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Cordelia's Triumph Was Complete

CORDELIA THE MAGNIFICENT

BY
LEROY SCOTT



NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
1923

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To
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CORDELIA THE MAGNIFICENT

CHAPTER I

CORDELIA FACES A PROBLEM

THE four young women at the table in their secluded corner, all about twenty-two or twenty-three, made a group such as any illustrated Sunday supplement of a New York paper would have been exultantly proud to have starred in the every center of its page of society beauties. Small wonder, then, that the people at the other tables in the big restaurant of the Grantham Hotel stole glances at these four favorites of fortune, pointed them out to friends less well informed and gave gossipy facts in eager, subdued whispers.

They had known each other all their lives had these four, said the gossipy whispers; had gone to the same school; had been *débutantes* in the same season; had always done everything together. That one there, the vivid, sparkling beauty with glinting, reddish-brown hair and with that pleasant, confident smile which showed that she was equal to anything—that was Miss Cordelia Marlowe, best known of the four, the most striking figure in society's youngest set. Didn't she really look everything that people and the papers said of her?—didn't she look that name which had somehow fastened itself to her, "Cordelia the Magnificent?" Just look at her! Didn't she?

The others? That spirited brunette across from her was Mrs. Jacqueline Thorndike, whose smart wedding two years before to Murray Thorndike was still being talked about. And that vivacious little blonde was Mrs. Ailine Harkness,

whose husband was that Peter Harkness who was just now making a sensational splurge down in Wall Street. And that proud-looking girl—if she were arrogant, wouldn't any girl be so in her position?—was Miss Gladys Norworth, an orphan these many years, and in her own right the richest girl of the group, and one of the richest heiresses in America.

But the one to look at was Miss Marlowe. Wasn't she a beauty? And just looking at her, couldn't you just see why she was so popular?—so undeniably a leader in her own brilliant set? . . .

Cordelia sensed very well the substance of what these tables were whispering about her. She was accustomed to being admired, to being talked about; not only by a mixed crowd such as filled the Grantham, but by her own great world. Though the good-humored smile of her oft-pictured face did not change under this present admiration, the face of her mind puckered into a wry, twisted smile at the irony of the situation. How very differently these people—and all the people who knew her or knew of her—would talk when they learned all the facts!

That morning, when the thing was fresh upon her, Cordelia's dazed impulse had been all for breaking this luncheon engagement; Jackie, Gladys and Ailine, even though they had long looked upon her as their leader, could easily have handled all matters relating to the fifth reunion of the class of '16 of fashionable Harcourt Hall. But Cordelia had wanted to see Jackie, her room-mate at school and closest friend during the years since then, and tell Jackie confidentially the stupefying, the unbelievable thing that had just befallen her. And being here—such was her control of herself—she was outwardly the charming, humorous, pleasantly confident Cordelia her friends had always known.

All through the luncheon the four girls—nicknamed in their first year at Harcourt the "Faithful Four"—had chattered about this and that, interrupting each other with the license of old friends. But it was not until after the finger-bowls were before them that they really settled to the business that had brought them together.

"Of course the biggest thing we've got to do is to pick the chairman for the class reunion," said Jackie Thorndike. "We know the person we want, and the person the whole class will want. Cordie Marlowe. And she's practically promised to serve. We're all agreed on that—yes?"

"Of course," said pretty Ailine Harkness. "The class would be sore at us if we dared pick any one else."

"Cordie, of course," agreed Gladys Norworth.

"Then that's all settled," declared the brisk Jackie. "And since that's about all the real business we have—"

"I'm afraid it's not settled," drawlingly interrupted Cordelia. "I suppose I should have told you before, but I didn't know the thing myself much before this. The fact is, I'm not going to be at the reunion."

"Not be there!" the three chorused in dismay. Then Jackie demanded: "What's the matter, Cordie? Why not?"

Cordelia's good-humored, ready smile did not change—except that there was now a provoking hint of mystery in it.

"I've suddenly changed all my plans," she answered.

"Changed your plans!" cried Ailine. "How?"

"I'm not telling just now," said Cordelia still smiling. "You'll all know all about my plans in a few days. Wait till then."

"You must have something big on!" breathed Jacqueline.

They did not question her further; they knew from old that there was no use quizzing Cordelia when she had an-

nounced she would give no answers. But they sensed mystery here—perhaps romance—certainly something big, as Jackie had said—certainly a surprise. Cordelia read what was passing in their minds, and again she smiled her wry inner smile. They would be surprised, all right—but what a different surprise from anything they might be imagining!

“But I say, Cordie,” Gladys Norworth burst out in sudden concern, “you promised to come out to my place right after the class reunion and stay for the summer! Your new plan isn’t going to interfere with that?”

“I’m sorry, Gladys. But I’ll have to call that visit off altogether.”

“But, Cordie, when I’d planned—! What is it, anyhow, that you’re up to?”

Cordelia was still smiling. “It’s just as I said, Gladys. I can’t say any more just now—and you’ll know everything in a few days.”

There was a moment of surprised silence on the part of Jackie and Ailine. Gladys having asked Cordelia out to Rolling Meadows, and Cordelia having accepted! Here was something else to wonder about!

There was no further questioning of the smiling, enigmatical Cordelia about her altered plans; and the business of the committee of the fifth reunion of the class of '16 of Harcourt Hall went on and was quickly finished. The matter of the chairman was settled by the insistence that Cordelia accept the nominal chairmanship, with Jackie as vice-chairman who would be prepared to assume all duties in case Cordelia really could not appear. Gladys and Ailine then departed on shopping expeditions, and at last Cordelia had her wish of being alone with Jackie.

“You’ve certainly sprung a lot of surprises on us, Cordie, old dear,” began Jackie. “You needn’t tell me a thing you

don't want to—particularly about your changed plans. But Gladys asking you to come out to that big place of hers, that was certainly a jolt! Why, since she came back from France two years ago with her step-sister and that French war orphan the two of them adopted, Gladys hasn't had a soul out to see her!"

"That's exactly why she asked me," returned Cordelia. "I don't know all Gladys' reasons, of course. She said her keeping to herself so much since she came back from France was the effect on her of her two or three years of war work in the hospital of that Countess de Crecy."

"So that's it! The way she's herded to herself and behaved generally has had me guessing—had all of us guessing."

"Gladys said she now believed that her keeping out of things had been bad for her, and from now on she was going to entertain a lot. She put it up to me as a favor, and said she wanted me out at Rolling Meadows to help put life into things."

"She certainly could not have asked any one who could do the thing better!" declared Jackie. "At keeping a lot of guests in proper spirits, you're a world-beater; you're what might be called social insurance, Cordie. And certainly Gladys needs some one, with that awful temper of hers and her conceit—both likely to burst out any time. But her picking you, Cordie!—with her always having been jealous of you, and especially just now with the two of you— I guess I don't have to say that, Cordie."

"I suppose you're referring to Jerry Plimpton?"

"Jerry Plimpton, yes."

"I spoke straight out to Gladys about that when we were all out at your place last week. We'd had a bit of a row, and she'd flared up about Jerry. Just as nice as I could I

told her there was no sense in our fighting about Jerry Plimpton. I said I wasn't saying that I liked Jerry or that she liked Jerry; and if Jerry liked either of us, that was pretty much his own affair and I guessed he'd make up his mind to suit himself. And I told her that if he made up his mind that he liked her, and if she liked him, I'd be right there saying 'God bless you, my children.' I went on and said a lot more things, all along the same line."

"How did Gladys take it?"

"You know how Gladys is. When she has a good impulse, it's as swift as her temper. She broke down. Said she'd always resented me, because people liked me; that's why she's been so nasty. Said she had lots of acquaintances—but no girl friends—not a real girl friend—and how she did need a girl friend she could depend on. It all sounded mighty sincere. That was when she asked me to come and stay with her."

"Perhaps Gladys was sincere—for that moment!" said Jackie skeptically. "But even so, she was unconsciously thinking of little Gladys. And if she wants a real girl friend, one that she can depend on, how about that step-sister of hers? The little I've seen of Esther Stevens, she's always seemed to me a mighty decent sort—and the two used to be getting along together well enough for them to go to Paris the month after Gladys graduated to work in the hospital of that Countess de Crecy."

"I said much the same to Gladys. Her explanation was that there was too much difference in their ages for them to be real friends."

"I don't believe her! Gladys is twenty-two or twenty-three, and her step-sister is only five or six years older. There's some other reason—I'll lay you a little bet on that. And as for you, Cordie—she's asked you out because she

thought she could use you. And I'll bet it all has something to do with Jerry Plimpton!"

Cordelia still wore her smile. "Whatever Gladys' real reasons may have been for asking me, I guess they don't make much difference at present since I'm not going out to visit her."

Suddenly Jackie's hand slipped across the table-cloth and gripped Cordelia's wrist. "Speaking of Jerry Plimpton!" she breathed. "There—coming out of the grill-room!"

Cordelia slightly turned her head. Jerry Plimpton's course lay past their table, but as yet he had not seen them. He was twenty-nine or thirty, tall, well-built, with high-bred, handsome features, easy confidence in his every movement: altogether an outstanding figure in any company. Since the death ten years earlier of his mother, who had admittedly been the social empress of New York City, there had been no more important question to ambitious mothers with queenly daughters than whom Jerry would select as his consort, to try to fill, in her younger way, the place untenanted in society since his mother's death—and likewise fill the great house on upper Fifth Avenue, the Newport house and the other Plimpton places.

Jerry sighted them, and bore down upon their table with an eager smile. The greeting was that of old friends.

"If I didn't have a confounded business engagement with my lawyer," he grumbled pleasantly, "I'd invite myself to sit with you for a while."

"If you did, I'd have to tell you you couldn't stay," returned Cordelia, "for I'm having, right now, a confounded business engagement with Jackie."

His gaze fixed on Cordelia. "That sounds to me like an order to hurry along. All right, Cordelia. But I'll be seeing you to-night out at the Grastons?"

"I'm sorry, Jerry, but I won't be able to make it. I was going to 'phone you."

She had promised him several dances for that night, and his face showed keen disappointment.

"Well—if you can't, you can't. Then I'm not to see you till that little party we've arranged for Friday night?"

"I'll not be able to make that either, Jerry. I've just changed all my plans."

"Changed your plans!" he exclaimed. "In what way?"

She regarded him with her same easy, unperturbed smile. "I can't tell you just yet, Jerry. But you'll know all in a few days."

Puzzled, Jerry went on his way.

"You should have seen how the people in here were looking at you and Jerry while you were talking," whispered Jackie. "All of them, including me, were saying just one thing: 'What a stunning couple they'll make!' I'm backing you with all I've got against Gladys."

"And I, if I had anything to bet," returned Cordelia, "would put it all on Gladys."

Jackie stared at this. "I wish those few days you mentioned were over, so I could know what all this business is about!"

"You won't have to wait, Jackie. My chief reason for coming here to-day was to get the chance to tell you at once what it's all about."

