached her room.

"Sherry!" she exclaimed. Her hands went out toward him; yet she shrank back.

Sherry came on, smiling.

"Sherry! Please!"

She had reached the limit of retreat. Her back was against the dressing-table. Sherry's right arm closed around her, and she tried, helplessly, to prevent his other hand from unfastening the mask. He took it off quite gently, dropped it on the floor, and looked into her eyes.

"Jacqueline, why did you run away from me?" he asked.

But the moment he said the name he saw fear leap into her eyes, and cursed himself for a clumsy fool. He stooped and picked the mask up—held it out to her.

"You know now," she said hopelessly. "Sherry, I've tried so hard to hide from you."

He tried to take her into his arms again. "But why?" he asked. "Why hide from me? Didn't you believe me when I said I love you? Jacqueline, dear—that is your right name, isn't it? You are Jacqueline Lanier?"

"Yes, Sherry. I wish I weren't. I—"

"Hah!" She looked startled as he barked that laugh at her; and he stepped into the full heritage of manhood as compassion for her overcame all other thoughts. His own predicament, his own desire—hope—loneliness was nothing in the overwhelming awfulness of hers. "I'm glad you are!" he went on. "It gives me a chance to prove I love you! Bless your darling heart, did you think it would make any difference who you are, or what they say about you? Jacqueline dear, look at me again! Look up! D'you think I'm not telling you the truth? I'm with you to the end of time—whatever has happened or whatever may happen. Don't you remember I promised that?"

"But, Sherry, you hadn't read the papers—"

He dismissed newspapers and all their universe with an impatient jerk of his head. "I had seen you, dear!" he answered. "Did you think I'd believe them after that? Jacqueline! Why—oh, why didn't you trust me? I could have saved you so much—all this, for instance. I would have stood by you through thick and thin."

But even then all Jacqueline could shape out of the chaos of thoughts within her was that Sherry knew. He knew—and he still loved her. He didn't believe! But perhaps that was because he did not really know.

Words came tumbling from her lips, sentences blurted almost incoherently, her eyes still frightened (for she feared the worst—that he would turn when he really did know). She tried to tell him all the truth at once—six aspects of it all at once—and he only caught the general drift of it. He laughed, and stopped her with a kiss, taking her into his arms and holding her so tightly she could hardly breathe.

And in his arms, as he kissed her, all the panic and hopelessness were stilled. There was peace. Her arms crept around him. She clung to him. Tears came in a passion of relief; and through the tears a sob—almost a whisper; "Sherry—oh, Sherry!"

Then memory once more. She drew back startled, thrusting him away from her.

"Sherry, you mustn't love me! You must never see me again! You must let me go! I can only do harm—I'll ruin you! I must always hide! I couldn't stand it, to have everybody know who I am—and have them say such awful things—and if they knew you loved me, they'd drag you in—"

"Listen! Listen!" he said, holding her tightly again.

"Dear, listen to me! They can't hurt me—and d'you think I'd care if they did? I'm not going to let them hurt you any more, that's all!"

He wished he felt as confident of his power to do that as the words sounded; but he could see the effect of the words on her. At least if he could not stop the newspapers he could help her to bear their cruelty.

"You can't escape from me, you know!" he went on. "You're not going to run away from me again, because there isn't a place you can go to where I won't follow! I love you, and you can't beat that game! Bless your heart, if my dad can't or won't straighten out this newspaper business and put everything right, we'll go to China or Siam, or some other place where they don't have newspapers—and live on canned soup if we have to," he added, laughing. "Say, Jacqueline—I love you. Don't you love me?"

She could not keep from smiling at him through the tears. Love him? Who wouldn't?

"But, Sherry—"

"Do you, Jacqueline? You do? Well—what else matters?"

Nothing else did matter when he held her that way in his arms and kissed her. The feeling of peace returned.

"You know," he said. "I wasn't joking about canned soup! We'll be broke to start with! We may have to—"

Her answering laugh was what he had been playing for. It brought her back from the dangerous border of hysteria.

"Sherry, why—why do you believe in me?" she asked him suddenly.

"That's easy," he answered. "The question is, do you believe in me yet?"

She nodded—met his lips half-way. "Absolutely, dear?"

"Sherry, how could anybody help believing in you?"

CHAPTER 29.

"Meat and drink for him!"

Cervanez had to leave Dad to lower the curtain; but then Dad had Ramon on his hands as well as her, and Ramon was belligerent. His self-esteem was stirred by having saved the day; he felt like a brave man who has fought in the trenches, and returns to find treason at the rear. His right hand went naturally to the dagger-hilt projecting from the sash at his waist; and as Cervanez poured her tale of woe into his ear he began to stalk Dad Lawrence, working around in a strategic semicircle toward the far side of the door, with the obvious intention of rushing Dad and forcing him away from it toward the stage.

And Dad was no matador—no duelist—not even skillful with his fists. He faced the enemy, but gave ground, retreating step by step, his eyes on Ramon's. And the farther Dad retreated, the worse Ramon's eyes glittered, and the more Cervanez egged him on to "teach that thief a lesson!" Cervanez was in a mood to see blood. But Ramon was not quite keyed to the point of taking that tremendous risk; he faced about suddenly, with a movement as graceful as a matador's avoiding a bull, and disappeared through the door leading upstairs.

Dad would have followed him, but something else—definite and loud —attracted his attention. He and Cervanez both ran to the curtain and peered around it, one on either side. The whole restaurant was in a panic mixed of indignation and assertive innocence. Women were hiding flasks in their stockings and corsets; a dozen officers in uniform were filing down both sides of the room. Dad saw Wahl standing in the entrance beside a prohibition officer, and the expression on Wahl's mean face would have told the story even if the police were not already in there. Cervanez ran to Dad and clutched him by the arms, screaming at him:

"You! What is this? What it mean? You do this?"

"The place is pulled," he answered. "Listen!" His brain was working like lightning now. He had to defeat Wahl, and that thought spurred him as nothing else could. "You stay here—let them search you but refuse to let them pass! Play for delay! You understand? It's your only chance!"

He was gone before she could ask him another question—upstairs three steps at a time, and hammering at the only locked door. In the passageway was Ramon, sputtering brimstone Portuguese.

Dad thrust Ramon aside and beat on the door with his fist.

"Open, Sherry! D'you hear? Open! It's me—Dad Lawrence!"

Sherry turned the key and went back to Jacqueline, leaving Dad to open the door for himself. But Dad found himself thrust aside in turn; Ramon seized him by both shoulders and whirled him against the wall—then flung the door wide open and stood for a moment magnificently posing on the threshold. Jacqueline was in Sherry's arms again, and Ramon's brows came down over his eyes like a thunder-cloud. He said nothing, but his hand went to his knife. Dad Lawrence sprang too late. Jacqueline smothered a scream. Ramon's knife went slithering point-first at Sherry's heart.

There was no thought—no time for it. Impulse—instinct —mother—readiness to die for what she loved moved Jacqueline. She pushed at Sherry suddenly—thrust him out of the knife's path,

and herself into it. The knife went point-first into her sleeve, and the white stuff grew crimson. Sherry sprang for Ramon, and Dad cut off his retreat.

"No!" Jacqueline cried out. "No, Sherry! No! Look, I'm not hurt! It's only a scratch!"

Dad saw at a glance she was telling the truth and sprang between Sherry and Ramon—turned his back to Sherry.

"Look after her!" he shouted over his shoulder. Then to Ramon: "Now, you dam fool! Get downstairs! Stop the police from coming up here! If you don't I'll have you pinched for attempted murder! Have you another knife? There's a man named Wahl down there—stick it into him!"

Ramon's fight had all oozed out of him. He obeyed Dad meekly, trying to pause on the stairs to explain that he had meant to protect the senorita—that he had mistaken the gentleman for a burglar—that he was sorry—anything, in fact, but guilty of jealousy. But Dad threatened to kick him if he did not hurry downstairs, and Dad's mood was a Viking's in that minute. He would have carried out his threat. His frenzy would have prevailed over Ramon's strength, and Ramon knew it—ran. Dad rushed back into the bedroom.

"Out of this, Sherry! The place is raided!"

"What do I care?" Sherry answered. He was trying to bandage Jacqueline's arm with his handkerchief.

Dad took hardly even time to nod to Jacqueline.

"Get a move on, you young ass! Get out of here! Wahl staged a raid, and he's here with the bulls! If you're found here, they'll pinch the two of you. You know what that means! The son of Mansfield of the Tribune caught in a room with the notorious—"

"Shut up!" growled Sherry.

"Damn it, man, I mean it!" Dad exclaimed, shaking his arm. "There isn't a paper in San Francisco that won't play that up till they're blue in the face! They'll ribbon head-line it! It'll be the end of her—and you too! For your dad's sake, run! Leave me to look out for her—I'll stay with her whatever happens. Sure—I promise. No, you've no time for kissing—get a move on—scoot! Climb down the fire-escape at the end of the passage."

Sherry saw the point, and having seen it did not hesitate.

"I'll be out in the street in front," he said.

"Dad—for God's sake—"

"Sure!" Dad answered. "Beat it!"

There came a hammering on the door. Sherry opened it and cannoned into Consuelo. Dad pulled her in, pushed Sherry out, and locked the door again. Consuelo was in utter panic, too terrified to speak, gasping at Dad like a choking fish and moving her hands up and down spasmodically. It was no use talking to her; Dad turned to Jacqueline.

"Listen, little woman," he said as calmly as he could make himself speak. "We're in a tight fix. This raid has been staged by Wahl in order to catch you. He wants to identify you, that's all. He's got his story all written, and it's sure to be worse than anything he's done yet; the minute he's identified you he'll phone the Tribune to put the story on the press. He'll have you arrested if he can. You've got to get out of here before he finds you—see? There's only one place I can think of for you to go. Take this key. I'll find a car, and tell the driver where to take you. Cover up with shawls—veils—anything. Don't be recognized. We've got to kill that story—see? Be ready now, when I come back."

Dad let himself out, and stood listening outside the door. He could hear a noise coming up from the stage—voices, and heavy footsteps—Cervanez shrilling, reinforced by Ramon—both trying to guard the stairway. Suddenly he felt his leg seized and something jumped on his shoulder from behind, making his blood run cold. A monkey caught hold of his chin and peered into his face! He looked down at a curly-headed child in a night-dress, who clung to his leg and stared up at him.

"Who are you?" he asked, trying with one hand to keep the monkey from climbing up on his head.

"Pepita. I want Conchita! I want Conchita! She said she will come. I want her!"

"You can't see her now," Dad answered.

"Why? I want her! Conchita!"

The child began to cry, screwing fists into her eyes and opening her mouth to yell. That was altogether too much for Dad's equanimity. He could not hear a dog yelp without wanting to run to the rescue. He dug into his pocket, found a coin, and doubled down beside the child to bring his face on a level with hers.

"Hey-hey-hey! Don't cry. Look here—take this." Her fingers closed on half a dollar. "And look, your monkey's pulling my hair! Won't you take him off!"

"I want Conchita!"

There was a footstep on the stair now. The situation seemed desperate, but Dad did his best to keep calm.

"She's going away for a few days—just a few days," he answered.

"You shall see her when she comes back."

"Where?" the child demanded. "I want to go too!"

"You can't go to the mountains," he answered, and realized too late that that was a bad mistake. The child began to cry again.

"See here," he said, "if you'll take your monkey, and be a good girl, and run upstairs to bed, and keep quiet I'll take you to see Conchita in the mountains."

"When?"

"Soon. Only you must go now! Run! Be off with you!"

Pepita took him at his word, and went, holding the monkey upside-down and stumbling on the end of her night-dress as she climbed the stairs. She had hardly gone when the feet of half a dozen heavy men began tramping upstairs from the stage, and he heard Wahl's voice.

"Kick open any door you find locked, you men! You'll find something worth while, I promise you!"

Dad strode to the head of the stair. He reached it, under the dim gas-jet, just as the leading policeman set his foot on the top step. He could see Wahl's face in shadow behind the second man.

"Have you a search warrant?" Dad asked.

The front man hesitated, glancing back at the man behind him.

"Go on, men," said Wahl. "Don't mind him!"

"If you have a search warrant," said Dad, "of course, I've nothing to say. But if you haven't, you'd better go get one before you take chances. You know me, I think. If you overstep the law, the mayor and the district attorney are going to have the facts before the night's out!"

Wahl came striding up past the policemen, pushing them aside.

"Say, here, what's this?" he demanded.

"Didn't you hear?" Dad answered.

"You killing a story?"

"I'm reporting this raid!" said Dad. "You men are simply being made catspaws!" he called down over Wahl's shoulder to the policemen. "You'll be the goats if you act illegally. Take my tip and confine yourselves to the job downstairs—or go get a proper warrant. Some of you have known me twenty years. How long have you known Wahl?"

"You'll know me before I'm through with you!" Wahl growled savagely. He showed his teeth like a wolf. "You'll know what hunting a job means, too, Dad Lawrence! Take my word for it!"

But Dad was sure enough already on that score. He knew what Mansfield senior's instant verdict would be. He was as good as fired already. Wahl's bolt was shot—held no more terrors.

"You fellows take the advice of an old friend, and be sensible!" he called down to the policemen; and some one near the foot of the stairs said gruffly:

"'Bout face! Downstairs—march!"

The men tramped down again, but Wahl stood leering savagely with his face thrust close to Dad's.

"I'll give you one chance!" he sneered.

"Stand by while I force that door in, or I'll break you forever, as far as any newspaper's concerned!"

"Get to hell out o' here!" Dad answered calmly. "You're a skunk! Go and make your smell!"

Wahl's laugh, as he turned and followed the police downstairs, was merciless. It rang like steel struck against stone, sending a cold chill down Dad's spine. He wondered what the devil would do next, yet did not dare to wait and see. He knew what he himself had done, and Wahl had twice his brains; the odds were a thousand to one that Wahl would try the fire-escape; but there was just an even chance that if he hurried—

He led the way to the room at the end of the passage, threw the window up, and helped Jacqueline out on the fire-escape. Then he climbed out himself, and fairly hauled Consuelo through after him. Consuelo wanted to feel her way down carefully, but Dad put one arm around her and hurried her down as if flames were curling all about them.

"Never mind if you break your leg! It'll mend!" he protested. "It's your one chance! Hurry!"

One of the rusted steps broke under Consuelo's weight, but Dad saved her from falling by main strength. Consuelo cried aloud to all the saints, but Dad lugged and hauled at her—the thin iron trembled—Jacqueline called encouragingly from below—and Consuelo's faith in guardian angels somehow clung to her as far as the bottom step. But then Jacqueline swung herself over and dropped like a cat to the ground. Saints—angels vanished. Consuelo sat down.

"I'll stay here!" she announced flatly. "Go on! You two go without me! I don't matter—they won't get a word out of me!"

She did not know who "they" were, but she was willing to face devils rather than that long drop to the ground. However, Dad and Jacqueline between them managed it. Dad jumped to the ground and found two garbage cans, one full, the other empty—piled one on the other, and laid a piece of wood on top of all. Jacqueline coaxed, Dad swore, and Consuelo was persuaded; she stepped down, and the whole structure toppled forward under her trembling weight, but it broke her fall, and Dad and Jacqueline between them saved her from breaking her neck.

Then, hand in hand, they hurried up the alley to the street to find an auto. The police patrol wagon was backed up to the front entrance of the El Toro, and they were putting Papa Pantopoulos and several of his waiters into it. Beside the patrol wagon was some one's private car, and Sherry was talking to a man in a dress suit and overcoat about half a head taller than himself, a little to one side, beyond the café entrance. Dad did not look at the man hard enough to recognize him. He hurried the two women past Sherry, and got in Sherry's way to prevent him from dallying with Jacqueline.

"Get an auto of some kind—quick!" he whispered. "We'll wait at the next corner!"

Dad tugged at the women, for the police were coming out of the El Toro, and Wahl might follow them. The man Sherry had been talking to seemed much too interested. Dad did not dare look at him.

"Hurry!" he urged. "Best foot forward! Keep your faces covered, and look straight in front of you!"

But that damned young fool Sherry, instead of running for an auto, was talking to the man again!

"Hell! Is the boy crazy?"

Dad's nerves were nearly as far gone by then as Consuelo's. He almost jumped out of his skin when a man's step came hurrying behind him and a man's voice spoke close to his ear.

"Pardon me. Why not use my car?"

Dad faced about—gasped—grinned—recognized John Miro!

"This is perfectly all right," said Miro, smiling. "They won't interfere with any lady in my car. Take my arm, Miss Lanier!"

She obeyed, with an almost creepy sensation. It was like walking with Desmio, only this man was so much taller! He had the same way of holding her arm, and the same peculiar dignity in his stride. Strange, what idiotic thoughts occur to one in a crisis. She looked down at his feet, to see whether he was wearing the rubbers he so energetically advertised! He was not, and she was almost disappointed! She had not time to feel surprised at meeting him in that extraordinary crisis; in fact she was past being surprised at anything—and so disturbed on Sherry's account that she could not think.

Miro helped her into the car—a great expensive closed one with the Miro coat-of-arms on the panel; then offered his arm to Consuelo. Dad whispered to the chauffeur—fiercely—repeating directions again and again. Miro slammed the door shut, cried "Go ahead!" and stood between Dad and Sherry, watching as the car threaded its way into the stream of traffic.

"Well—so here endeth this lesson!" Miro remarked after a moment.

"No, it doesn't!"

Dad turned and faced him squarely. "That swine Wahl," he went on, "has his story all written. It's set up, ready to use the minute he phones them to spring it. What's he doing now? Anybody seen him?"

Miro did not know Wahl by sight, and shook his head.

"He's still inside there somewhere," said Sherry.

"Damn it! We've got him beat," said Dad, "unless he gets her story out of Ramon! Maybe he's phoning already from the cafe—get in there, Sherry, and see if you can't bust the instrument—or cut the wire. I'll hunt for him upstairs. God! If I catch him in one of the rooms I'll kill him!"

"Don't quite kill him!" advised Miro. "I'll wait here for both of you."

But Wahl had stolen a march. He was not yet ready to telephone to the Tribune to use the story. Even he did not dare to turn that scurrilous concoction loose without first positively identifying his victim; and he believed she was still hiding upstairs.

He wasted precious minutes trying to find some other way of invading the upper story, and nearly came to blows with a Negro cook who drove him headlong out of the kitchen by the back way. That brought him into the alley, at the rear, and it was not a minute after that before he thought of the fire-escape. But there were two fire-escapes; and the one he swung himself on to

was at the end of the building, serving quite a different set of windows from the one that Dad had used. He peered in vainly at window after window, almost giving up hope, until he reached the top story and at last saw a small girl in a night-dress playing with a monkey on a bedroom floor. Without a moment's hesitation then, he wrapped his fist in a handkerchief, smashed a pane of glass, unlatched, the window, and climbed in.

The child ran from him in terror, and Wahl did all he could to increase the terror, believing that would save time. He caught her—backed her up against the wall—made hideous grimaces in the child's face.

"Where's Conchita?" he demanded. "Tell me or I'll hurt you!"

"Gone!" wailed Pepita. "She's gone. I want her too! But she's gone!"

"Gone where? Hurry up now! Tell me, if you don't want to be hurt!"

"A man came and took her to the mountains. He promised he'd take me. I want to go soon!"

Pepita burst into tears, and Wahl turned away from her, stroking his chin.

Mountains—mountains? The man was Dad Lawrence undoubtedly. He had felt sure Dad was a traitor, but where would Dad take her, or send her to in the mountains? It was hardly likely Dad would go along. He would put her in a car and send her there. Might get the number of the car—no, no time for that, and not much chance of it. Dad must have thought of some place on the spur of the moment—what place?—wished he knew Dad better —Got it! Dad had told him he sometimes spent weekends in Mansfield's cabin, and Mansfield himself hardly ever went there! That must be the place —where else? But could he find the way, he wondered. Well—he couldn't find it by standing there stroking his chin. He knew the general direction—everybody in the neighborhood would know where Mansfield's cabin was.

He went out by the window just as Dad entered the room in search for him. Dad, leaning out of the window, watched him hurrying down the iron ladder —saw Wahl grin as he recognized the face above him, and guessed the grin meant triumph. He shut the window down, and spent five minutes in comforting Pepita before he could coax the account from her of what Wahl had said and done, and what she had told Wahl. Then he tossed the child on to the bed, covered her, kissed her good night, and ran for it—downstairs —as hard as he could lay foot to the floor. He found Sherry by the phone booth.

"Where's your car?" Dad demanded.

"In the garage. Haven't used it since yesterday."

"Take a taxi, and go get it, quick! Wahl's wise! He's after her—to your dad's cabin in the mountains! Get on his trail! Smash him if you have to! Use a monkey-wrench! Anything to stop him! If he identifies her—"

But Sherry was gone. Wahl's roadster, in which he had followed the police patrol wagon on the way to the raid, had been parked half a block away. That was gone too.

"It's a race now—up to Sherry and a high-powered car," said Dad, joining Miro on the sidewalk.

"Race for what?" asked Miro. "What next?"

Dad enlightened him. "If Wahl phones the Tribune to spring that story, tomorrow's first edition will about kill that girl! The story's all in type. One word from him, and it's on the press! All the other papers will copy it, and the evening editions will enlarge on it! Mansfield's sure to put it on the wires, and every paper in the country will run columns about it! She'll never be able to live it down."

"No," said Miro calmly, "she won't. I know what publicity means!" He glanced up at his own glaring sky-sign several blocks away. "Let's see: I use a lot of space in the Tribune. I've phoned for my other car—it'll be here in a few minutes—I'll go and see Mr. Mansfield!"

Dad touched his arm. "Be careful!" he warned: "Mansfield's iron! Threats only make him savage."

Miro smiled. "He won't care to lose any full-page advertising."

"Meat and drink for him!" Dad answered. "He'll leave the space blank, and run a paragraph in big type in the middle explaining why you canceled your ad! He's fought and won that kind of fight a dozen times."