Despite the privacy of their corner table, Jackie leaned far across and gazed breathlessly at her old room-mate.

"Yes?" she whispered.

"You must promise not to repeat a word of what I tell, until it all becomes public."

"You can count on my promise, Cordie."

"Here goes then. First of all, so you'll understand the

full meaning of the thing, I'd better remind you how poor we are. These last ten years, since father's death, mother has had a mighty hard time to keep things going with Lily and me on her hands, and only a little over thirty thousand a year to do it all on. As for that, I guess things weren't a lot better when my father was alive, or even in my grandfather's day. We Marlowes never did have much money."

"Everybody knows you haven't much money, Cordie. That doesn't make any difference with such a family as the Marlowes. It's enough for us all that you're just Cordelia Marlowe! There's not another girl who has your standing—your popularity—who gets the invitations you do!"

Cordelia smiled wryly, half humorously. "Perhaps you've never guessed it, Jackie, but my popularity has been part of my capital, those invitations a large part of my income. A week-end party, a yachting party, a guest at this house for a week, at that house for a month; I'm always booked up. I'm a successful guest, and I work hard at being a guest; that's been my business."

"Don't talk like that, Cordie! Every one's always tickled to get you!"

"I suppose they have been. At least, I've tried to please. But if I hadn't taken my living expenses off mother's hands in this way, I don't see how mother could have managed at all these last five years. So much for that. Now to come to the present situation. Here it is all at once, Jackie. We're wiped out, Jackie—utterly finished!"

"Finished?" echoed Jackie. "In what way?"

"In every way."

"You mean especially—especially money?"

"If we haven't any money at all—well, I guess money includes everything, doesn't it?"

"Cordie! . . . How did it happen?"

"No use bothering you with many details. It's a common story, anyhow; I'll bet that never before did so many families go on the rocks as in this awful year of Our Lord 1921. I didn't know anything about our mess till last night; then mother and I had a long session, and she told me some things she'd been keeping from me. With the high prices since the War she found it harder and harder to live on our income. Result, she kept drawing on her capital by selling off bonds. Result of this was that the income from her remaining bonds was so inadequate as to make her feel they were hardly worth keeping. She saw only one chance. Desperate, she decided to sell the bonds and speculate. Mother picked out oil, and—everything's gone."

"Everything, Cordie?"

"Everything except a twenty-five-hundred-dollar annuity from one of my father's life-insurance policies. Mother said she'd tried to borrow; but nobody, not even old friends, would loan in such hard times without the best security, and of course we haven't that."

"I'll loan you money, Cordie!"

"Thanks! You're a dear, Jackie! If it were a small amount, I'd take you up. But nothing less than thirty thousand, and thirty thousand every year, would be worth while. I wouldn't take that much from you, even if you could spare it."

"Cordie—Cordie—what will it mean?"

"Isn't that pretty plain? As my mother put it last night, 'It means that the Marlowes, one of the best families for generations, must necessarily sink out of their world into poverty and dingy obscurity.' I'm sorriest for Lily; she's only fifteen and was to have entered Harcourt Hall in September; but now Lily will never have a chance. As for myself—well, now you see why I can't be chairman of our class

reunion—why I'm not going out to Gladys Norworth's—why I'd back Gladys against myself so far as Jerry Plimpton is concerned. I'm out of my old world, out of your world, out of their world—out of it forever."

"Cordie!" breathed the dazed Jackie. "Cordie! . . . My God!"

Cordie still tried to smile into Jackie's staring face. But none the less she was feeling something of the poignant dismay that had pierced her and dazed her when her mother had broken the news of the family disaster. She knew no other world except this into which she had been born; she loved it; and now she had lost it! She had indeed been a social star; and now all that glory was lost! She liked Jerry; subconsciously all her important plans had been basing themselves upon the growing possibility of being Mrs. Jerry Plimpton and of having the splendid position that would belong to his wife; and now she was out of his world, their paths would never cross—now all that was lost!

"I guess you realize now what it means, Jackie," Cordelia said mechanically. Then she added: "The only reason for keeping the thing secret is my mother's wish. She feels the disgrace, and is crazy to avoid it. Mother said that since the rent for our apartment is paid in advance until the first of July, it will be cheaper for us to live on there than any place else. She hopes there may be some kind of a chance that something may still turn up, and if something does then the world need never know what's happened. She wants to keep the thing quiet, on that chance."

Jackie nodded. "But you, Cordie!—what are you going to do?"

"I've thought it all out, and the only thing is for me to go to work."

"Work!" Jackie was scarcely less horrified and sym-

pathetic than at Cordelia's original announcement. "Cordelia Marlowe—go to work!"

And then Jackie's face lit up. "It might not be so bad after all, Cordie. It's something new—it might be an awful lark! What're you going to do?"

"That's what I've been wondering about—though I've not yet had time to do any real thinking."

"I'll tell you what," Jackie cried inspiredly. "Let's have a look at the want columns of a newspaper. They tell me one can find everything in these want ads."

For the moment the vivacious Jackie had forgotten the seriousness of the situation and was seeing the affair as an exciting adventure into an unknown country. So when the waiter set down Cordelia's iced tea and her own horse's-neck, she ordered him to bring in a newspaper. Jackie quickly swallowed two inches from her tall glass: "A little something from the hip will pep this Volstead stuff up so I can do some heavy thinking," she whispered, and drew a silver flask from her hand-bag and filled her glass to the brim. This she stirred with a long spoon, and sipped her reinforced beverage. "Ah, that's something like!" she sighed. "Somehow my booze tastes a lot better these days since they've told me I can't have it."

The waiter returned with a newspaper and the next moment the two of them were scanning the columns headed, "Help Wanted—Female." They finished these pleas for assistance, and regarded each other glumly. It was Jackie who spoke the thought of each.

"How monotonous! Nothing wanted but cooks, maids, scrubwomen, nurse-maids, stenographers—and still more cooks and maids. Not a thing that's in your line."

"No."

Simultaneously their eyes fell upon an adjoining heading

"Positions Wanted—Female." Again Jackie had an inspiration.

"I say, Cordie—why don't you put in a want ad for a position? Miss Harcourt was always saying you were the best Harcourt Hall ever turned out."

"That might be just the thing!" exclaimed Cordelia. Then she asked: "Advertising to do what?"

"Well—um—well—you're a wonderful dancer, you know."

"But not good enough to be a professional on the stage. And I don't know how to be a teacher. And I don't think I'd like to be one, either."

"Well—there's your swimming."

"Same answer, Jackie."

"I don't know any girl who can sail a boat better than you."

"Same answer again."

"There's your tennis. Don't some tennis clubs have professionals, the same as golf clubs?"

"Not women professionals. There's no money in tennis for me."

"You're a regular wiz at driving a car. I've been in your roadster when you were coaxing over ninety an hour out of it."

"How much demand is there for a woman chauffeur—or should I say chauffeuse? And with my record for arrests, who would take me on as a careful family driver?"

"Well"— But here Jackie came to a pause.

"I guess you get all of my situation now, Jackie."

"Yes," Jackie said slowly. "You're broke, and you've got to earn money. You've got every accomplishment, but you can't do a damned thing that's useful—not a damned thing that you can sell!"

"That's exactly my situation, Jackie. And as you just said, Miss Harcourt used to call me Harcourt Hall's best!"

The two looked at each other solemnly, even glumly, for a long moment. Then a smile started on Jackie's piquant face, and slowly became a challenging grin.

"What's up now, Jackie?"

"I dare you to do it?"

"Do what?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Cordie, we've been following the wrong line!"

"How?"

"In trying to compete with these people." Jackie excitedly tapped the want columns. "They all either want to buy or sell the commonplace, the useful. What are some people often most eager to get and pay big money for? Uncommon things that are not useful. Diamonds, for instance! Beginning to get the idea?"

"I'm beginning to get excited. Go on!"

"Don't advertise yourself as a lump of coal. Advertise yourself as a diamond. There's my idea. I dare you!"

A reckless gleam had flashed into Cordelia's eyes, and she laughed. Into the two girls had come the spirit of old. Again they were a couple of wild, harum-scarum girls hatching an escapade at Miss Harcourt's.

"I'll not back down on a dare!" cried Cordelia. "I'll advertise, but I'll tell the exact truth!"

"The more truth the better! We'll not waste any time getting busy on this. Here, use the ads in this paper as a sample, and dictate to me. I'll write the thing on the back of this menu card. I'm all set—now shoot."

Laughing at the absurdity, the dare-deviltry of the enterprise—so much akin in spirit was the thing to one of their schoolday larks—Cordelia began to dictate. After elabora-

tion, condensation, revision, and frequent reference to the newspaper for the proper form, the completed want ad on the back of the menu card read as follows:

AMERICAN GIRL, 23, strong, considered good-looking. Best social standing. Expert at swimming, riding, tennis, dancing, and can drive racing car. Has other accomplishments, but no useful training. Desires position with adequate remuneration. What have you to offer her?

Jackie summoned the waiter and paid the bill. "Just so you won't have a chance to renege, Cordie, I'm going to take this right over to the *Times* and pay for it. Come on."

Laughing, Cordelia followed Jackie out of the hotel and over to the *Times* office, where Jackie copied the advertisement upon the blank provided and handed it in. The clerk counted the words, added "R 113 *Times*," and handed Jackie a slip of paper. This Jackie gave to Cordelia.

"There's your lottery ticket, old dear—R 113. Sounds like a lucky number. The clerk said you might have a bunch of replies by Wednesday morning. You must tell me what happens."

"Jackie, you dear fool you—nothing is going to happen!"

"You just wait and see!" prophesied Jackie.

But even Jackie did not guess what a good prophet she was.

CHAPTER II

THE MAKING OF CORDELIA

SINCE this history is primarily a record of a brief period in the life of Cordelia Marlowe, then to understand the striking, gay, impulsive, confident creature that Cordelia was at twenty-three, one must be equipped with some further knowledge of her family and of Cordelia's history. The Marlowes were for generations one of the bluest families in that unnumbered group which tradition has baptized under the numerical name of The Four Hundred. The family had once upon a time been wealthy, though the Marlowes had never been wealthy upon the scale by which present fortunes are considered. The later males of the Marlowe family, however, had lacked the ability to retain what the earlier Marlowes had acquired, though there had always been sufficient to maintain the family name as one of the best in New York City. But Cordelia's thoroughly likeable father, that almost famous polo player, had in an even greater degree than any of his forbears the gift of letting money slip through his hands; so that when a galloping pony stumbled with him, and he was picked up dying—this was when Cordelia was twelve—the lawyers had to report to his widow that the estate had almost passed out of existence with its last proprietor.