"Where's the joint in his armor then?" asked Miro—almost pleasantly—the way a surgeon might ask to see a patient's leg.

"Sherry!" Dad answered. "Mansfield wants to break Miss Lanier because he suspects Sherry of being under her influence. Sherry has as much iron as his father, and won't quit. Mansfield will cut Sherry off without a nickel."

"And you?" asked Miro.

"Oh, I'm done for! I'll be hunting a job tomorrow morning."

"Try me first," suggested Miro. "Here's my car. Well—glad to have met you, Mr.—what name?—Lawrence. And this place in the mountains—just where is it?"

"Mansfield's cabin."

"Oh he'll know the way then. Good night. Don't forget to come to see me. And before I forget it will you do me a favor? Phone the Ursuline Convent—get Sister Michaela—tell her where Jacqueline is and have a car put at her disposal. Send me the bill." He saw Dad's bewilderment. "That's just in case the rest of us fall down.—Good night."

CHAPTER 30.

"I've heard threats before—lots of 'em!"

At seventeen moods flash from one extreme to the other, and Jacqueline in John Miro's limousine behind a liveried driver was a totally different person from La Conchita in a shabby

cabaret. She began instantly to readjust herself to the new surroundings, and to think in corresponding terms. Noblesse oblige. That is almost the only age-worn proverb that can not be controverted. The other is, "Put a beggar on a horse and he will ride you down."

Hedged in by elegance, and safe for the moment, she thought of nothing but Sherry and how to save him from the disaster of being mixed up with herself. She was willing to make any sacrifice for Sherry—but what sacrifice would help? There was no prospect now that Sherry would listen to reason and drop her out of his life; she knew he would stick to her through thick and thin, quarrel with his father, and be ruined—by what? By his own father's newspaper's lies about herself! And reporters were probably already hunting like wolves to discover who the man was who had been in her bedroom, because she had no doubt but that Ramon was already talking.

Who would help? To whom could she turn? Dad Lawrence had been an angel, but what more could he do? John Miro had turned up like a person in a dream, and had helped by lending his car. She supposed he was awfully rich, but—he was just a gentleman, behaving as such—he could hardly have refused the loan of his car—he and Desmio had been at daggers drawn—but Desmio would certainly have done as much for John Miro—it was no use looking to John Miro for any further aid—besides, he would certainly think she had plotted to deprive him of the Miro estates in Louisiana. He very likely believed the newspapers and that Desmio's death was her fault. Why should he not believe the newspapers? Everybody always did.

She almost wished she had stayed and confronted Wahl. If she told him the plain truth, wouldn't he listen? She knew he would not listen! She remembered Wahl's face—and his hand on her wrist—knew, too, that she could never force herself to say a word to him; even the memory of him made her feel cold all over.

How did any one come to believe what such a person as Wahl said, she wondered. Why did the people who owned the newspapers place any confidence in him? Why did Sherry's father trust him? Oh, if only she could see Sherry's father, and tell him the truth for one minute, she felt sure she could convince him! She would warn him of Sherry's danger.

Why not? Was he invisible? Was she afraid? Yes! Of what—for herself? Yes! What did that matter? She owed it to Sherry! What was love for if you didn't sacrifice yourself to save the man you loved?

She nudged Consuelo. "Tell him to stop!" she commanded. But Consuelo had no mind for anything but flight—and the luxury of being in a limousine again.

"No, no, honey—"

Jacqueline leaned forward and slid the glass partition.

"Drive first to the Tribune Building!" she commanded, and the man swung the car around obediently. The die was cast!

"But what are you going to do, honey? Are you—"

"Never you mind. You wait in the car while I attend to something."

Firm lips—eyes full of conquest—seat erect—courage. She wished she knew beforehand what a newspaper office was like. She imagined Mansfield senior in a den between whirring machinery and oil-cans, and supposed she would have to shout her loudest in order to make him hear above

the clatter. Well—it would help if she had to shout; she would yell the truth at him, and all his men would hear, and would be convinced too! She had a vision of a dozen men in overalls crowding around Mansfield senior and forcing him to withdraw his accusations against her—forcing him to print a special edition exonerating her—and of Mansfield begging her pardon, just as Sherry would beg anybody's pardon, bluntly, almost rudely, but with absolute sincerity! If they did find out that Sherry had been in her room, it wouldn't matter, if only all the newspapers withdrew all those awful lies about her!

She saw Mansfield senior as a big bloated copy of Sherry, with his coat off and his sleeves rolled up, and one hand on a wheel that controlled all the machinery.

Then, suddenly, there she was in front of the Tribune Building, with her heart in her mouth, and all the inspiration gone! Consuelo begged and implored her not to do anything foolish, but the driver got down and held the door open, which kept her from changing her mind if nothing else did. She wrapped the heavy veil twice around the lower part of her face, jumped out before Consuelo could stop her, and ran into the building.

She thought at first she had made a mistake; it was not in the least like the newspaper den she had imagined—just a great gilded hallway, with well-dressed people hurrying to and fro. But a man in uniform told her which floor to go to, and showed her into the elevator; in another moment she had stepped into a corridor with doors to right and left and a desk at one corner, at which a pale-faced boy sat behind a piece of painted wood marked "Information." She supposed that meant that the boy would tell her things.

But it was he who insisted on information. He wanted to know her name and business. Had she a card? Would she write her name then on a slip of paper? When she shook her head the boy grew impudent, and that settled that problem. He learned, at once, at least something about dignity.

"Tell Mr. Mansfield that a lady is waiting to see him."

The boy looked at her and left his desk. A moment later he bowed her in through Mansfield's office door, and Mansfield senior rose from his leather-covered chair, as she stood hesitating while the door clicked behind her.

It was all so different from what she had imagined that she could not speak at all at first. Mansfield looked something, though not much, like Sherry, and was as well dressed as any man she had ever seen. The office was almost like a private library, with a fireplace, arm-chairs and an expensive carpet. There was no noise. Mansfield remained standing at his desk and seemed to expect her to speak first, and to be very suspicious.

"Are you Mr. Mansfield?" she asked suddenly.

He nodded, and she walked half a dozen steps toward him.

"I—I wanted to talk to you about—about something." His expression showed that he supposed that was why she was there; it was dry—hard—uncompromising. He did not make the slightest effort to put her at her ease.

"About what?" he asked after a moment's pause; and the very abruptness of the question nerved her to the fighting point.

"About your newspaper, Mr. Mansfield, and about untruths you've printed, and—"

There! It was out! But instead of looking startled, Mansfield smiled dryly and motioned her to a chair. "Won't you remove your veil?" he asked.

"No, thank you. You've printed disgraceful accounts of Jacqueline Lanier," she went on, "and I happen to know they are absolutely false. I've come to tell you that, so that anything you print from now on will be done with your eyes open. You've ruined Jacqueline Lanier—ruined her life and all her hopes. You've blackened her character, without knowing anything about the real circumstances and you've reduced her to the point where she simply can't face people—where she is afraid to let people know who she is, because of the things the newspapers have said of her."

Jacqueline paused for breath. Mansfield again motioned her to a chair, but she continued standing, so he leaned back against his desk and stood at ease.

"Jacqueline Lanier is one of those evil characters who should be exposed, in the public interest," he answered sternly. "We have all the facts about her. Our special correspondent was present at the tragedy that made her notorious. He interviewed her. His impressions and his information are first hand."

"He knows nothing!" she retorted. "You've let that—that devil destroy a girl's character, and—you've worse than murdered her! She's forced to run away and hide—and now you're trying to kill her all over again!"

"It is not our fault that she deserves to be pilloried," Mansfield answered calmly. "This newspaper owes a duty to the public. However—pardon me—how do you know of our intentions?"

"Never mind! I know! Your reporters are after her. You're going to print another story about her, and I'm here to ask you not to do it!"

Mansfield smiled again. He made no comment, except that his eyes hardened and grew a fraction less wide open as he watched her. He picked up a paper-knife from the desk behind him and began to play with it.

"Is that blood on your dress?" he asked her suddenly.

Too late, she remembered that her cape had no button in front, and clutched it. "It's nothing—only a scratch," she answered, but she saw renewed suspicion in his eyes.

That frown of hers was dancing restlessly, belying indignation, making her look mischievous, and the effect of that was heightened by the veil that she was so careful to keep over her mouth. The veil rather muffled her voice; and the fact that she had on a spangled dancing dress under a cheap cape was decidedly not in her favor. If she had only covered her forehead instead of her chin, those lake-blue eyes might have convinced.

"How do you come to know Jacqueline Lanier?" Mansfield asked abruptly.

"I do know her!" she answered. "Isn't that enough?"

He shook his head. "You forget that we know her!" he answered.

"You don't, Mr. Mansfield! She's—"

He interrupted with a gesture. "Let me prove to you that we do," he broke in. "Don't hesitate to tell me if I'm wrong. She is dancing, and has been dancing for several nights past, in a lowdown cabaret called the El Toro, owned by a Greek of unsavory repute. She is living in the company of disreputable foreigners, and dancing in a mask. That, of itself, is evidence of her real character. People have a way of finding their true level, whatever the circumstances of their birth may happen to be. Am I right?"

"Don't you see that she's there because you've left her nothing else to do, and nowhere to go? Are you going to deprive her of even that poor chance to make a living?"

"It is part of a newspaper's business to expose people of her type," Mansfield answered, studying that dancing frown with increasing dislike. "Left to her own devices that girl would very soon repeat past performances. She would ruin more young men—and possibly more old ones. She is a public menace—a type of the greatest public menace in the world today, only she happens to be worse than most of them. Pity would be wasted on her. What pity had she for the man who went to his death on her account, and for poor Jack Calhoun, who shot himself? She laughed! Our correspondent saw her!"

She did not, Mr. Mansfield!"

"How do you know? Were you there?" he asked.

Jacqueline hesitated, and the fact did not escape Mansfield's notice. She was wondering whether to admit who she was, but the hard look in his eyes warned her that would be worse than useless. She tried another line.

"Haven't you a son?" she asked him.

"Yes. What has that to do with it?" he snapped back.

"Would you like your son to be found guilty by the newspapers, and condemned, and hounded from pillar to post—until there was almost nothing left but suicide?"

Her voice almost broke as she said that, but Mansfield snorted and sat down at his desk. He had no intention of being won over by sob-stuff, nor of letting the interview drag out much longer. His eye was on the button at the end of the row on the wall; unless she had something more to the point to tell him, in another minute he would ring the bell and have her shown out. She read his intention, but she was there to save Sherry, and her next words made him sit upright and stare at her again.

"Very well, Mr. Mansfield. You have ruined Jacqueline—you can't hurt her any more. But do you realize that you've made her so notorious that any man would be ruined, too, whose name was mixed up with hers?"

"That's his look-out!" Mansfield answered cynically.

"Listen, Mr. Mansfield. Your reporters—or one of them—caused the El Toro to be raided. There was an accident."

Mansfield raised his eyebrows. He thought of the blood he had noticed on her dress, and nodded.

"There was some one in La Conchita's room—a young man."

"A man, eh?"

"Yes. And please, Mr. Mansfield, if there's any mercy or justice in you, call off your reporters. Don't let them find out who it was. If they do—"

"Serve him right!" snapped Mansfield.

Gesture—expression—attitude—finger ready for the bell—all indicated that the interview had no further possible purpose as far as he was concerned. But he did not press the bell-button; something in Jacqueline's manner arrested him. She had grown calm suddenly; the effect was much more tragic than if she had pointed a finger and screamed at him.

"The man was your son, Mr. Mansfield!" she said quietly.

He was stung! He gaped at her. But then his face began to grow harder than a stone.

"I am here to save your son," she went on.

"I'll save him!" he said suddenly, and grabbed at the desk telephone. "I'll let no woman of that type ruin him! Give me the desk!" he shouted. "Quick! Have every story that comes in about the raid at the El Toro sent to me first. D'you get that? Print nothing until I've seen it!"

"If that's all you came about, you needn't worry," he sneered. "We'll keep his name out of it!"

"And hound her?"

"Certainly!"

Well—she had saved Sherry. But divine rage—reckless, righteous anger seized Jacqueline. Suddenly she saw the smallness of this man—his meanness—his cowardice. Scorn arose in her and swamped every other sensation.

"You miserable coward!" she exclaimed, not raising her voice, but looking at him as if he were a Negro. "So your notions of public duty don't include yourself or your son! You contemptible creature! Sherry is worth ten million of you, or I would go myself and tell his name to every newspaper in the city! Don't dare answer me! Listen! You have heard the truth tonight! If Jacqueline Lanier were all that you say she is, then you're worse! But she's nothing of the sort, and you're worse than a murderer—you're a yellow coward, and a liar! That's all, Mr. Mansfield! You may ring your bell now!"

She turned her back to him and waited for the office-boy to show her out, not once looking back at him, and for a moment Mansfield sat still, not enjoying his sensations. It was the first time in his life that any one had dared to say to his face anything remotely resembling Jacqueline's words, and what appalled him was her impudence, not his own injustice. To be bearded in his own den and called a liar by—by that creature! For he knew who she was now—hadn't the slightest doubt of it. She was La Conchita—none other than Jacqueline Lanier—the female who

had vamped Sherry and cast a spell on him—here in his office to save herself by a hypocritical pretense of pleading for the boy! He grabbed the telephone.

"O.K. that Lanier story!" he almost shouted. "I've identified her! Rush it through—and say: send some one from the news-room quick, to follow that woman downstairs. She's just gone down in the elevator—it's the Lanier in person—sure!—trace her—have him hurry!"

But Jacqueline was into Miro's limousine, and away, before the reporter ran out of the building, and all the news he brought back was that some one had told him she drove away in an expensive closed car.

"Ham!" said Mansfield. "Another old man on the string, I dare say. She seems to like two at a time—an old one and a young one! I wonder where Wahl is all this time—he ought to play that up."

About ten minutes later he was rather annoyed than otherwise to learn that John Miro had called, and wished to speak with him. Normally he would have been glad to talk with Miro, as an advertiser nationally known, with whom it was good business to be on friendly terms. He had never met him, and would like to. But just now he wanted to keep his mind on the Lanier story, and to watch for any angle of it that might implicate Sherry. Also he wanted to consider what to say to Sherry—how to discipline him without arriving at an open quarrel. So, though he received Miro graciously enough, he told him he could only spare five minutes.

"Time's always scant about the time we're going to press," he explained.

"So I judge, by the way the stuff's written," Miro answered, smiling amiably as he took the proffered arm-chair and crossed one leg over the other. "If I rushed into print with my advertisements as casually as you print news, I'd be bankrupt or in jail within the month. Will you have a cigar?"

"No, thanks," snapped Mansfield. "What is it I can do for you?"

"Do you mind if I light one?"

"Certainly not. Go ahead. But please come to the point—I'm rushed off my feet."

"You're going to be rushed a great deal faster presently," said Miro, carefully cutting the end from a cigar and lighting it. "I've a car outside that can catch its own shadow. How are the roads toward the mountains—pretty good?"

"I wonder what you mean?" asked Mansfield, staring at him.

"I know you do."

"The point—?"

"Is this," said Miro. "When you make mistakes, are you big enough to retract them? Or are you one of those big I Am's, who have to have it proved to them how small they really are?"

"What the hell d'you mean?" demanded Mansfield, growing angry. "Is there anything wrong with your copy? If so, I'll—"

"Oh, no. That all emanates from my office, and is checked up very carefully."

"Then what the—"

"I am coming to that."

"Then I wish you'd be quicker about it!"

"We will what they call 'step on her' presently," said Miro suavely. "I occasionally read your paper."

Mansfield's expression softened a little. He was always ready to talk about the Tribune.

"The advertisements are now and then excellent," Miro went on— apparently deadly serious now.

"We're the greatest advertising medium on the West Coast," said Mansfield.

"Yes. Many of your advertisers tell the truth. They make sure of their facts, I suspect, before asking for other people's money. It occurred to me to ask you why you don't consider taking a feather out of their cap."

"For instance?"

Mansfield had a hand on each arm of his chair, and his feet were under him, as if he were ready to spring up and fight.

"Miss Jacqueline Lanier is the particular instance I have in mind," said Miro, just as suavely as ever, leaning back, blowing smoke rings— nevertheless, watching Mansfield with a pair of very bright brown eyes.

Mansfield struck his fist on the desk. "There," he exclaimed, "I have you! There was never a case in which we were more certain of our facts!"

"And never a case where you perpetrated a more rank injustice," Miro answered calmly. "Who supplied your facts?"

Mansfield ignored the question.

"Injustice? Where's the injustice in exposing a woman of that type? She's a public menace! You're the last man who should uphold her! She as good as murdered a relative of yours. She's the type that breaks up families,— disorganizes society—ruins the lives of young men—"

"She's a good, sweet, honest little woman, beautifully bred and delicately poised," said Miro, "and you've turned her into a poor little soiled bird caught in the lime."

"Why pick on me?" demanded Mansfield. "The Tribune isn't the only paper that has printed her story."

"I pick on you because you're handy, and one of the worst offenders," Miro retorted calmly. "The cheaper rags will copy you. Is that clear?"

Mansfield jerked his drawer open. "See here!" he snapped. "Here's a wire in this afternoon. Another scalp on her belt. Donna Isabella—dead of a broken heart!"

"And in hell—I suspect," added Miro. "I was at Don Andres' funeral, although I noticed your reporters overlooked the fact. I had an interview with Donna Isabella. I shall not attend hers." He uncrossed his legs, and laid his gloves and hat down very carefully on the floor before he went on. "The funeral of the Tribune is the next that I propose to attend —unless you and I arrive at an understanding before I leave this office!"

"Hah!" Mansfield jumped from his chair with every fighting instinct uppermost. "Is that the lay of the land? Cancel your advertising! Good! Just put it in writing!"

"Not at all," Miro answered calmly. "You will carry my advertising as long as your newspaper has a leg to stand on. The contract has nearly a year to run, and I have an option to renew at the same rates."

"Then what's your game?" snapped Mansfield.

"I'm not playing any game. I'm deadly serious," Miro answered. "I propose to confront you with actual facts."

"Facts? I know all about her!" Mansfield snorted.

"More than you'd ever guess! She's been dancing in a low-down cabaret known as the El Toro, and was caught red-handed with—"

He checked himself. He was not going to implicate Sherry, even in order to confound this man.

"I know all about that," Miro answered, smiling. "I know the name of the young man who was in her bedroom. I have had some of the brightest young men from my office hunting for Jacqueline Lanier for several days. Two of them, working independently, identified her this evening, and I arrived on the scene just as that raid was pulled off. You, may say—if you like—in your paper that I assisted to rescue her. It was then hardly half an hour ago—that I made up my mind to fight you to your knees."

"You? Fight me?" demanded Mansfield.

"Why not?" Miro answered. "It will be the sort of public duty that I dote on. I suspect that I own about twenty-five or thirty dollars to your one. I have no family—no heirs whom I care to leave money to. And nothing in the world appeals to me half as much as smashing a public nuisance like your newspaper. There will be libel suits, of course; and you will inevitably lose them; but those will be no more than a preliminary skirmish."

"You mean, you propose to dictate to me what the Tribune shall print —whom it shall attack, and whom let alone?"

"Not at all. I should find that very uninteresting, and I hate above all things to be bored. I propose either to force you to reapproach this whole subject of Jacqueline Lanier with an open mind, and to retract in full —and handsomely—whatever mistakes I may convince you you have made—or else to smash you so completely that you will never raise your head again. I shall also, of course, be at great pains to let the public know why you were smashed."

"Go to it!" snapped Mansfield. "I've heard threats before—lots of 'em!"

"My first step will be to give the true story tonight to all the other newspapers—including the name of your son," said Miro. "The other newspapers are just as sensational as yours, and they'll revel in it, but they'll be supplied with proofs—which your—ah—special correspondent overlooked. They will also be permitted an interview with Miss Lanier. It will make great news, won't it, that your son has—ah —taken the part of the lady whom you persist in vilifying!"

Mansfield was ready with a retort, but checked it. He was stung. He knew the other newspapers would harp on that string mercilessly. Hating him —jealous of his mounting circulation—they would pounce on the opportunity.

"What are these facts and proofs that you hope to convince me with?" he demanded, and Miro carefully smoothed out a smile.

"I propose, first of all, that you shall come with me and meet Miss Lanier in person," he answered.

"Useless!" snapped Mansfield. "I've met her! She left this room ten minutes before you entered! I had a long talk with her. She convinced me she's a bad lot!"

That statement rather took the wind out of Miro's sails. He began to gather up his hat and gloves, but he managed to mask his disappointment.

"Very well," he said. "I've had a most delightful interview. I always like to discover a man's weaknesses before I fight him! Thanks for the—ah —intelligence, the armies call it. Good night."

He was striding for the door, when it opened and Dad Lawrence burst in, breathless, nodding to Miro and trying to force himself to feel and look calm.

"I just came in to say I'm through," he explained. "I won't wait to be fired. Thought I'd warn you that Wahl's on his way to your cabin after Jacqueline Lanier—"

"My cabin! Who sent her there?"

"I did. I gave her the key!—and Sherry's in his own car hellbent after Wahl. He'll catch him, sure. I doubt if Wahl knows the way, and Sherry's sure to overtake him. There'll be a fight. It seemed a good idea to let you know it."

John Miro stood with his hand on the door-knob, smiling. "Don't you think Sherry will win?" he asked, watching Mansfield's face, which was a picture of all the violent emotions.

Mansfield snatched at the desk telephone. "My car!" he yelled. "Order it round in front—rush!"

"Why not mine?" asked Miro. "Yours is probably as unreliable as the news you print! Mine's waiting."

Mansfield snatched up the telephone again. "Cancel that!" he yelled. "I've another car!—Come, then!" he snapped at Miro. "What are we waiting for?"

"Only for Mr. Lawrence. Aren't you coming?" Miro asked; and Dad, nothing loath, hurried behind them into the elevator.