There was something left, however, and Bernice Marlowe, who had always had everything, saw no reason why she should not still have everything, or at least the appearance of

everything. There followed great internal economies, of course, and some borrowing: of which affairs it was not the world's business to have any knowledge. So the long-legged Cordelia was kept on at her very exclusive private school (Lily, eight years younger, was as yet no such economic problem); after which, as parents who are somebody do with their daughters and as also do parents of recent wealth who want to be somebody, Cordelia was sent at fourteen to one of the hundreds of girls' finishing schools which find the vicinage of New York a rich soil for their growth and prosperity.

Harcourt Hall was of course one of the most, if not actually the most, exclusive of these schools. Miss Harcourt, for the prestige of her establishment, tactfully did her very best to restrict her enrolment to girls who came from families of established social position. Miss Harcourt recognized and deplored the growing fact—she never saw the fact in the light of a social phenomenon of American life with consequent social problems—that never before were there so many Americans with new-made fortunes, and never so many new families who were trying to promote their daughters to higher social spheres by sending them to schools where they might mix and establish valuable relations with the daughters of the socially elect. This practice was abhorrent to Miss Harcourt, and it may be said to the credit of her watchfulness that few indeed were the upstarts who escaped her scrutiny and got within her walls to soil her carefully chosen group and mount ambition-ward upon them.

Harcourt Hall sits in withdrawn dignity upon one of Long Island's main highways, some thirty miles out of New York City. To the neighbors, to motorists who pass and repass it, to the members of the *nouveau riche* who would enter, it offers to the eye no more than a long stretch of high brick wall, a lofty pair of wrought iron gates with a porter's lodge

on guard beside them. Watchful observers see these gates swing open only when big cars with liveried chauffeurs come on Friday afternoon to whisk away young ladies, and then return these young ladies Sunday night or Monday morning; or when of an afternoon, the day's toil done, the gates emit a speedster with a girl at its wheel—on some afternoons several such cars—on the errand of clearing away the cobwebs of study by racing against the winds of Long Island.

To the initiate, there is presented a very different view: a park that is carpeted by meticulously shorn lawn; ribboned with drives of white gravel that curve in and out among noble elms and glistening copper beeches. In the heart of this splendid seclusion sit three spacious buildings of closely related architecture, for all are of red brick and their trim of white woodwork has something of the majesty of the colonial: the Gymnasium, the Dormitory, and the Administration Building, the latter containing most of the class rooms and the office of Miss Harcourt, whose sanctum is finished with a rich austerity as might have been the room of a not too unworldly abbess.

It was a wonderful place, Harcourt Hall. It taught a girl sureness of herself, the proper manner to carry herself through the great world.

At Harcourt Hall Cordelia shone, but not because of excellence in her studies. While the curriculum of Harcourt Hall as published in the elaborate year book was rather extensive, even including business courses which none of the girls took, regular application to study was not required. Miss Harcourt was very considerate in this respect; it was enough if her dear charges did just as much work as they wanted to—their careers were to be those of ladies.

Cordelia had a jolly time during her four years at this

model school for young ladies, which has so many duplicates and imitations teaching their tens of thousands of girls the ways of gentility. She was popular not only with the other girls, but with the very proper Miss Harcourt, whose invariable wear was black silk, and who might have been of almost any year above forty-five, for Miss Harcourt knew all the secrets of preserving the appearance of an imposing middle age. Miss Harcourt fully realized that Cordelia was not rich as the other girls were rich; but then Cordelia had tremendous "family," and was in every way an ornament to the school.

"My dear, I am just sending off the very best report to your mother," she said in her grand dame manner in Cordelia's last year. "You are one girl—I may say *the girl*—Harcourt Hall will always be proud of!"

And indeed, when Cordelia graduated, which was when she was eighteen, she was easily the star of Harcourt Hall. She was the school's star at swimming, tennis, riding, and basket-ball. Also she drove a car with the daring if not with quite the skill of a professional racing driver; she knew the periods when the traffic officers were off duty, and so could let her car out with the minimum danger of arrest. Also she was an instinctive dancer—"a love of a dancer" the girls called her. And very incidentally she knew enough of the modest academic requirements of Harcourt Hall to graduate not quite at the bottom of her class. Ailine Harkness ranked next below her, and both Gladys Norworth and Jackie Thorndike had too much money and standing not to be given their diplomas.

Cordelia's début a year afterwards at Sherry's (then an institution, and not as now a memory), though modest as to cost, was everything it should have been as to its appointments, and the best people were present. Her mother had

carefully seen to these matters. After her *début*, Cordelia's mother patiently and in silence waited for her to marry any one of the several nice rich young men who paid her court. Cordelia would swim with any of them, and out-swim them; play tennis with any of them, and give any of them a man's game; and would dance with any of them or all of them till morning. But not one of them would she marry. She got rather bored with saying "No," though always she felt genuinely sorry for the perfectly tailored, heart-broken young men she had to say it to.

During the year and a half America fought in the Great War, Cordelia, of course, threw herself into the work of entertaining the untrained soldiers encamped near New York, as did most of the girls of her set. This was most exciting—the boys in their blanket-fitting uniforms were such dears! What the young fellows liked best was to have her drive them about; and at times her imported sports car—she still drove the same smart racer—scuttling through country roads, could scarcely be seen because of the very large portion of the American Expeditionary Army which was attempting to adhere to it. But presently the War was over, the soldiers were demobilized, and Cordelia declared peace (though the official government was less prompt) and turned to other matters.

When some two or three years had thus been spent in war-relief work, and in having a good time socially, and in being a brilliant sportswoman, and in rejecting proposals (Jerry Plimpton had not as yet developed into a serious consideration), and when at the end of this period Cordelia was still unwed and even unbetrothed, her mother at last lost something of the patience she had been exercising with such difficulty. Mrs. Marlowe, with affectionate, deprecatory insistence, demanded that Cordelia marry one of the several de-

sirable suitors, and backed up this demand by revealing something of the Marlowe financial circumstances, which until then she had protectingly withheld. Thirty thousand a year—they'd been reduced to that, and the strain of making ends meet on that figure—well, Mrs. Marlowe simply could not stand it much longer! Cordelia was sorry about the finances; she would do her best to keep down her expenses; but she was not ready to marry. Perhaps a little later she might: almost any time a man might come along whom she really loved.

Cordelia had never known any sort of life but this which she lived, and it simply did not enter her consciousness that any other sort of life was possible. But after this talk with her mother Cordelia did all she saw practical to reduce expenses. There are innumerable ways of living cheaply, and at the same time appearing to live otherwise, which are open secrets to many women of Cordelia's world, and likewise to many men. Of course the Park Avenue apartment meant cash; nine thousand a year. But though Cordelia always looked smart, she managed so that her clothes cost as little as possible, and she managed so that her food cost her, in cash, nothing at all. There was always a luncheon party, a dinner party, a week-end party, a yachting party; as she had told Jackie, she was a guest at this big house for a week, at that big house for a month; there was hardly ever an empty hour in her engagement book. She was welcome everywhere, sought for on all sides. She was so clever, she instinctively put life into the other guests, she was so good at every sport—and what counted most of all with the women, though she was immensely popular with the men, she lacked utterly the instinct to take another woman's man away from her or to monopolize male attention. She was a brilliantly successful guest. She worked hard at being a

guest, and so spontaneous were all her social expressions that she worked without ever knowing she was working.

Such was Cordelia Marlowe, made what she was by birth, home traditions, school training, and the practices of the world into which she had naturally been projected: distinctly herself, altogether different, yet in many ways typical of the ten thousand plus, or hundred thousand plus, other girls turned out by Harcourt Hall and its peers and its struggling imitations. . . .

"Magnificent" became attached to Cordelia's name in much the way that most of the nicknames of every-day life and the more formal sobriquets of history become attached to their owners: through some minor incident—through the color of the hair, size of body, a limp, a crooked back, a terrible temper, a splendid manner.

In Cordelia's case it had been her manner. Her very handsome and very popular father, when she was newly born, had paid her only the casual attention which is the common attitude of fathers until their offspring begin to emerge from that mere generalization which is infancy into an individuality of their own; besides, during those early days, Mr. Marlowe was either very busy practising to make the American Polo Team, or as equally busy at some of his various clubs, discussing America's chance of bringing back the cup from England. But when Cordelia was between one and two, and her father had failed to make the team—he was a brilliant performer, but he liked his whiskey and the good-fellowship of his clubs too well to be a dependable player—he began to take more adequate notice of his first-born. Already, he noted, she had the true Marlowe air; the air which had made him so popular, made him accepted as a leader among his fellows: an air composed of genuine good-nature, pleasantly imperious self-confidence, an implicit

belief that of course she was going to have her own way and that, of course, her way was the best way. "A true Marlowe!" he ejaculated proudly. "God—but she's a magnificent child! Magnificent!"

He liked that word "magnificent." In his pride as a Marlowe, in his new pride as a father, it seemed to him that "magnificent" exactly hit off his daughter; the word had a fine flavor upon the tongue, and he used it again and again. Like so many chance words, chance phrases repeatedly uttered by fond parents over their young, this word adhered to Cordelia. It remained with her through childhood; through her school days; and even through the years that followed—though the father who had bestowed it had then long been resting under a very handsome monument. Her father had been quite right: she had the manner, the dash, to carry off the word. Nowadays in her young maturity the word, whenever it was used, was used lightly and half-humorously; but never with irony or contempt as might have been the case had Cordelia herself taken the word too seriously. She seemed to regard it as an inescapable but good-natured jest, trailing her from her childhood. Most people, however, in their hearts, seriously believed Cordelia deserved the title; and down in her own heart of hearts, Cordelia was inclined to believe the same.

Physically, this title seemed a garment made for her. She was above the middle height, was strongly and splendidly built, and withal was rarely light and graceful. And her face deserved the attention that the photogravure section of the Sunday papers had for years been giving it: regular in its dark beauty, but with an aliveness of mind and spirit, with a high good-natured confidence, which removed all danger of that monotony which so often is the fatal accompaniment of beautiful facial regularity: the kind

of vital, sparkling beauty that is most properly crowned with just such glinting reddish-brown hair as was hers.

She would hardly have been normal or human had she not privately believed in this appellation of her childhood. She had always been a brilliant star, and popular as such even among her girl friends; she had never faced a situation which she had not carried off with ease.

That is, not until this situation had arisen which she had just outlined to Jackie Thorndike.

CHAPTER III

HOW IT PAID TO ADVERTISE

WHEN Cordelia and Jackie parted, Cordelia drove her smart roadster to the Marlowe apartment on Park Avenue, still humorously regarding her want advertisement as an absurd adventure. But beneath this amusement at herself there was a very real excited expectation. Who knew?—indeed something might happen!

However, the following morning, her mood was to discount entirely the humor and the expectation of her advertisement. The thing was just a bit of folly of two extremely foolish girls.

Her eyes fell upon a stack of unopened envelopes on her writing desk, and in Cordelia's mood those envelopes seemed the concrete symbol of her present situation—indeed the chief and bitter fact of the Marlowes' existence. They were bills. Some were more than bills: were duns, even threats of action if there should not be prompt payment upon account. The first of every month saw just such a stack. Bills—forever bills. Cordelia sighed. That was life's direst tragedy—meeting bills!