In less than two minutes they were scooting through the traffic like a fire-engine answering a fourth alarm—Mansfield with his hat off, in order that the traffic-cops might recognize him, and let them by.

CHAPTER 31.

"The devil—half-roasted!"

It cost Sherry exactly twenty minutes to cross town to the garage where he kept his own car, to put in gas and to be under way again. But Wahl lost fifteen minutes asking for directions and procuring a road map; and Sherry's car could overhaul Wahl's cheap roadster at the rate of almost two to one. Nothing but traffic and the speed-laws made a real race of it, but the luck was with Wahl from the start; perhaps because his car looked incapable of high speed, he slipped away unnoticed, whereas Sherry was held up twice in the first ten miles and served with notice to appear before the judge; each of those interludes cost him several minutes.

Thereafter Sherry "stepped on her" in real earnest. But the luck was still with Wahl. A bent nail punctured one of Sherry's rear tires, and he lost six more minutes changing rims—made clumsy by darkness and his own impatience. By the time he had finished that job he knew by consulting his watch and figuring the mileage that it was a serious question whether he could catch Wahl before he reached the Mansfield cabin; the last twenty miles would be rough going over narrow dirt roads, on which high speed would be impossible. To make matters worse, he began to drive into a fog.

But that was not so good for Wahl's prospects as might appear.

Like father, like son; Sherry Mansfield was a fighter, the main difference being that Sherry had more compunctions to begin with. Once determined to fight, Sherry would have to be knocked out and killed before the other side could safely claim a victory. And he was no bull-headed combatant, however keen; he used every ounce of energy the engine could be made to give and took all chances at curves and corners, but the back of his mind was busy planning what to do to Wahl in the likely event of his failing to overtake him.

One thing he knew he would do. If Wahl should reach cabin ahead of him, he would stop and cut the telephone wire somewhere on the last half-mile where it was looped from tree to tree beside the track. Then, though Wahl might identify Jacqueline, he could not phone the information to the Tribune. And after that:

"Well: I'll beat him up, that's all! He's yellow. His sort always are. I bet I can lick the enthusiasm out of him!"

But Wahl's enthusiasm was of a type beyond Sherry's comprehension. The lone hunt suited him perfectly. He liked the fog; it made it difficult. He preferred things the way they were—would not have missed that chase into the mountains for a month's pay. It turned the story into an epic. As he drove, his brain shaped headlines—coining phrases, with which to slander his victim without risk of libel suits.

"Lanier girl hiding in the mountains!—No, that's not strong enough. Lanier girl takes to the woods—that's better! Sub-head—caught in police net, slips through the fog and is brought to bay by Tribune reporter! That's a good one! Gee! I'll get a story from her! I'll scare the living lights out of her! Taken in Mansfield's cabin of all places! We'll have to alibi that—cabin in the mountains is enough—nobody's business whose cabin it was. Soon as I've identified her positively, I'll phone the Tribune to O.K. what I've written, and then dictate 'em a follow-up over the wire. Hope it isn't one of those cursed party lines. That's not likely, though. Mansfield's sure to have had a private wire put in."

He had a keen sense of direction, sharpened by long experience in hunting down elusive victims of his pen. He drove with a road map pinned open on his knees, where he could just see it in the faint light from the dashboard, and he took the right turnings at top speed in the dark and the thickening mist with an almost unerring instinct, only slowing three or four times to read signboards by the way—until at last, near midnight, he came to a sandy road marked deeply by the wheels of one car, and only one, that had gone up recently. Then he knew he was on the right scent, and laughed aloud.

There was a man standing in the dark near that corner, who heard the laugh, and talked of it for many days afterward.

Wahl had no more sense of duty than the hound that hunts a leveret—or the wolf at the heels of a doe. His mind had pictured Jacqueline as something to destroy. The harder she fought for seclusion, the keener his zest to unearth her and strip her naked with his brain and pen. That was what life consisted in. For what was talent, if you did not use it? The public was not his taskmaster, it was his audience, that it delighted him to entertain—his paymaster, yes; the donor of rewards, yes; contributor of applause, as was fitting. In one sense Wahl was an amateur; he craved the laurels far more than his pay. As a man runs a race, he strove to outdo all competitors with the meaty, juicy scandals he brought to light, and colored with the touch of genius.

He felt more satisfaction in rounding up Jacqueline, and bringing her to bay as he intended to describe it, than some men would feel in winning thousands on a horse-race. If there had been no cruelty in his performance, two-thirds of the zest would have been gone.

"Take off the law, and there'd be bull-fights in a week, playing to standing room only. The public wants to see 'em suffer! Nine-tenths of slumming's for the sake of the thrill they get out of seeing kids go hungry! Hell—I know the public. I've got a good one for 'em this time! Let's hope she makes a scene and tries to scratch my eyes out! What sells newspapers is what sells books—Gibbon, for instance—Rabelais—accounts of women and children torn in the arena—salacious stuff—and the censorship makes it easier—you can suggest things without saying 'em—tickle imagination—and ho! watch the public gloat!"

He neither worshiped nor despised the public, any more than a hyena does the other ghouls that it consorts with. Morals did not enter into it; he had no conception of them, other than as standards used by the public for destroying other people. He prided himself, on always having taken good care to have a thoroughly sound moral basis from which to attack his victims.

"But lord! I never had such a good one as this. She's perfect! Brains enough to be a red-hot vamp, and not enough sense to be a hypocrite! Didn't even shed crocodile's tears, with two lovers shot dead in her own bedroom! She's a hot one! Damn this road! Are we never going to get there?"

The sandy track had narrowed until there was room for only one car, and a high bank on the right shut off the moonlight. As he followed a curve rather warily up a steep incline Wahl's lights projected at a tangent from the road, their milky whiteness lost among rocks and trees. He leaned forward close to the windshield, keeping his eyes on the edge of the track at the left, slowing more and more, feeling his way—when suddenly his eyes were blinded by the fierce lights of Miro's returning limousine coming downhill noiselessly, following its own ruts in the sand, its driver taking the curve at thirty miles an hour without a suspicion that any other car would be on that road at that hour.

Wahl tried to sound his horn, but it did not answer the button. There was just time—possibly just room if he hugged the outside edge. But the wheels held in the rut; he had to use all his strength and step hard on the gas to force the car out of them. He cried out, but the cry was drowned in the din of his own racing engine and as the car jumped clear of the ruts the edge of the soft bank yielded under the sudden weight. The limousine purred by, untouched, before Wahl felt the roadster capsizing and tried to jump to save himself. He was half out of the car and half in it when it turned completely over and pinned him by the shoulders face-downward among grass and leaves. He struggled for a minute, yelling for help and then lay still.

A mile lower down Sherry Mansfield halted the limousine by waiting in mid-track for it with his lights pointing straight uphill. Yes; the driver had delivered the lady and her companion safely. He had opened up the cabin, built a fire on the hearth for the visitors and had come away. Yes, they were all right; yes, he had passed another car on his way back—had nearly collided with it.

Sherry pulled out to let him pass, and drove like fury uphill. If he could not overtake Wahl—but he must! If Wahl identified her, and could use the telephone, that cursed story would be on every breakfast-table. He would kill Wahl first!

But he was driving dead-slow because of the sand at a turn when he saw dancing flame through the fog to his left about twenty feet below the track. He would have passed, believing it a forest fire, only he suddenly remembered it was not the time of year for those, and stared again. The outline of a pair of wheels in air was unmistakable. It was a burning auto, and he got out to investigate.

In less than a minute he discovered Wahl, pinned under the side of the car, breathing, but unconscious and beginning to be scorched by the heat of the burning gasoline.

"Let him burn! Serve him right! That's what he'll get in hell!" Sherry muttered to himself, and tried at once to lift the car off Wahl's shoulders. But he could not move it, and the heat drove him off. He rushed into the fog searching for a pole of some sort—found one—shoved it under the car—lifted it six inches—rested the end of the pole on his shoulders—and dragged Wahl clear.

"Now leave him here to rot, damn him!"

He picked Wahl up, and carried him up the bank staggering under the weight and swearing each time he caught his breath.

"Lie there, you swine, while I turn the car around, I'll dump you at the first house on the road to Frisco, and I hope you die!"

He stooped to look at Wahl—switched on his search-light, and looked again.

"Dying, I guess. Dad-blame the luck! The brute's got burns on him. Have to do something about those, or he'll be gone in fifteen minutes! I wonder if she knows how to fix them! Consuelo's sure to—old hens like her know everything! Well—it's the only chance the devil's got—here goes!"

He lifted Wahl again and hoisted him into his own car as carefully as he could.

"I hope you die before we get there!" he panted, climbing in beside him. "I hope you jolt to death!"

He drove awfully carefully, getting out once or twice to make sure of the best places in the road, for the fog was denser than ever; and it was about ten minutes before he saw the lights in the cabin window and turned in cautiously through the gap in the rough stone wall. Leaving Wahl in the car, he ran up the cabin steps and opened without knocking.

CHAPTER 32.

"D'you suppose we're very wicked people?"

"There is a destiny doth shape our ends," and destiny itself doubtless governed by intelligence whose vision comprehends the finished scheme. But the business of being shaped is often no more comfortable than a toad's under the harrow. One may imagine that the toad resents the teeth and lacks enthusiasm for high farming.

And so Jacqueline. She had time, while John Miro's sumptuous limousine devoured leagues of fog-wrapped road toward the mountains, to learn all over again what helplessness and dimness are, the fog and Consuelo seconding young human nature.

The fog made Consuelo nervous, and she tried to drive from the back seat, as she used to when Zeke was piloting Don Andres' car below the levees. Jacqueline endured that for an hour, and then her own nerves began to give way under the strain.

"Be still, Consuelo! If we're lucky, he may drive us over a precipice! I hope he will!"

That remark set Consuelo in earnest to the task of mustering herself—a stern fight, needing time. She sat with pursed lips, breathing through her nose, for fifteen minutes able to do no more than to refrain from screaming at the turns, or when headlights appeared suddenly in the fog. But no more that night did she add to Jacqueline's burden, and it was not long before she became a very tower of strength.

The fog was a symbol of Jacqueline's thoughts. So was the limousine. She felt that she was being swept along, even as she had been when the flood broke through the levees, by a power there was no resisting, through obscurity, toward terrors none could foresee. Was she not in a car that belonged to Desmio's enemy? John Miro's sky-sign blazed in her memory beside the Tribune's golden boast of "ALL THE NEWS THE PUBLIC WANTS." She was news—news—news again—news in her night-dress with a lover coming through the bedroom window. Only this time the lover was Sherry, and her heart ached for him; and that made it worse.

What could she do? There was nothing—nothing to do but to sit there and be bowled along—toward what? She had no notion even of where John Miro's car was taking her, except that it was

to be somewhere in the mountains. And what then? What after that, but more trouble, and more disgrace, and more awful drawings in the Sunday papers, with people reading them in curl-papers and slippers at the breakfast table?

And if Sherry should "stick to her through thick and thin," as he had promised, and as she did not doubt he intended, there would be the ghastly knowledge that she had dragged down the man she truly loved to the hell into which destiny had plunged her.

It was worse, not better, now that Sherry had discovered her. What craziness had induced her to come to San Francisco of all places? Weren't there other places where she and Consuelo could have scrubbed floors? Scrubbing only made your back and arms ache, whereas' this—But even scrubbing had its mental terror. She recalled the Chinaman. Were there always people after you, whatever you did? People like Wahl and the Chinaman, hungry to sell you in the market-place as news or something worse. She did not know even now just what the Chinaman had meant, and did not want to know; but it was something hideously dreadful, that her whole being shrank from.

"Consuelo, d'you suppose we're very wicked people, you and I?" she asked suddenly. "Why else should this happen?"

"Honey dear, there'll be an end to it."

"I know there will. I can't stand it much longer."

Consuelo racked her mind for solace, but found none to offer. She felt she was no longer in Jacqueline's confidence. Ever since their meeting after the flood she had known there was a secret being kept from her. Dad Lawrence's arrival on the scene, and his unexpected, unexplained friendliness had only added to the mystery. And who was the young man who had cannoned into her in the bedroom doorway at the El Toro—whom Lawrence had told to make haste by the fire-escape—and who had waited outside in the street?

Having nothing to say, she said nothing, mastering her own emotions, and waiting watchfully in the hope that Jacqueline would presently take her into confidence.

But she was no nearer to the truth when they reached the Mansfield cabin and the chauffeur set a light to the wood already piled in the great stone fireplace. Jacqueline hardly thanked the man; he belonged to John Miro, who was Desmio's enemy, and so hers. But his going made Consuelo feel friendless and afraid, and to keep herself from hysteria she set to work to explore the cabin at once with a housekeeper's eye for details. She knew within ten minutes where to lay her hands on everything the place contained.

But Jacqueline knew all that she wanted to know—and more— within thirty seconds after the fire leaped on the hearth. It was an extravagantly luxurious cabin, and on one wall was an oil-painting of Mansfield senior, with a gilt shield attached to the frame, and thereon the legend that the portrait was a token of esteem from the staff of the San Francisco Tribune.

So she was in Mansfield's house—his guest!

Well—she would not trouble him long; she would be gone by morning. She would go now, only she felt so tired. And at last she was able to be glad about something; she was in the mountains; there would be caves, or a forest she could hide in. She was glad she had seen Mansfield and had

called him names. Perhaps she would leave a note for him on the table before she went away forever, telling him things she had forgotten to say to his face.

She did not think of him as Sherry's father just then, but as a dragon that she had faced in its lair, and that had turned out to be only a coward and a bully after all. She despised him. She felt no longer in the least afraid of him.

But tired—no, not tired—crushed, and almost dead, with no desire to go on living. The world was an awful place, with nothing in it but cruelty. Even her own love for Sherry was a cruel thing, because it would inevitably ruin him, and she wished she had disguised her real feelings when he made love to her in the barn, so that she might have saved him from what must follow.

She wished she might love him without his loving her, because then only she would suffer. But what was the use of wishing? She lay down on the couch before the fire and tried to go to sleep and forget everything.

But Consuelo had found things to eat, and came and warmed them at the fire, and it was useless to try to forget with Consuelo at your elbow urging you to take stuff from a spoon—"so that you'll feel strong again, honey." She did not want to feel strong, and was not strong enough to resist. But even so, she did not eat the stuff, for she spilt it when the door burst open and she saw Sherry framed against the night.

She did not feel glad to see him, although her heart leaped. She felt too weak and tired to endure a scene with him, and to send him away forever as she knew she must do. But life seemed to be just one cruelty after another; and she supposed she must stand up and face it. However, Sherry only flashed one glance at her, as if to make sure she was there, and then made one of his abrupt remarks, to Consuelo, not to her:

"Come out here and lend a hand, please."

No explanation—hardly a pause before he had disappeared again, leaving the door wide open and the mist pouring in. Consuelo ran to slam the door with an exclamation of disgust—caught sight of something—exclaimed "Heavens and earth, what next!"—and disappeared too. Jacqueline was too tired even to feel curious, but got off the couch; and about two minutes after that Sherry and Consuelo came staggering up the steps carrying a man between them. They laid the man on the couch and Jacqueline looked at him. It was Wahl.

"Found him under a burning auto. He'll die if he's not seen to," announced Sherry, and then turned to Jacqueline, as if all that were Consuelo's business. He tried to take Jacqueline's hand, but she snatched it away, seizing on Wahl as the excuse. Anything—anything to postpone argument.

"Burns! Burns!" cried Consuelo, running for the bathroom, where she knew there were medicines in a cupboard. She came back with arnica, and then found a bedsheet and tore it into strips. "Scissors!" she demanded. "I can't find any."

Sherry produced his pocket-knife, and Consuelo began to rip Wahl's clothes off, jerking out orders to Sherry, and muttering to herself as she saw how serious the burns and bruises were. For fifteen or twenty minutes she kept Sherry occupied, and there was nothing for Jacqueline to do but make the strips of the torn sheet into rolls, and to look on. She was looking at Wahl's face when he opened his eyes at last, stared straight at her, and closed them again. She thought he had recognized her, but she did not care.

She was surprised to discover how little she feared Wahl, now that he was under the same roof with her. It never once entered her head that, without Consuelo caring for him, he would not recover from his injuries. He was still Wahl—the devil's own. But somehow he had lost all terror for her. She was much more afraid of Sherry, because Sherry, she knew, would claim her presently and she would have to steel her heart against him. It was going to be the most difficult thing she had ever done. She kept on looking at Wahl because that made it easier to avoid meeting Sherry's eyes.

Wahl recovered consciousness again and stared straight at her about a minute. She met his gaze steadily, not feeling even a desire to flinch. His eyes were cavernous, and horrible with pain. She found that she even pitied him. When he sat up suddenly and pointed at her with a bandaged arm, she stood her ground—although her frown was dancing over startled eyes. She tried to force herself to smile, so as to make him feel at ease as much as possible. Surely his burns and bruises were discomfort enough.

"Think you've scored, don't you!" he said, misinterpreting the smile and the frown. He grinned back hatefully, and glanced at Sherry. "Hello, young Mansfield! You are a bright one! Tribune's only son and heir, eh? God! You'd have a paper on the rocks in a week! How did I get here? You bring me! Well, there's that in your favor. Bring me that phone, quick! Bring it here—the cord's long enough. Call the Tribune, and hold the instrument so I can speak into it."

Sherry did not answer, but laid both hands on Wahl's shoulders and pressed him down until his head was on the pillow.

"Treason!" Wahl yelled at him. "Treason! I've identified her! Bring me that phone, young Mansfield, or—"

"Shut up!" Sherry ordered.

"Me? You can't do it, youngster!" Wahl laughed like a ghoul and struggled to sit up again. Sherry held him down. "You can't stop Clinton Wahl— can't shut him up! Can't kill him! Get that? You can't kill him! I'm Wahl, youngster! Special—that's me! Bring me that phone! I'll spill 'em a hot one over the wire! Jacqueline Lanier and Sherry Mansfield—" He began to say awful things about them both, sliding off into delirium and raving of indecencies the Chinaman had only hinted at. Consuelo shook Sherry by the arm.

"Take her outside while I quiet him!"

She did not know who Sherry was, nor how she should quiet Wahl, but anything was better than that Jacqueline should hear that raving. Sherry acted almost before the words were spoken—threw Jacqueline's cape over her shoulders and led her outside, shutting the door behind them. But he could still hear Wahl's voice through the door, so he coaxed her down the steps to the wide gap in the wall that answered for a gate. She shuddered, and he put an arm around her, folding her cape closer with his other hand.

The cabin was above the fog now. The blanket had drifted lower and lay shrouding the valley, creating a weird effect of isolation. Not even a glow was visible above the distant city. They seemed all alone with the moon and stars, above the clouds.

Jacqueline did not speak, and Sherry studied her anxiously. The moonlight seemed to emphasize her beauty, but there was a new paleness in it that worried him; it was almost as if something

within her had burned out; as if she had gone as far emotionally as she could go, and was waiting for the inevitable end.

"I was on my way to stop Wahl from reaching you when I found him by the roadside under his car," he began.

She turned a little toward him, but showed no emotion. Her eyes were listless, and the color of utterly still pools.

"I was afraid it was you who had hurt him," she said. "I'm so glad you didn't. It doesn't matter about Wahl. He would have found me sooner or later. If not he, some one else like him, and they've already done their worst to me. That is what I was foolish not to know."

The note of despair was in her voice that always struck such terror into Consuelo, and Sherry felt panic race through him.

"Look here, Jacqueline!" he said, trying to speak sternly. "You're not to talk that way! You get me? You're not to think those kind of thoughts! You've done too much of it already. I'm with you now, and nothing—"

She held up her hand to stop him. "Please, Sherry! You only make it harder for me. You only make it hurt all the more. Please go. Consuelo and I are going away—"

He caught hold of her and turned her toward him, unconscious of his roughness.

"I'm not going, and you're not going away. Or if you do go, I'll go with you!" he answered. "Your fight is my fight. Get me? They can't do or say a thing to you without doing or saying it to me. You're mine, and I'm yours. They can't undo that, and neither can we."

It was a pathetic little laugh that answered him, but it held vestiges of life.

"It makes me happy, Sherry, to hear you say that. But Jacqueline— your Jacqueline, that is—is dead and can't ever come back to life, because nobody believes her. I learned that tonight."

"Good lord! But I believe you!" he retorted.

"Do you, Sherry? I'm so grateful. But you must go away, because I bring only unhappiness to every one who loves me, and I don't want to make you unhappy. Desmio—Jack Calhoun— Consuelo—now you. It's too much, Sherry! And Wahl—Wahl nearly dies trying to reach me. I bring misfortune to every one."

Sherry stared at her, utterly, absolutely sure of his own mind, but wondering what to say. She recognized the consternation in his face, knew she hurt him, and was much more sorry for him than for herself. Tears suddenly blinded her eyes and ran down her face unheeded.

"Sherry dear, do go! Will you please go? Your father will not forgive you if you love me. If I hurt you any more than I have done already I couldn't bear it. I love you. See—I tell you, dear, I love you. And if you love me, you will let me go away—"

Sherry's answer died still-born. There came from close at hand the roar and stutter of a big car being driven uphill. Headlights blazed around the bend.

"Who now? That's not my dad's car," Sherry muttered. "Maybe it's reporters from one of the other papers," he said, throwing his arm around Jacqueline.

"Come on, sweetheart—back to the cabin! I won't let 'em in."

He almost carried her up the steps. But the car came roaring in through the gap, and he had hardly locked the door when a man's fist struck on it and he heard his father's voice:

"Come on now, Sherry—open the door!"

He turned the key again, then turned his back and walked to mid-room, beside Jacqueline, where he swung himself around and stood to face his father with his jaw set tight and both fists clenched. Consuelo was sitting on a chair beside Wahl, but rose to her feet when Mansfield entered, closely followed by Dad Lawrence and John Miro. Miro bowed to Jacqueline, undid his overcoat, and walked to the corner of the fireplace, where he stood erect, like a man in armor. Mansfield stood silent, with his back to the door, glancing from Sherry to Wahl and again from Wahl to Sherry. No one spoke for thirty seconds.