She forced her thoughts to her more immediate problem, making a living, and tried to consider it practically. But Cordelia knew no more about the practicalities of earning money than if she were the daughter of some distant planet blissfully exempt from toil. She knew that the young women who waited on her in the shops, and the young

women she had seen entering office buildings, must be paid for their work, and in the first instance must have used some method of gaining their positions; but how much they were paid, and how they secured their places, she could not even guess. She considered many kinds of possible work, and out of the great number of undesirable possibilities, she tentatively decided that a private secretaryship might be the least undesirable. But she had to have information. Information was something Jerry Plimpton might be able to give her.

"I've just had a letter from an umpty-seventh cousin, Jerry," she was presently saying over the telephone. "The girl wants to come to New York to be a private secretary. How much is a private secretary paid?"

"From nothing up to fifteen or twenty thousand a year. How good is she?"

"I don't know. Suppose she's just fair."

"A girl has got to be mighty skilful and reliable to get as much as thirty a week."

"Perhaps she doesn't know anything. What's the best way to start in?"

"Tell her to go to a good business school, and then get experience with any decent concern that will give her a chance. But how about this evening, Cordie? Won't you let me—"

Cordelia evaded the invitation. Thirty dollars a week! But thirty dollars a week, considered merely as thirty dollars, had no meaning to Cordelia. Obviously its meaning had to be expressed in terms of what it would buy. Board and lodging for instance. She had to know about this.

Half an hour later Cordelia was in a house over in the West Seventies, the address of which she had found in a newspaper under the heading "Boarders Wanted." Mrs.

Gregory led her up two flights, opened a door, and began :

"One of my best rooms. Very private. The bath only two doors down the hall."

To Cordelia the room looked stifflingly small and was stifflingly hot this June day, and she could see little else in it besides an iron bed. Next Mrs. Gregory led her to the dining-room in the front of the basement—a low ceileded dungeon, it seemed to Cordelia—with a view through grilled windows of passing legs all uniformly amputated at the knee.

"How—how much?" Cordelia managed to get out through her muffling handkerchief.

"Only fifteen dollars a week. And the accommodations cannot be equalled at the price in the city."

"Thanks—I'll tell my cousin," murmured Cordelia and hurried out to her roadster and back across Central Park.

Half of her salary for such accommodations! And she wasn't even earning that salary yet!

She drove back to the Park Avenue apartment—her mother had fled the city to visit a distant cousin, taking Lily with her—and spent the rest of that day and most of the night, going over and over her situation. She had to go to work, that was settled; and thirty dollars a week became fixed in her mind as her first economical goal. She simply had to earn at least thirty dollars a week! But how was she going to finance herself until she was able to earn that much—say by learning to be a private secretary?

There was only one way. That was to sell her car; her beautiful imported roadster.

But while she thus planned through the night, a dizzy, nausea seized her every time she thought of her swift and appalling descent from her pleasant, her magnificent world. From her wonderful world, to the dingy, smelly oblivion

of Mrs. Gregory's boarding-house or its kindred! . . .

The next morning, more out of obedience to her implied promise to Jackie than out of any re-awakened expectation, Cordelia went to the advertising office of the *Times* and presented her receipt. Here she had her first great surprise. The clerk handed her a twine-bound packet of what seemed a hundred letters or more.

Her second great surprise came when, locked in her room at home, she tore open the top letter of the parcel, and read:

Dear Little R 113:

Your advertisement listens mighty good to me. Let's get acquainted. You sound like just the girl I've been looking for. Call up the telephone number below, ask for me, and we'll arrange to have a nice little dinner together and size each other up. After that—

Well, if we make a hit with each other I think you'll be satisfied on the point you made about adequate remuneration. I have enough money and you'll find me no tightwad.

Eagerly awaiting your ring.

Cordelia gazed in utter astoundment at this letter. Then, as its obvious meaning penetrated her numbed consciousness, she gave a gasp, went hot all over with rage, and tore the letter to bits. How dared any one so insult her?

Breast heaving, she regarded the pile with horror. Then she forced herself to read another letter—and another—and another. Each she tore up as she read it. With each her horror and her hot rage mounted. They were different from the first only in text: the purpose behind every one was identical.

Cordelia read no more. She simply could not understand the thing! How could she possibly, possibly have laid herself open to such insulting overtures? Then she bethought herself of her advertisement. She had saved a copy of the paper containing it, and this paper she now secured and read the lines she and Jackie had concocted over the tea table. She slowly read the advertisement through two or three times; then she turned as cold as she had been hot. She gasped again, and with a different kind of horror, as she realized the unsuspected significance that existed in the innocent advertisement drawn up by two confident, worldly-wise, yet unworldly-wise young women in a larkish spirit. To men of loose minds the thing of course read like a veiled invitation. And she had written it!

For a space she was of a mind to destroy the rest of the letters unread. But the very fascination of her horror drew her on, and one after another she read some two dozen more. They varied in expression as much as the men might have differed in their physical appearance; some were delicate, some direct, some leering; but every writer had read her advertisement as had her first correspondent.

At length she came upon the following, typed upon heavy expensive paper, the firm's name embossed at the letter's top.

My dear Miss R113:

If you will apply in person, show this letter, and ask to see Mr. Franklin, it is possible that some work may be arranged for you with our firm.

Very truly,

Kedmore and Franklin

Per M. G.

This letter brought her up with a start. Its impersonal formality, its brevity, its typewritten signature, were coldly refreshing after the odious familiarity of the letters which had preceded it. "Kedmore and Franklin"—the name sounded familiar. Who were they? The austere letter-head conveyed no hint of their business. Oh, yes; she remembered now. They were a firm of lawyers. Big lawyers, too, for dimly remembered newspaper accounts connected the firm with many important cases. And, oh, yes—they were the chief counsel in helping Mrs. Henry Arnold win her sensational counter-suit for divorce.

She hesitated. What help could she possibly be to such a firm? Then suddenly she made her decision: they had asked her to come, there would be nothing lost in seeing them. So she locked in her desk the torn heap of repulsive letters, to be more fully destroyed later, and started for the firm's address on lower Broadway.

An express elevator shot her up to the thirtieth floor. Here was an impressive line of doors labeled "Kedmore and Franklin," one of which was marked "Entrance." As she stepped through this door into an outer office of quiet but rich appointments, a young woman of her own age arose from a typewriter and courteously asked how she could serve her.

"I wish to see Mr. Franklin. Please give him this letter."

The young woman passed through a side door, and almost at once returned. "You are to come right in, please."

With her heart in almost painful wonderment as to what she was about to experience, Cordelia followed her guide through another office, which instantly gave an impression of quiet distinction, to a third door which the young woman opened. "You'll find Mr. Franklin waiting," she said.

Cordelia stepped through, and the door closed quietly behind her. Her quick eyes took in a large room of yet more simple distinction than the others, with windows that looked downward upon the whole northern and eastern stretch of the city. A man at the flat-top desk in the center of the room stood up; she saw he held the letter she had sent in to him.

"Will you please have a chair," he invited in a low courteous voice, motioning to a chair beside his desk.

She obeyed, giving him a swift glance. Mr. Franklin was perhaps thirty-five, clean-shaven, quietly but smartly dressed, of athletic build, of easy bearing; he gave her an instant sense that here was a man of power, a man who would achieve great things if he had not already achieved them.

He resumed his chair after she was seated. "And now Miss—Miss"— He gave a start as he now saw her features more clearly. "Pardon me, but I believe I already know you."

"I do not recall ever having seen you before," Cordelia said with some stiffness and in surprise.

"You are correct; we have never met. But I frequently glance at the photogravure sections of the Sunday papers, and no one more frequently appears there than yourself. You are Miss Cordelia Marlowe."

"Yes," Cordelia had to admit. She had planned to use her mother's maiden name, at least temporarily. Now with the admission of her identity she felt with dismay that the possibility of keeping the Marlowe disaster a secret, as her mother wished, was instantly and entirely gone.

"You wrote the advertisement to which this letter refers?"

"Yes."

"Indeed!" He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. "Excuse me just one second, please—a little item I had overlooked."

He pressed a button beneath his desk, though there was a double row of pearl-topped buttons in view beside his telephone, and scribbled upon a pad. He folded this, and apparently waited for some one to appear, meditatively tapping his pencil upon the rich mahogany. But no one entered.

"I guess this other matter will have to wait after all," he remarked, turning his keen, steady, gray eyes again to Cordelia. "Would you mind telling me, Miss Marlowe, just why you wrote that advertisement?"

"The advertisement itself answers that question. I want work."

"But why should Miss Cordelia Marlowe want work?"

"Is my reason important to you? It seems to me that the important consideration is whether I am suitable for any work you may have in mind."

"That is partly correct, Miss Marlowe. But I think you will admit that it is somewhat unusual to have one of the best known young women of New York's smartest set advertising for work—and any sort of work at that. We are a responsible firm, Miss Marlowe, and therefore must necessarily exercise care regarding our personnel. I think you will agree that we are not exceeding our legitimate requirements in wanting to know what prompted so unusual a procedure on your part."

Cordelia had to admit to herself that he was in the right, and she gave a brief account of the family reverses.

"Strange that I hadn't heard of this," mused Mr. Franklin.

"No one has heard as yet."

"No one?"

"No one except my mother, myself, and my best friend, Mrs. Murray Thorndike."

"Do you object to telling me why this misfortune has been kept a secret?"

"It was mother's idea. You see, rent for our apartment is paid in advance, and it will be cheapest to live there for the present. So since we were not compelled to make a change at once, it occurred to my mother that there was a desperate last chance of something turning up which might save us and make it unnecessary for the public ever to know what our predicament had been."

"I see. And if nothing does turn up, what will happen to your mother? How will she feel about it?"

"She's a proud woman, and you know what has always been our family's position. I think you can answer your question for yourself."

"I think I can. And your sister—what will become of her?"

"I don't know. She's the one who will really suffer most, for she will not have had a chance of any kind."

"Thank you for your information," he said quietly. And then after a moment: "Just what did you think you might do for us?"

"I had not thought. My advertisement was plain enough in stating that I could do nothing useful. If you have work for me, it will be for you to decide what I can best do."

Mr. Franklin nodded.

"What sum had you in mind when you mentioned 'adequate remuneration'?"

"I was hoping for something that would pay me thirty dollars a week."

Mr. Franklin slowly shook his head. "At thirty dollars a week I fear we could not use you."

Almost unconsciously, as the conversation had continued, a very eager hope had been growing up in Cordelia. Consequently Mr. Franklin's quiet words had the effect of almost flattening her.

"Why—why," she stammered, "I thought I would be worth at least that much. I don't see how I can live on less." Then, hesitantly: "Twenty-five?"

"We could not use you at twenty-five."

Cordelia stood up dully. "Then I might as well be going. I suppose I should thank your for your kindness in seeing me. Good-bye."

"One moment, please. I am not quite through. Won't you be seated again?"

That even voice had a compelling quality. Cordelia sank back into her chair.

"Since you have already permitted me to be inquisitive relative to your personal affairs, I hope you will answer just one more question. How much a year has it cost you to live? I mean for the entire family, and in the manner in which you have been living."

"I don't know exactly, but around thirty thousand."

"I should say at least thirty thousand, to live the way you were living. And at that you must have found it hard. I have listened to your proposition, Miss Marlowe, and I now ask you to listen to my proposition. My offer to you is thirty thousand a year."

"Thirty thousand!" gasped Cordelia.

"It being expressly understood as part of the agreement, if we do agree," the quiet voice went on, "that you and your family are to continue to live in the exact manner

in which you have been living. There will of course be other conditions."

"Thirty thousand!" repeated the dazed Cordelia. "Thirty thousand—when you wouldn't pay me thirty a week! I don't understand."

"It is very simple. Thirty dollars a week presupposes that you have dropped from your present position, and are just Miss Smith. As Miss Smith you are not worth thirty dollars a week; and besides, you would not particularly interest me for I can get ten thousand Miss Smiths to do the Miss Smith kind of work. But as Miss Cordelia Marlowe, holding your present position, you are not one of ten thousand, you are of a very small number, and as such you are easily worth thirty thousand a year to my firm."

"Doing what?" she inquired.

He shifted slightly, and seemed to be keenly watching the effect of his carefully chosen words upon her. "You must understand that much of our work is of a highly confidential character and is performed for wealthy clients. Many of our clients belong to your own set, or else come in contact with it. Frequently a delicate situation arises, and we must protect our clients' property and honor. We can best do this if we are in a position to secure information other than through our regular channels concerning the conditions which threaten our clients. A person belonging to your set, and moving on terms of intimacy in it, can easily secure bits of information which, added to what we already know, would prove of great value to us."

"Am I to understand that you are proposing that I am to act as a spy upon my friends, and that I then pass on this key-hole information to you?"

She said this in a voice of incredulous indignation. He studied her flushed face a moment before replying.

"That is what I was intimating—yes."

"Then you may get some one else for your work!" She started to rise.

"Please keep your chair, Miss Marlowe. I made that intimation solely for the purpose of testing you. Had you said 'yes,' we could not have used you. We require a person of utmost honor—and if you were a person to sell out your friends, you might also sell out us."

"Well?" she demanded.

"The general nature of the work is much as I have outlined it, but you would be requested to do nothing that would not be pleasing to your honor and good taste. Further, you will have the privilege of refusing to participate in any case that does not appeal to you. As a matter of fact, I believe that most affairs would so engage your sympathy that you will be happy to be of service."

"I don't know," Cordelia said doubtfully.

"The arrangement will obviate all the unpleasant features that would attend your sinking to the level of 'Miss Smith,'" he suggested. "I judge that you are not exactly eager to give up your present position and your present friends?"

"No."

He pressed this point gently but firmly. "Also it would obviate the fate your mother dreads for herself and would solve the problem of your sister."

"Those are good arguments," she said. "But before I can answer I'd like to know what are the other considerations of which you spoke."

"Certainly. We must require that you never let a single soul know the true character of your relations with our

firm. Your explanation for seeing us, if ever an explanation is necessary, is that we are your personal attorneys."

"I understand. What else?"

"You must never let any one know the real source of your income. For the public to learn this would mean that the public had also learned of your family reverses, and that might in some way impair your own and your mother's position. Since the general public does not know what your predicament has been, you need explain nothing to the public—the public will never know the difference. As for your friend, Mrs. Thorndike, tell her your mother's fears were premature and groundless and that all is now well. And as for your mother—"

"Yes, my mother! How will I account for the money to her?"

"She must be kept in ignorance of what you are doing. Here is an instance where we may properly use a bit of deception that you will agree is legitimate. You spoke of your mother having some speculative stock which is worthless. Get that stock into my possession, and I will handle it in some way which will make her believe she has recovered her lost fortune. The money which you earn will then come to you through your mother."

"I see. What are the other conditions?"

"We have covered them all. I am now waiting for your 'yes' or 'no.'"

"I can only say 'yes' to such an offer, especially when it leaves me free to decline any work you may propose. Though," she added, "your proposition doesn't yet seem real to me."

"I am glad you are to be with us," he said. Even now his voice did not alter in its courteous, business-like quality.

"And you will soon find that the proposition is real enough."

"When do you want me to begin? And on what piece of work?"

"I wish you to begin at once, if possible. I have one case in hand in which I am certain you can render the greatest service, but the circumstances are not yet quite ripe for you. May I ask what were your own plans prior to the time your mother gave you her bad news?"

"I had accepted an invitation to visit a school friend, Miss Gladys Norworth. Of course I have canceled it."

"Gladys Norworth!" exclaimed Mr. Franklin. "The great heiress—that Miss Norworth?"

"Yes."

Mr. Franklin's gray eyes held a surprised brightness for a moment, then were as calm as before. "Since I am not quite ready with the case I referred to, I suggest that in the meantime you make your visit with Miss Norworth as originally arranged."

Cordelia blinked at this.

Mr. Franklin hesitated an instant, then continued: "I think it might be well for me to say a little more. Very shortly I would have asked you to go to Miss Norworth's anyhow. Her affairs constitute one of our cases. I think you now begin to see the value that our connection with you will be to us: you have the natural entrée to the kind of people we must keep in touch with."

"Gladys Norworth one of your cases!" exclaimed Cordelia.

"I said her affairs," corrected Mr. Franklin. "Miss Norworth knows nothing of our firm being interested in her, and I wish you to take care not to let her suspect it. If she did, our efforts might be useless. We are confidential counsel to the trustees of her estate. Her trustees believe

something is seriously wrong with her affairs, but they themselves have been baffled as to what it is. That is why they have secretly entrusted us with the matter. We have gained some facts, and have some suspicions, but we have not yet penetrated the mystery. That is what I wish you to do, help us get to the heart of this baffling matter. You will please notice everything, and report every detail to me no matter how unimportant it may seem to you."

"That is exactly what I said I could not do—spy upon my friends."

"I thought we had covered that," Mr. Franklin said patiently. "You are not acting as a spy—at least not in the repugnant sense of the word. You are in reality your friend's protector, though she does not know it, and must not know it. You are really trying to help save your friend. That is something very different, is it not?"

"Yes," Cordelia admitted.

"Then you will go, as soon as arrangements are made?"

"Yes. But would you mind telling me something about the situation?"

"I cannot without a breach of good faith toward the trustees. Besides, there is no need for you to know much; what you need you will learn for yourself. Further, I will very frankly admit I do not understand the thing myself, except that something strange is going on behind the surface. And now, Miss Marlowe, I believe that is everything, except the discussing of financial plans involving your getting into my hands your mother's oil stock."

Thirty minutes later that discussion was over, and Mr. Franklin opened the door for her with a courteous bow. As she shot down the elevator, and walked as in a dream up Broadway, within her was a chaos of wonderment and

thrilling exultation: a whirling chaos that had three chief elements.

This Mr. Franklin, clear-thinking, never hesitant for a word, always courteous—could he possibly be other than the polished gentleman, the discreet repository of other peoples' confidences and worries, that he seemed to be?

What was the strange thing that was going on in Gladys Norworth's affairs? Now that a point had been made of it, it did seem that Gladys for a long time had been behaving oddly. What was she, Cordelia, going to find out? What was going to happen to her?

But more thrilling than either of these thoughts was the change that had come in her fortunes. An hour before she had been a pauper, seeking work at a miserable wage. And now she was her old self again. Her mother was saved—Lily was saved—she was saved! The family position was unchanged; she was to remain up in her own world—the world that loved her, the world she loved! And—and—the world where she and Jerry Plimpton would be meeting as before!

CHAPTER IV

FORTUNE'S OTHER FACE

CORDELIA would have wondered even more had it been possible for her to have remained invisible in Mr. Franklin's office, and thus been able to see and overhear. The moment Mr. Franklin was back in his chair, after seeing Cordelia out, he remarked in a slightly raised voice:

"Come in, Kedmore."

A door at the side of the office opened, and from a little private corridor that led to the adjoining office there stepped forth a stockily built man of perhaps fifty-five with a pinkish bald head. His clothes had doubtless cost as much as Mr. Franklin's, but their wrinkled and baggy appearance suggested that they also served him as pyjamas. Seen in repose he looked a very unimportant figure; but those acquainted with the higher courts of New York knew that, given a case with a woman in it, no matter what its other ingredients, Josiah Kedmore could win that case before the most callous jury ever impaneled. His was the gift of the golden voice, the apposite word, the bugle call to tears.

In the privacy of his partner's company something seemed to have dropped from Mr. Franklin's face: nothing so tangible as a mask—perhaps merely that careful control which was his face's professional attire. At any rate, his features were more alive, expressive; the tow-toned even, persuasive quality of his voice had given place to vibrant incisiveness.

"You got my signal?" Mr. Franklin queried when his partner was in the chair which had so recently held Cordelia.

"Sure!" It was a relaxation to Mr. Kedmore to be in-elegant when the occasion did not require dressed-up English.

"Then you saw her and heard her. What do you think?"

"That she's a peach! Lord, man, I almost passed out when I learned who she was. Cordelia Marlowe! To think of Cordelia Marlowe writing an ad like that—Lord!"

"She's just the kind that would do it. Worldly-wise and self-confident, and because of that as ignorant and easy as they come."

Kedmore nodded his big pink head. "Just so. Lord, if it wasn't for those swell schools, and what they do teach and don't teach the dear girls, and if it wasn't for swell society, and what it does teach and doesn't teach, where the dickens would we poor lawyers be—what? Lord!"

"Then you think she'll do?"

"She'll be a wonder—if you can manage her."

"You saw this afternoon's performance. I was as much surprised as you were when I learned who she was. I never guessed a real society person was behind that ad. Considering my surprise, I think you'll admit I handled her pretty well."

"Yes, that was clever work, Franklin. Damned clever. Lord, yes. But for a minute I thought your foot had slipped."

"When?"

"When you suggested to her that Maggie the Blackmail Queen thing, and she flared up."

"I had to sound her out, didn't I, to find whether she was already of a mind to go in for something of the sort?"

And when I learned she wasn't, I guess you'll admit I made a quick recovery."

"Yes, your mind is quick on its feet. Lightning quick, I'll say. But where did you get that idea, not hesitating a second, of sending her out to that—what's her name?—Gladys Norworth? And our being privately retained by Miss Norworth's trustees to make an investigation of certain matters? How did you come to send her to this Gladys Norworth person? You certainly had me buffaloed, and it still seems a mystery."