It was Wahl who broke the silence. "Chief!" he yelled. "I've got her! Get to the phone—quick! O.K. that story! Then spill 'em a follow-up—have 'em put a live man on the other end! Here she is! Caught in your cabin with your son! Didn't I tell you she'd vamp Sherry? Watch her, or she'll—"

Sherry put his clenched fist close to Wahl's nose. "Shut up!" he commanded, "or I'll finish you, you beast!"

Wahl began to swear excitedly at Sherry, but Dad Lawrence picked up a towel, gagged Wahl with it, and held his head down on the pillow. Sherry turned again to face his father:

"Long live the Tribune!" he said grimly; and Miro, over by the fireplace, chuckled.

"Did you do that to Wahl?" demanded Mansfield. "Did he hurt you? Did he attack you?"

"No. I wish he had. Then I'd have killed him!"

"Why?"

"Because he should be killed! He's all but killed her," Sherry answered, with a jerk of the head toward Jacqueline but meeting his father's gaze steadily.

"May I ask what possible concern that is of yours?" Mansfield tried to keep the sneer out of his voice, but failed, and Sherry's eyes blazed at him.

"Sure!" he answered. "And I'll tell you! She's the girl I love, that's all. So now you know where I come in."

"Sherry, my boy—" Mansfield was trying hard to master his emotion —"we'll have to talk that over later. When a young girl has a reputation—"

"Stop!" Sherry held his hand up. "None of that, dad! Wahl made her reputation. Wahl is a liar!"

"But it's public property," said Mansfield.

"Yes, and whose fault's that? But I'm not going to argue with you. I don't give a damn what all the papers in Christendom have printed about her, or will print. She's the girl I love. She has my absolute O.K. I'm going to marry her."

"You're not!" said Mansfield; and once more John Miro chuckled, striking a match on the chimney-stones to light a cigarette.

It was almost as if the match had set a light to Jacqueline! The spirit returned to her eyes. Before Sherry could prevent her she stepped forward toward Mansfield, and the tragedy written on her face made even him look at her with a changed expression. Dad Lawrence, with his hand on the towel over Wahl's mouth, was almost crying. John Miro burned his fingers with the match.

"Sherry is not going to marry me, Mr. Mansfield—because I am not going to let him. I have been telling him that, but he will not listen."

Her voice sounded very tired, and Consuelo made a move toward her. Mansfield glanced at Sherry.

"That seems final, doesn't it?" he said abruptly.

Sherry stepped in front of Jacqueline and faced his father more angrily than ever. Jacqueline felt Consuelo's arms behind her and almost collapsed into them. Dad Lawrence left off holding Wahl and came to the rescue with a chair on which Jacqueline collapsed entirely, laying her head back against Consuelo's bosom and closing her eyes.

"Final?" exploded Sherry. "This is final—what you're hearing from me now. You, and the other newspapers, have pretty nearly killed her. If you don't do every damn thing you can to put her right again before the world, then I'm through with you, not her! That's final! I'm on her side forever. Watch me, if you don't believe it!"

He turned toward Jacqueline—tried to thrust Consuelo aside and take her place—failed, might as well have tried to shove a battle-ship—laid a hand on Jacqueline's shoulder—and once more faced his father.

Mansfield snorted. "How come that you think you know so much about her?" he asked, making no effort this time to disguise the sneer. Sherry glared back at him.

"Good God! Look at her! Dad, are you crazy? Use your eyes! Here she is! This is the girl you've been flaying alive—this one—here! This is Jacqueline Lanier!"

"Aye, there she is!" Wahl broke in, trying to struggle off the couch. "Go to it, Chief! Grab the phone, man—" Dad Lawrence jumped for the towel again, Wahl's yell died down to smothered murmurs, and then ceased.

Mansfield conceded Sherry's point to the extent of scowling at Jacqueline again, his brows meeting over his eyes and his expression like that of a scientist studying a vicious insect.

"I will listen to her if she has anything she'd care to say," he volunteered ungraciously. "I've heard her once," he added.

"When?" demanded Sherry, but did not wait for an answer. "Jacqueline dear," he said, leaning over her, "tell dad what you told me—will you? Tell him all that happened—please—for my sake! Dad, for God's sake listen to her! And look while you listen! Does she look as if she could lie, even if she would? Jacqueline dear—tell him—won't you!"

Jacqueline looked up at Sherry and sighed, feeling she would rather die than drag that awful past before a man who listened almost against his will. She had thought her pride was dead, but it was not. Pride urged her to refuse. But she would have cut off her right hand for Sherry, even as she had cut out her heart for him. Mansfield was staring at her, and that made it worse. She could not think connectedly. Where should she begin?

"Please, dear, won't you tell him?" Sherry urged. She glanced up at Sherry again, and began playing with the heavy locket on the gold chain.

"Desmio—"

Her voice broke into a sob and she faltered—stopped. Not even for Sherry's sake could she force herself to drag Desmio's name through the mud to oblige a stranger. She was not crying. There were no tears. She simply leaned back against Sherry's arm and could not go on—had reached the limit of emotion and endurance.

"Who is Desmio?" demanded Mansfield, and John Miro threw his cigarette into the fire. He stepped forward, as if to join in the discussion, but said nothing. Consuelo gave him no time.

Wrath—boiling, royal, fearless wrath took hold of Consuelo then, and even Mansfield (terrible himself in wrath) flinched in front of her.

"Be quiet now, honey-lamb!" she said with one swift turn of tenderness, for Jacqueline had felt rather than seen the coming storm and made the beginning of a move to protest. "I'll tell him!" With one shove not much less violent than a blow Consuelo thrust Sherry away. Then she stood behind the chair, leaning forward over it, fixing her eyes on Mansfield's.

"Look!" she commanded. "She was born into my arms. I've been with her almost every hour since then, except when she was in the convent. She's as innocent and sweet and good now, as she was that day I first set eyes on her. You and your newspapers! I've read your lies! Look! See what your lies have done to her!"

Jacqueline tried to protest again, but Consuelo threw both arms around her, kissed her, glared around the room and back at Mansfield.

"You ask who's Desmio," she snorted. "A better man than ever you'll be! It was her name for Don Andres Miro. He's the gentleman who raised her in his home—and was that proud of her—and loved and worshiped her so well that, when he knew he was dying, he asked her to marry him. He knew her! He understood her! Since she was three years old she'd been better than a daughter to him. He couldn't make her his heir any other way, so he took that means to provide a proper mistress for his great estates, and to make sure she would never lack for anything!"

Wahl stuck his head up over the end of the couch, tried to struggle to his feet, and shouted:

"How about the handsome lover Jack Calhoun?"

Dad Lawrence used the towel again, although Mansfield made a gesture of disapproval.

"Yes—what of Calhoun?" asked Mansfield.

"That cockerel! That jackanapes!" Consuelo almost screamed her answer at him. "He was like the rest of you! He hunted her! He saw a flower and craved to pluck it! He was a beast like you! A monster! A young spendthrift! I know twenty girls he's ruined! He'd liked to have married this lamb, and he'd have ruined her life as you've done, only she'd have nothing to do with him, and I saw to it that he never once—not once!—saw her alone, until her wedding day, when he sneaked in. My back was turned. I'd seen him in the garden. I was looking for gentlemen who'd throw him in the horse-pond. That was how he sneaked into her bedroom. Don Andres must have seen him go in there. And when Don Andres went to protect Miss Jacqueline, Calhoun shot him."

Consuelo paused for breath, gulped once or twice, and went on:

"But he was better than you are. He had shame! He shot himself! You stand there proud of your dirty work! That beast—that Clinton Wahl—was sneaking like a thief about the house, and he was into the bedroom ahead of me. There the poor darling stood—with the gentleman who should have been her husband in the next five minutes, shot dead at her feet—and Calhoun with his brains on the bed-spread—and that beast Wahl hanging on to her wrist, snarling at her, trying to make her talk to him! Wanted her to tickle his ear with information! I gave him some! He followed us to my room, where I put the poor darling to bed, and threatened us through the keyhole, until one of the nigger footmen knocked him down.

Then he tried to get in through the bedroom window, until a gardener chased him! Then he wrote those lies; and a paper in New Orleans printed them—and she—what else could she do but run away? Think of it, you—you—devil! Can you think? Have you any heart in you? Do you know what it means to be brought up by a gentleman amid refinement—sheltered, and looked up to by the folk of half a dozen counties—and then to see that filth printed about you in a newspaper that goes into people's homes? Maybe you wouldn't hide yourself; you haven't the pride or decency! You don't know what innocence means! She ran away. And I went with her, to look after her—for I'd cut off both hands and put my eyes out any minute, if that 'ud do her one bit of good. And at that, I don't love her more than all the rest of 'em who knew her!"

It was Consuelo's hour; the climax of seventeen years devotion. Never before had she addressed an audience, never before had she been quite bereft of meekness. She faced that tribunal, and scorned it as unreservedly as she hoped someday to stand and be judged at the world's end.

She told all the story of the flight to San Francisco, of Jacqueline's bravery, of the debt to Ramon and Jacqueline's insistence on dancing with Ramon, in order to pay the debt; and then of Wahl's invasion of the stage in the effort to uncover her identity.

"The beast would like to strip her naked!" she screamed. "And you'd like to print pictures of it! You dogs! You've crucified her! And all the while that poor frightened honey-lamb was struggling to pay her debt and hide from your dirty lies, you were printing more lies about her, for the mob to read and gloat over, and to pay you nickels!"

Sherry made a bad break then. He approached Consuelo and laid a hand on her shoulder, meaning well enough; he intended to show her there was at least one friend near at hand. But he might as well have tried to stroke a bull in the arena.

"You're one of them!" she screamed at him. "You're his son, aren't you? You're the brat of that thing, that owns the Tribune! You—you reckon yourself fit to kiss the ground she's walked on? Don't touch me, you young reptile! Hands off of her!"

Sherry made a move toward Jacqueline, and that was Consuelo's last straw. She threw her arms around Jacqueline—hugged her—"Oh, my poor darling—my poor darling honey-lamb!"—almost lifted her off the chair, set her down in another one by the fireplace opposite John Miro's corner, seized the kettle that she had set on the hearth to boil when she first entered the cabin, and stood at bay. The kettle was full. The scalding water spluttered from spout and lid as she shook it.

"Now out of here—the lot of you! Outside—and take that devil with you!"

She shook the kettle at Wahl, and narrowly missed scalding him. Dad Lawrence sprang aside, letting go of Wahl, and Wahl sat up again.

"Chief!" he yelled, "It's a beat! It's a whale of a beat! Get to the phone, man! Spill it to 'em!—'Lanier girl takes to the woods— slips through prohibition net and stands at bay with scalding water!'— Go to it, Chief! It's a pippin!"

Mansfield scowled. Dad Lawrence jumped for Wahl and forced his head down on the pillow. Mansfield glanced at Miro, who was smiling and very deliberately lighting another cigarette. He held up his hand.