"If you listened carefully, you will recall that Miss Marlowe was the first to mention Gladys Norworth. I'd not even thought of Miss Norworth until Miss Marlowe spoke of her invitation to visit Miss Norworth. So I decided to send Miss Marlowe where she already had an invitation. Almost every rich family has a closet with a skeleton or two in it, and I thought Miss Marlowe might as well start with these Norworth people, where she has an opening, as with anybody else. It's all the same to us. Of course I did recall vaguely a few things about the Norworth situation, and that helped. If Miss Marlowe doesn't find the key to the Norworth closet, or if opening the closet she finds no skeleton, then I shift her to some other family. And that's all there is to that mystery."

"Simple as taking a litter of rabbits out of your grandmother's silk hat, after you've been shown how," commented Mr. Kedmore. "You've sure got a brain, Franklin, up where some people only keep a custard pie."

"Thanks. You understand I don't care a damn about this Norworth outfit; that is, not unless something big is turned up there. What I care about is landing a young woman like Miss Marlowe. That's the big thing!"

"Sure, I understand. But, Lord, man, offering her thirty

thousand. That's quite a piece of change, you know. Seems to me you're mighty free with our dough."

"It's just as I told her: she will be worth that or nothing to us. And you know she would be worth nothing to us unless she stuck to her place in society."

"I suppose so. But how are you going to get that money back?"

"You let me worry about that. It's going to be easy. The tips she'll hand me, without ever knowing what she's done, about the things that are happening among her rich friends—why, there'll be a fortune in them if we follow them up and use them right."

"But you can't expect to keep a girl like Miss Marlowe in ignorance forever of what she's actually doing. Lord, no. When she takes a tumble to the real game, how are you going to handle her?"

"By that time I figure she won't need any handling. She'll be willing to come in with her eyes wide open, provided we keep on covering up her work. Don't I know that sort of woman!—the woman who's about to topple from her place in the big world and who don't want to fall! New York, every big city, is full of them. String those women along for a little while, keeping them just balanced at the top, and then they'll be willing to do anything to keep from going down. You know that as well as I do; that's been our experience."

"I know. But we've never before handled a woman that's had the real class of this Marlowe girl. Suppose when her waking-up time comes the girl refuses to go ahead?"

Franklin's mouth tightened. "That event will be provided for. If she refuses, she will find herself so involved,

without knowing beforehand that she is involved, that she will not dare do anything except go ahead."

Kedmore raised a hand. "Say no more. Never tell me what you're up to. I'm only the vocal chords of this organization; I'll handle any case in court that you've got fixed so that the law cannot reach it—but it's up to you to do all the thinking and fixing. Too much knowledge is likely to be a damned dangerous thing for me. So let me have the bliss and safety of ignorance."

"All right. You needn't worry. And, man, think of the other side: how much we'll make when I've made her what I want her to be! I tell you, Kedmore, I'm going to make that girl, willing or unwilling, the ablest woman in this line that New York ever knew. You just see!"

"I hope you do it. But it may be some job."

"I'll make her that—you just see!" repeated Franklin, his eyes glowing. "These ladies' maids who want to sell compromising letters—these women on the fringe of society who hang on by their little retail trade in scandal—all of them together won't be a tenth of what Miss Marlowe will be when I've got her ready!" He became tense in his certainty. "She's going to be a wonder! A year from now—it will take time—it will require patience and adroitness—but a year from now and that girl will be everything I've said!"

"I believe you, Franklin; you have an admirable habit of putting your plans across." The pink head nodded slowly in meditation. "But I wonder now—I just naturally wonder what your Miss Marlowe would be thinking about if she knew this minute what she is destined to be in a year."

To this Franklin made no reply.

"Of course you'll succeed," the heavy, meditative voice of Kedmore rumbled on. "But that girl had a look to her that does make me wonder. She's no cinch. It'll be mighty interesting, Franklin, watching how she develops under your hands. Mighty interesting."

After his partner had departed through the private door through which he had entered, Franklin swung around and gazed down on the far reaches of the city, his brain feverishly exultant, eagerly darting into the future. Robert Franklin was a type of lawyer that has existed ever since law has been practised as a business, but which has only mounted to the peak of its success with the development of modern wealth, of modern society and modern business, and the rich opportunities these have offered. At the beginning of his practice he had chanced upon a rather scandalous secret and had been paid his price for suppressing it. That incident had determined his career. Such money comes so easily and comes in such large sums: money paid by clients for helping them hide something, money paid by clients for doing something illegal in such a way that the law, even if awakened, cannot touch client or lawyer, money paid for a closed mouth; and it is all so very safe, if only one is clever and careful enough.

To-day it was Franklin's practice to watch for every little domestic rupture among the respectable rich; to listen for every rumor of an indiscretion that might develop into a profit; to wait quietly for developments, collecting notes of every detail—adding to these, ever adding to these, until finally a crisis was reached in some affair in which reputations were at stake and in which those concerned were frantically eager for nothing to leak out, and he was the only outside person who had all the dangerous facts. These affairs were his great chances; in such general direction

had the main portion of his law business developed—as many a law business, in part at least, has developed.

Such, then, was Cordelia's saviour at the age of thirty-five: a perfection of his type: respected in his profession, and suspected by no one to whom he did not care to give his confidence; prosperous; a finished man of the world; he wore, and knew how to wear, the best of clothes; he was a member of good clubs; and he was to-day far more ambitious than in his fiery early years.

His practice of watching every chance, however small, every slip of folly and ignorance, every mistake of vanity and pride and judgment, had finally brought him Cordelia. He had never felt more exultant, more sure of himself, than now. She was made to his hand! And of her he was going to make a wonder!

Thus mused Franklin, who was accustomed to the belief that he could see into the far future and pull the proper strings to make that far future fit his own desire. But Cordelia, setting forth upon her mission, ignorant of the true purposes that had prompted her orders, was not more ignorant of what was to be the outcome of this planning and striving than was the astute, sky-soaring Robert Franklin.

CHAPTER V

ROLLING MEADOWS

ON Monday afternoon of the following week Cordelia, at the wheel of her spirited maroon roadster, a large black suit case strapped upon its after deck (her trunks had been sent in advance by express), was skimming easily over a Long Island road at a third her engine's speed but many miles over the speed permitted by the State law. She was palpitant with the suspense of the adventure whose portals she was now entering. She had taken part in many daring matters before this, but in none had the stakes been so important to her and to others; in none had the outcome seemed so unforeseeable; and in none had her personal situation been so strange a one.

Behind her she had left business affairs settled upon much the basis Mr. Franklin had first outlined to her. There had been many interviews with him in his office from which one looked down, as from a watch-tower, upon the far-flung city and its toiling, scheming, idling, suffering, loving millions. Mrs. Marlowe had been prevailed upon to come to this office and leave with Mr. Franklin her unfortunate securities. She had been greatly impressed by Mr. Franklin on her first visit; and her respect had grown a hundred fold when three days later he announced to her that she had been the victim of fraudulent practices, and that he had succeeded in getting a settlement out of her brokers and the companies in which she held stock, under the terms of which settle-

ment she was regularly to receive twenty-five hundred dollars monthly. He had handed her a cashier's check for the amount of the first payment. She had been most grateful, but extreme tact had been required in handling her indignant demand for criminal action against those conscienceless brokers who had tried to ruin her and who so nearly had succeeded; and she had driven away, the saving check triumphantly clutched in her hand-bag, with never a suspicion that she had been an unconscious actor in a carefully prepared bit of private theatricals.

Of course Cordelia had promptly sent off the ordered note to Jackie Thorndike telling that her mother had been premature in her fears of financial reverses, and telling Jackie that their affairs were as sound as ever and that therefore she, Cordelia, would not have to undertake any of those foolish schemes they had discussed. Jackie had replied with enthusiastic congratulations, and had promised silence. It had hurt Cordelia a bit to tell this fib to a good old friend like Jackie.

And of course there had been payments made upon those awful bills.

There were flies buzzing about the sweet ointment of her secret rehabilitation of the secret failure of her family. Was she going to be found out? If so, what would happen to her? And then there was that sense that she was acting rather like a spy, coming to Rolling Meadows under such circumstances. But this last fly she brushed away with the mental gesture that she was coming to protect, not to betray:—though at intervals this fly returned to its buzzing.

As she drew nearer her destination her excitement grew more intense. She did not know Rolling Meadows, she did not know the step-sister, or the other persons who might comprise the household; she knew only Gladys. She was

about to enter a new world—a world that she now believed contained a mystery, possibly a menace: a mystery that she, always unsuspected, was to help discover and clear away.

Presently the maroon roadster turned through the gateway of Rolling Meadows and swung over the low undulations, now lush with hay that would soon be ready for the mower, toward the house which sat upon a knoll that had the splendid exclusion bestowed by a quarter mile's removal from the highway. It had been the gently curving lines of the sweeping acres which had inspired the parents of Gladys to call the estate Rolling Meadows when, twenty years earlier, they had chosen this as the site of their country home and had ordered architects and landscape gardeners and builders to do their best.

Since she was the first of Gladys' friends to enter Rolling Meadows, Cordelia looked with an explorer's interest at the house she approached. Her first vision of course could not take in details: but she was aware of a two-story red brick house, containing possibly two-score rooms, trimmed in white, and with cool wide porches upheld by white fluted columns, the whole mounted upon the low pedestal of a brick-walled terrace. Two hundred yards from the house the hay left off and a lawn began whose nap was as perfect as that of a putting-green. Cordelia had a consciousness of long rose arbors in flamboyant bloom, of a sunken garden at one side, of a thick pine wood as background to the entire picture, with Long Island Sound on one side glistening in the distance. Then she halted her car at the steps from which Gladys had been eagerly waving to her.

"I'm so glad you were able to come after all!" Gladys cried, and after Cordelia had lightly sprung from the car, Gladys threw her arms around Cordelia and kissed her.

That was only Cordelia's second kiss from her old school friend, and it seemed uncomfortably strange.

A man in formal clothes came rapidly and noiselessly down the broad steps of the terrace, crossed to the car and began with quick practised hands to unstrap Cordelia's bag. Cordelia, obeying the instructions given her by Mr. Franklin, swiftly studied this newcomer, obviously Gladys' butler. He was young for a butler, perhaps twenty-eight or thirty; was above the medium height, rather lightly built except for an unusual width of shoulders, and had that clean-shaven, impersonal mask of a face which Cordelia instinctively associated with male house-servants of the higher order. If she had been asked at that moment to characterize him, she would have had to say that his outstanding characteristic was his perfect conformity to his class, his colorlessness, his lack of any individuality. And yet despite this perfect usualness, Cordelia had an instant sense that his appearance belied the man's real quality.

Bag in hand, the butler turned to Gladys.

"What time shall I serve dinner, Miss Norworth?"

"You can be ready in half an hour, Cordelia?" asked Gladys. Cordelia nodded. "Dinner at eight, Mitchell."

Cordelia's eyes followed Mitchell as he moved easily away with her heavy bag; and she noted that Gladys' eyes were also fixed upon the impersonal butler.

As they went up the steps of the terrace, Gladys again threw her arms around Cordelia in a clutching embrace. "Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" she whispered. "You'll—you'll help so much!"

"How?" asked Cordelia, rather bewildered by Gladys' unaccustomed show of emotion.

"By—by just being here!" Gladys quickly recovered her

self-control. "You're so strong and sane, you know." She started to lead Cordelia into the house. "I'll show you your room. Your trunks are already there. Wear anything you like; dinner's going to be very informal tonight."

"Aren't you going to let me meet your step-sister now?"

"Esther is helping with François."

"François? Who is he?"

"Our child. Esther's and mine. The French war orphan we adopted."

"Oh, yes—in the excitement of getting here I'd forgotten about your war orphan."

"He had a little indigestion this evening, and didn't want to go to sleep. Esther offered to help his governess quiet him, so I might be free to meet you."

By this time they had crossed a big hall, mounted a wide stairway, and had come to a door which Gladys opened. "These will be your rooms, Cordie. Annie here will take care of you."

Gladys went out, and Cordelia gave her keys to the waiting lady's maid and examined her quarters. There were a large bedroom with bath, and an enormous sitting-room with eastern windows which looked over the green billows of the estate, and with northern windows from which she could look down from the hill-poised house over the stunted Long Island trees and see the smooth Sound burnished by the low coppery sun. There might be something wrong in this house, as Mr. Franklin had said, but certainly Rolling Meadows did not lack in comforts for the body and pleasures for the eye.

At eight o'clock Cordelia entered the dining-room, and there met Gladys' step-sister, Esther Stevens. Cordelia tried to make swift appraisal of this new member of the house-

hold, as she had tried to appraise Mitchell. Esther Stevens was the direct antithesis of the colorfully handsome, impetuous Gladys. She was twenty-eight or -nine; pleasant of face and manner, though no radiant beauty; self-contained, self-controlled, with a quiet graciousness, and obviously in no awe of her rich and dominating sister. She gave off a sense of reserve power, and a sense that for all her quiet control hers was a nature capable of deep emotion.

Alert to record her impressions, Cordelia noted how instantly she had been struck by the wide difference between these two sisters; and she wondered how they got on together in private, and how they had been getting on the many years they had been together. She felt she was going to like this quiet Esther, if Esther would let her.

There was no conversation at the dinner that Cordelia afterwards recalled in detail. She retained only her impressions. Gladys' attempts were all towards gossipy personalities concerning their friends. Esther said little, but what she said was pleasant, and unobtrusively gracious; it increased Cordelia's liking. Cordelia's most distinct, yet indistinct, impression was of Mitchell. The butler alone served the dinner. Such was his ability to efface himself that he hardly seemed to exist; yet there he was, serving noiselessly, seeming to anticipate every want before it became conscious in the minds of the three women, and in consequence requiring no word. In his non-existence, in his swift efficiency, he seemed to Cordelia the most perfect butlering mechanism she had ever met.

A little incident happened at the end of the dinner that gave Cordelia further glimpse of the flawless versatility of Mitchell. He had served the ice and they were in the midst of it, when a childish voice sounded from the main doorway:

"Mother Esther, can't I have some ice-cream?"

Cordelia turned. There in pyjamas and bare feet stood a handsome, yellow-haired boy of four, sturdy and manly, blinking sleep-heavy but bright eyes at them. Esther and Gladys were out of their chairs at the same moment, but Gladys chanced to have sat the closer to him, and she seized him sharply by the shoulder.

"You naughty boy, François! Why aren't you asleep?"

"Don't want you, Mother Gladys," declared the boy, trying to pull away from her. "Want Mother Esther."

Esther Stevens was now on her knees beside him, her arms about his small figure.

"I left you asleep with Jeanne watching, François," she said gently. "How did you get down here?"

"I woke up, and I wanted you to tell me another story, Mother Esther."

"Wasn't Jeanne there to tell you another story?"

The boy shook his head. Then he sighted Cordelia and pointed a tiny finger at her.

"Who's that, Mother Esther?"

"You mustn't bother us, François," interrupted Gladys. "You must go right back to bed!"

"He'll go in just a minute, Gladys," said Esther. "Come on, François, and meet your new friend."

Gravely she led him pattering across to Cordelia and gravely went through with the introduction. Gravely the boy held out a hand to Cordelia.

"Are you going to be another one of my mothers?" he demanded.

Cordelia felt a swift inward glow.

"I will if you will let me."

"Can you tell good stories?" he cross-examined.

"Perhaps she'll try to-morrow, dear," said Esther, start-

ing to draw him away. "Come upstairs, and Mother Esther will tell François a story now."

But at that moment the non-existent Mitchell materialized on the opposite side of François, holding his other hand.

"Pardon me, Miss Stevens," he said, "but won't you finish your dinner? I'm entirely through here. I'll take him up to the nursery." And to François: "Don't you want Mitchell to tell you a nice story? And let your mothers finish their dinner?"

"Yes—yes, Mitchell!" the boy cried eagerly. "You tell the nicest stories of anybody!"

"Then say good-night, Master François."

"Good-night, Mother Esther," and he put an arm around her neck and kissed her. "Good-night, Mother Gladys; you haven't kissed me good-night to-night and you didn't kiss me last night."

He held up his face to Gladys, and the flushed Gladys gave him a quick kiss, with "Now hurry off to bed with Mitchell."

The boy said good-night to Cordelia, then trotted off gravely with the butler. It seemed to the watchful Cordelia that Esther was not entirely pleased—the reason for it Cordelia could not guess—to have the child go away in Mitchell's charge.

The butler puzzled Cordelia. The servant question is one of the established commonplaces of conversation; one may discuss it, without seeming inquisitive, as one may discuss the weather or prohibition. So Cordelia felt she could ask questions about Mitchell without arousing suspicion of the curiosity behind the question.

"That seems a rather remarkable butler you have, Gladys."

"Yes, Mitchell is good."

"How long have you had him?"

"About a year now."

"How did you happen upon him?"

"Oh, he just turned up as servants do, and applied for the place."

"He seems to be almost without personality," Cordelia chatted on—"nothing in his nature to attract one to him. Yet I noticed that François seemed very fond of him."

"Oh, that is just François' way. He takes to every one."

With her next sentence Gladys changed the subject. Cordelia had a vague sense that Gladys had purposely changed the subject, that for some reason she preferred not to talk about her butler.

There was little more said during the dinner. Left to her own thoughts, Cordelia could not help considering the members of this household into which she had been brought by invitation and the instructions of the cool-eyed Mr. Franklin: Gladys—Esther—François—Mitchell. She could not then have explained why, but more than about any of the others, she wondered about Mitchell.

CHAPTER VI

SHADOWS OF SECRETS

DINNER over, Esther Stevens went upstairs to see if all was going well with little François. Cordelia took advantage of her departure to say how pleasantly impressed she had been with Gladys' step-sister.

"Yes, Esther is a dear!" agreed Gladys. "A perfect dear!"

Even had Franklin not given orders to learn all she could, Cordelia's human curiosity would have prompted her to be inquisitive concerning this step-sister and her purpose in being at Rolling Meadows. As it was Cordelia had two motives for asking questions, and she asked them. Gladys was willing enough to talk, and led the way up to the privacy of her own sitting-room.

Cordelia already knew something of Esther, and the account she now heard was added to by bits of facts and deductions which she picked up during the following days. Gladys' father had died when she was ten. When Gladys was twelve her mother had taken as her second husband Mr. Stevens, a rich and daring western speculator, recently left a widower, who had just come confidently to the East to promote some large mining enterprises. After his marriage he had decided to settle in New York and to show Wall Street that it possessed no monopoly of financial genius. Esther, then eighteen, had been so outraged by her father's second marriage, regarding it as an affront to the memory of her

mother who had been with her only a few months before, that she had flatly refused to come East and be a part of her father's new family.

Three years of trying to outwit Wall Street had resulted in Wall Street collecting to itself every dollar Mr. Stevens had brought as a challenge from the West. A few months thereafter he had collapsed from a bad heart and had died within the hour, Esther had been in California, and there had been no time for her to come to his funeral. He had never touched a penny of the great fortune of Gladys' mother—which included the large fortune left by her father—and on her mother's death, when Gladys was seventeen, in school at Harcourt Hall, the fortune had passed on intact to Gladys under a will (its character due largely to the suggestions of Mr. Stevens) which provided that the entire estate should be in the control of trustees, save only the income, until Gladys had married or reached twenty-five, in either of which events the principal was to come into her unhampered possession. The trustees were also named as guardians of Gladys' personal well-being.

The death of her step-father and later of her mother had left Gladys without a single blood relative; and the three tired and busy trustees, bethinking themselves of the step-sister and desirous of avoiding every responsibility that could be evaded, had written Esther a pleading note presenting the care of Gladys as a charge which would have been Esther's father's had he lived. Time and her father's death had softened Esther's resentment, and out of sense of duty to her father she had resigned her position as English teacher in a Los Angeles high school to become mother, aunt, older sister, chaperone, what-not, to the seventeen-year-old product of the socially ambitious mother and of Miss Harcourt's widely admired institution.

If Esther Stevens had different ideas about a young girl's upbringing, she had entered Gladys' life at too late a period, and with too little authority, to have tried to put those ideas into practice without arousing the defiance of her charge. So perforce Esther had accepted the situation as she had found it, trying to do her father's duty, and during the first months taking a lot of snubbing that tried her patience; and when, after her graduation in 1916, Gladys became captivated with the idea of being a nurse in the very smart hospital of the very chic Countess de Crecy (then in America campaigning for funds and volunteers) Esther had also gone as a nurse and had remained in France with Gladys for three years. While there she had co-jointly with Gladys legally adopted the infant François, whom they had taken from one of the many Paris institutions that the War was constantly overcrowding with parentless children.

Gladys had made her work as historian of her step-sister as brief as possible. She was eager to get to her own affairs.

"Cordie, as I told you, I've been herding by myself too much these last two or three years, and I feel I've been all wrong. Oh, of course, I had good reasons," she justified herself. This last came out with tense suddenness, but she did not enlarge upon her reasons. "But I can't stand things that way any longer. I've got a new program scheduled. I'm going out a lot, and there's going to be some life at this place. Lots and lots of people. That's what I want you to help do—put life into this place."

To do just this had long been Cordelia's business as a guest. "You can count on me to do what I can. And I think you are right in deciding to have your friends about you."

"I've spoken to a few already." She hesitated. "Jerry

Plimpton has promised to come. But when he promised, he of course knew you were to be here."

"What I said about him that night out at Jackie Thorn-dike's still goes with me, Gladys. You and I are not going to have any difficulty about a man."