"Put that kettle down," he ordered.

Consuelo glared defiance at him. She feared no man in that minute. She made a move as if to use the kettle and drive them all out of the room. But a tired, despairing voice, that touched her old heart even through the armor of that wrath, spoke from behind her:

"Consuelo dear, please put the kettle down."

CHAPTER 33.

**"And you shall sit in the patio
all day long and boss the niggers."**

Mansfield walked over to Wahl and looked down at him.

"Did you hear what that nurse said just now?" he asked.

"You bet I did," Wahl answered, sitting upright. "She's a liar, that's all." Mansfield's voice and air of authority seemed to bring him to his senses. His eyes looked suddenly less wild. "Don't forget, I was there, Chief. I saw it! I got it all first hand."

"Did you check your facts?" asked Mansfield.

"Sure!"

Consuelo drew her breath in with a gasp—ready on the instant to renew the fight. Mansfield stopped her, holding up his hand.

"How did you check them?" he demanded.

"Interviewed the sister of Don Andres!" Wahl answered. "Saw her in private in her own room—got it straight from her. She told me all about the girl's character. Donna Isabella wasn't guessing, mind you—she'd lived in the same house with her for years!"

Mansfield coughed dryly. Consuelo gave another gulp and started forward, words choking in her throat. Mansfield glanced at Sherry with a wry smile, and Sherry answered that by going over to Jacqueline and taking her limp hand in his. It was John Miro who entered the lists, as calmly as he did all other things. He tossed his cigarette into the fire and walked straight up to Mansfield.

"The point is, are you man enough to confess mistakes?" he said, smiling. "As her cousin, and at one time the friend of her family, you'll probably admit that I knew as much of Donna Isabella's character as she ever knew of Jacqueline's. Donna Isabella was as mad as your man Clinton Wahl. Are you mad too? I rather think not. Suppose you take another look at Miss Lanier. Judge for yourself, whether to believe her, and the nurse, and your own son, and me—or Wahl and Donna Isabella."

"Chief!" Wahl shouted. "Get to the phone! Don't you trust your own men?"

"Does it occur to you to trust me?" Dad suggested. Mansfield glanced at Jacqueline—and at Consuelo—and at Sherry. He was scowling; his brows nearly met over his eyes.

"Get to the phone, man! O.K. that story of mine!" Wahl yelled at him.

Mansfield looked at Wahl again steadily, for thirty seconds. Then he turned to the phone and took off the receiver.

"That's right, Chief!" Wahl shouted. "Run your own newspaper, and to hell with—"

Dad Lawrence used the towel again. There was silence—the tenseness of impending tragedy.

"Long distance—quick!" said Mansfield. "Operator—see how quickly you can get the San Francisco Tribune. There are several wires. Put me in on any of 'em. This is rush stuff. Step on her!"

Miro joined Sherry beside Jacqueline. Dad Lawrence shrugged his shoulders.

"Hello—Tribune? Who's speaking? Give me the desk—quick! Hello—this is Mansfield. That you, Blair? D'you recognize my voice? All right—kill that Lanier story! What's that? I don't get you. Won't be any first edition? I don't care—I said kill the story—did you hear me?"

The instrument buzzed into Mansfield's ear for thirty seconds.

"Dad, you're white! I knew you were!" said Sherry, and leaned over and kissed Jacqueline. Consuelo watched him, fuming. Mansfield held up his hand for silence.

"What's that? You don't believe it's Mansfield speaking? Just try disobeying me, and see how soon I'll prove it to you! Cancel the whole edition! If the vans have started, call 'em back—send people after 'em. I'll fire the whole outfit if one of those papers goes on sale!"

"All right, Chief!" The words could be heard distinctly all through the room, and Mansfield hung up. He glanced at Wahl.

"Put him in one of the bedrooms," he commanded. Dad—stay in there with him, and keep him quiet."

Sherry and Dad Lawrence carried Wahl out. Miro came forward and met Mansfield in mid-room.

"You eat crow rather handsomely," he said. "I like you for it. Blame it on the system and the public, though, not on that poor burned devil in the bedroom there."

Mansfield almost ignored him. He was thinking of something else. He walked toward Jacqueline, and Consuelo stepped into his way. He smiled at Consuelo, and though she bridled up and caught her breath, she stood aside again, watching him suspiciously. Then:

"Miss Jacqueline Lanier!" Jacqueline looked up, very woebegone.

"I wish to beg your pardon as humbly as a man may. I have never before in all my life retracted or apologized. Your presence is an honor to my cabin and I sincerely regret the cruelty and deep indignity to you for which the Tribune is in part responsible."

Consuelo burst out sobbing, but Jacqueline managed to smile, leaning forward and seizing Consuelo's red hand, stroking it.

"Mr. Mansfield—"

But he had not finished yet. He interrupted.

"I can promise you a full revenge, Miss Jacqueline! Whatever can be done to restore your fair name and reputation before the world shall be done by the Tribune immediately. I will sign the retraction and the other newspapers will copy it. They will make me look—and feel—extremely foolish."

"Mr. Mansfield, I don't want revenge," said Jacqueline. "I'll hide, to save Sherry from—"

"You can do that, if he'll let you," Mansfield interrupted. "But if he does let you I'll never speak to him again."

Jacqueline laughed at last, and Sherry took her into his arms, but he hardly had time to kiss her once before Consuelo interfered. Mansfield turned his back, John Miro used better judgment—recognized the symptoms—knew that Consuelo's wrath had left her half-hysterical. She would be trying to scratch Sherry's eyes out in a minute. He stepped between them, and stood smiling down at Jacqueline.

"There's a point we've not explained yet," he said kindly. "You surely knew I live in San Francisco, Jacqueline?"

She nodded, just a little proudly.

"D'you mind saying why you didn't appeal to me at once for help?"

"How could I, Mr. Miro? You and Desmio. I could not appeal to Desmio's enemy."

John Miro laughed. "His enemy?" he answered. "Jacqueline, I loved the man! He and I were boys together. I knew him too well and intimately not to love him. The dear, old dignified Don Quixote! The only thing we ever quarreled over was my advertising, and at that it was he who quarreled with me, not I with him. I would have crossed the continent at any time for the sheer delight of shaking hands with him."

"But, Mr. Miro, I thought—you must have thought—that —that Desmio and I conspired to do you out of the estates. If he had married me—"

"My dear girl, I never wanted your potato patch! I wouldn't know what to do with it. It's yours by every moral right."

"But the trust deed, Mr. Miro—"

"All that ever needed was my signature," he answered. "Andres could have had it for the asking. The first thing I did after attending Andres' funeral was to interview his lawyer Curtis Radcliffe. You'll find your estates are in Radcliffe's keeping. As I told Radcliffe, and repeat to you, whatever Andres wished to do with his estates is law as far as I'm concerned. We'll terminate the Miro trust deed just as soon as Radcliffe submits the papers for my signature."

"But—but there's Donna Isabella."

"No. She's dead. I rather think I personally killed her. No, don't look shocked—perhaps I claim more credit than is due me. I told her she was a snob, and it seems that nobody ever thought of telling her the truth before. She took to her bed that afternoon, and died yesterday."

Jacqueline felt genuinely sorry. She would much rather have endured Donna Isabella's vinegary enmity for the rest of her life than hear of her dying all alone. She knew that Donna Isabella had no friends. Even Consuelo drooped at the news. But Mansfield senior made no pretense to any kind of grief; he strode back across the room and faced John Miro.

"So you're doing that for her?" he said pleasantly. "She'll not be penniless, eh?"

"Not by a million or so," said Miro. "Maybe several million. I don't know the figures."

"Well—Sherry will have the Tribune. That means at least as much for him."

"Don't forget," Miro answered, smiling, "that will be my doing too! I would have smashed the Tribune, and you with it, if—"

"Here—shake hands and shut up prodding me" said Mansfield. "And give me one of your cigars; you drove that infernal car of yours so fast over the bumps that I broke all mine. Are you sleepy? It's nearly morning. Let's go out and hear the birds wake."

They walked out together, smoking. Consuelo, swallowing something in her throat, went into the room where Dad Lawrence was watching Wahl.

"Good woman, that," said Mansfield. "I was half-afraid, though, she'd stay in there and fight with Sherry. These two kids are best left alone now, to settle it between themselves."

"They won't have very long," said Miro. "I'm expecting some one."

"You are?"

"Yes. I used the telephone before I called on you at the Tribune office."

Mansfield turned on him sharply. "Not reporters from the other papers!"

"Wait and see. That's a car coming now."

It was a closed car that came much more slowly than Miro's had done, but which none the less seemed in a hurry. A face framed in white in the window looked almost ghostly in the dim light from the cabin windows—the face of some one who leaned forward, strained and anxious. Miro strode up to the car as it swung in through the gate and stopped. A woman stepped out as he opened the door for her, and another followed.

"You have found her?" she asked quickly.

Miro nodded

"Is she—?"

It was Mansfield, striding out of the shadow behind Miro, who interrupted.

"You—Joan?" he exclaimed.

She looked startled, but recovered instantly. "I came to see Jacqueline," she said firmly.

"Some mistake," said Miro. "This is—pardon me—Mr. Mansfield—Sister Michaela."

"Thanks," answered Mansfield, "I know my wife's sister. She was Joan Sherwood before she took vows. Joan—how's Sherry's mother? Do you ever hear from Clara?"

Her gray eyes looked straight back at him, and there was a pause before she answered:

"I came to save Jacqueline from Clara's fate!"

Mansfield scowled. "Isn't that man she ran away with kind to her?"

"He was, John."

"Was?" He looked puzzled.

"Was. He bore the blame you turned on him. They were neither of them guilty."

"Why didn't she come back to me then?" he demanded.

"How could she! You were too cruel. You divorced her. You spared her nothing. You and the newspapers were merciless. She was hounded. The notoriety was more than she could bear. She went away."

"Where?"

"Where you will not find her."

"My God! You mean—"

"I mean, she saved Sherry all she could. She changed her name—tried to hide—struggled, and then—I have a message from her for Sherry."

"He's in the cabin. Give it to him," said Mansfield, and stood staring down the road.

She turned to Miro and he led the way up the cabin steps, holding the door open for her. She paused on the threshold. Dad Lawrence was standing in the door of the room where they had laid Wahl, and from behind him came the weak voice of a man in delirium, raving:

"Takes to the woods—that's a hot one! Caught with Sherry Mansfield —uses scalding water! Get that Chief? Go to it, man! Get to the phone—"

Sherry and Dad—and Dad was not dry-eyed—were watching Jacqueline. Her hand was on Consuelo's shoulder. Consuelo knelt beside her, choking with sobs, her head on her beloved's lap.

"Oh, honey—"

"You old dear! Consuelo, you dear, faithful friend! I've brought all this on you, and you've had much the worst of it. But I love you, Consuelo. And we're going back, dear, to Louisiana—and you shall always be with us —and you shall sit in the patio all day long—and boss the niggers,—and—and be just as good and kind to Sherry as you've always been to me. Will you do that? Will you promise?"

"Honey, dear—"

THE END

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