Until almost midnight they discussed plans for the social revolution at Rolling Meadows. Long after she was in bed Cordelia lay thinking about this household which for its own good, so she believed, she had been set to study and to watch:—Esther Stevens—the unobtrusive, ever-present Mitchell—the child François—and, yes, Gladys. Some puzzling questions emerged from her patient thinking. Why should Esther Stevens, good-looking enough, by nature independent, competent, any real or sentimental obligation she may have owed Gladys now fully paid off, remain here in what was practically a position of dependence?—for Gladys had again made plain that Esther had not a cent of her own. And Gladys herself: now that she was concentrating upon the matter, wasn't it more and more odd that Gladys had maintained a rather distant attitude toward her friends all these years?

At length, wearied with self-questioning, Cordelia fell asleep, only to find herself after a time sitting up in bed, suddenly awake, with the sense that she had just heard the sharp cry of a woman. This was followed instantly by her definitely hearing the commanding voice of a man. The words she could not make out. She sat for a long moment straining her ears, but after that dominant male voice there was only silence.

Obeying an impulse, she got quickly out of bed and into a dressing-gown and slippers. She crossed to the door and cautiously peered forth. The hall was lighted but empty. She stepped through the door, silently closed it, and re-

mained in a moment's indecision as to which direction her search should take her. As she so stood, around a corner toward her came the noiseless Mitchell dressed in the formal clothes he had worn at dinner. Startled, she shrank back against the door, but he showed no slightest surprise as he approached her.

"Is there something I can get for you, Miss Marlowe?" he asked in his even voice.

She had recovered enough to have ready a fib explaining her presence abroad. "No, thank you, I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd go out for a little air."

"François has been having a restless night; I was just going to see if I was needed," he said, and with a bow he passed on.

To turn her fib into the semblance of truth, Cordelia went down and stood on the porch for several minutes; then she slipped back into her room and into bed. The man's voice she had heard had undoubtedly been Mitchell's. But the woman's voice—if there really had been a voice—had it been Gladys' or Esther's?

She wished Mr. Franklin had been more open with her and given her more of his knowledge of the situation in the household of his client and her friend. It was difficult to help Mr. Franklin straighten out this situation, starting as she was in utter ignorance. But Mr. Franklin was right in the main fact he had told her: there certainly was something strange here.

She thought and thought. Morning was beginning to break before her tired brain slipped into a swoon of weariness and she slept again. And when she woke her mind instantly returned to that outcry of a woman—the man's commanding voice—Mitchell prowling about fully dressed. And again she considered Gladys—Esther Stevens—the at-

titude of each toward their partnered son—the boy's ready acceptance of the care of the neutral-tinted butler.

For a brief space she had an impulse to go to Mr. Franklin, in compliance with his request that she report upon every slightest detail. But she decided against this course; as yet she had only faintest shadows, and one cannot transport or communicate a shadow. For the present she would just wait and watch: watch without seeming to notice anything. She must be very adroit; always very, very adroit.

On this second day, in the casual manner one may use in discussing servants, Cordelia again asked Gladys about her butler. Again Gladys quickly veered from the subject, as she had done the previous night at dinner. This was further confirmation of Cordelia's suspicion that there was more to Mitchell's place in the household than merely being its butler.

Cordelia made a careful survey of the other fifteen servants at Rolling Meadows. They all seemed no more than just the better class of servants that are to be found in rich families; they respected Mitchell, and gave him prompt obedience, for they recognized him as an able, experienced domestic commander; none of them, Cordelia judged, had any part in the mystery she suspected. The same conclusion she reached concerning Jeanne; Jeanne was just a high type of the well-trained French governess—nothing more. So all of them Cordelia dismissed from her consideration.

Mitchell, of the servants, was in this mystery alone—if mystery there really was. And every day her interest was more and more intrigued by the butler. Was that butler's face of his merely a mask? Did the mask ever slip off? What sort of person would be revealed if ever that mask did slip its strings?

This increased interest was due partly to her sense that,

from the first day, Mitchell had several times been watching her. She could feel his eyes intent upon her. She throbbingly wondered if he suspected her: suspected that she suspected him. But when she quickly turned toward him, he was busy about some butler's task and not even facing toward her, or else he was approaching her, his face its usual butler's mask, with the offer of some trifling butler's service. She never once caught him gazing at her, never surprised on his features an unbutler-like look. And yet she was certain—certain!—that he was observing her, thinking of her.

Why should Mitchell be studying her?

There was another item that added to her curiosity. On that first night when François had gone off so gladly with Mitchell, Gladys explained this willingness by saying that François took to everybody. Cordelia noted that this was not the fact. The boy got on well with all the servants; but Mitchell was his preference over them all, even over his governess. He would even slip away from Gladys and Esther to be with Mitchell.

To this study there came a brief interruption, the reunion of the class of '16 of Harcourt Hall. Cordelia went to this with warm eagerness. Without her being fully conscious of the fact, the school had been the strongest single influence in Cordelia's life since the death of her father. The reason for this is fairly obvious. For four years (except for vacations, which she had mostly spent with school friends) she had lived there continuously, and since fourteen no other place in which she had been had had a like quality of permanence. Except for those four years she seemed always to be visiting; even her stays at home had the character of brief visits. At Harcourt Hall alone had she really unpacked and settled down. In consequence it seemed more of a home to

her than the expensive apartment on Park Avenue which her mother maintained as the most important item of that family appearance which she had to show the world.

Besides Gladys, Jackie Thorndike, Ailine Harkness and a score of other '16 girls were present. In every detail that day was a triumph for Cordelia; as presiding officer, she knew just how to handle these wilful young women; and for their part, they fairly smothered the heroine of their school days in their enthusiasm. It was "Good old Cordie!" and "Just as ugly as ever, old dear!" and impulsive flinging of arms about her all through the day.

It was all so splendid to Cordelia; it flushed her with warm affection for her friends, and with confidence in her own powers. She felt that she could do anything—anything!

At the end of the afternoon she had a few minutes alone with that thoroughly-stayed figure of dignified portliness that was Miss Harcourt, whose manner toward her was august but deferential. Once in an impulsive moment during her last school year Cordelia had kissed the rarely kissed cheek of Miss Harcourt and had thereby almost unposed that lady; but although Miss Harcourt was still an important person to her, and although Cordelia was warmly alive with good wishes for her former preceptress, Cordelia made no attempt to kiss Miss Harcourt now.

"I'm so glad you were with us to-day, Miss Cordelia," Miss Harcourt said in her model of drawing-room graciousness. "I have designs on you. You know I still consider you one of the best products of Harcourt Hall—in fact the very best—and I am always talking about you. Can't you run out again to-morrow? I'd like to arrange a little affair for you to meet some of my younger girls informally. They have heard much about you, they are very eager, and will be highly complimented."

Cordelia was herself highly complimented. "I'm very sorry, Miss Harcourt, but my engagements won't permit my coming." Miss Harcourt was also deeply disappointed. Little more was said—there was no time for it. Cordelia congratulated Miss Harcourt on the success of the school during the year now ending, and wished it an endless succession of successful years. Miss Harcourt thanked her, and when Cordelia started away she said:

"I hope your sister will make as good a name for herself here as you have, and I hope that she will be as happy here."

"I'm sure she will be. Good-by, Miss Harcourt."

"Good-by, my dear," replied Miss Harcourt, in that voice that was a model of dignity and deference. "And remember, Miss Cordelia—any time you can come, it will be an honor to us."

Outside Cordelia experienced difficulty in breaking away from her school friends. As her car rolled away, Jackie turned to the group on the verandah steps and cried, "Altogether, fellows—three cheers for Cordie Marlowe!" The cheers that instantly followed almost choked Cordelia and there were tears in her eyes as she turned and flung a kiss. It was a wonderful place, good old Harcourt Hall! The gracious lawn, the stately trees, the drive that curved among them, all moved her deeply. And when she went through the iron gates, and the precise old porter who had known her since her hair was in a braid, raised his cap to her with a permissible smile of friendship, she was almost impelled to fling him a kiss. Yes, Harcourt Hall was really a wonderful place!

CHAPTER VII

THE REWARD OF VIGILANCE

THE days of adroit watching that followed brought no new incidents and revealed few new facts. But they confirmed Cordelia's first impression that there was a hidden something at Rolling Meadows, and confirmed and enlarged her first impressions of the people. Gladys was fitfully generous and gay, fitfully cross and impatient; now that Cordelia was seeing her intimately, she noted that Gladys seemed constantly under a nervous strain, for which the planning of the coming party seemed hardly an adequate explanation. The more Cordelia saw of Esther Stevens, the more she liked the quiet step-sister. On several occasions Esther spoke in amusement of herself; she had been engaged before the War—had been jilted for a handsomer woman with a handsome inheritance—an old maid had to do something with her broken heart, so she had brought the fragments to Gladys. She was congenitally lazy, she said, so she had remained with Gladys ever since. To Cordelia she seemed so competent that Cordelia could hardly believe she was here just for a pensioner's ease.

The outstanding fact Cordelia noted about Esther was her love for the adopted François. Her love seemed far greater than that of Gladys. Had she been the boy's actual mother she could not have shown greater concern in every detail that affected him. And François plainly loved her better than his other mother; really liked her better than

he did Mitchell, despite his delight in being with the butler ; perhaps this delight, so guessed Cordelia, was due merely to the fact that Mitchell was the only man about the house to whom the boy could turn.

Cordelia could hardly understand the devotion of Esther to the adopted orphan. Had she been wiser in human nature, she might have surmised that the strongest element in Esther was the maternal instinct, and, denied outlet upon a child of her own, this great maternal feeling had turned its full power upon the foundling.

Cordelia's freshest experience these days was with little François. From the first he adopted her as his third mother, and she fell in love with him. This was altogether novel for her. She had never really come in contact with a child, much less played with one. The eight years difference between her and her sister Lily had been a chasm which had never been bridged. Of course she had always had a real affection for Lily, but for nearly ten years she had been almost constantly away from home. So now it was that François was the first child that had vitally entered her life—and what a dear François was.

As for her own part in this problem, this mystery, Cordelia considered herself as entirely outside it, except in so far as it was a problem which she was to solve. Of course this affair meant, in its secret financial aspect, her remaining up in her splendid world—in the world where she was going to meet Jerry Plimpton as she had been meeting him. Also she felt excitement in the adventure ; gratification in the exercise of her faculties for succeeding in anything she tried to do. She was going to solve this problem—somehow ! No doubt of that ! Also she wished to extricate Gladys, or whoever else might be involved in the mystery. But beyond these considerations, excited and intrigued

though she was, Cordelia did not feel herself personally involved in the affair. She was entirely outside the picture, looking for what the moving figures within the frame might next do, and trying to learn what might be the motives that prompted their actions, and what might be their various relationships.

It never occurred to Cordelia that this particular mystery might not be a thing apart to itself; that it might really be, for her, no more than a minor element in a far more important mystery. In her unsophisticated sophistication Cordelia did not realize that Gladys and the household at Rolling Meadows perhaps represented merely the ordinary mystery, if there was a mystery, of relationships that are carefully kept secret:—just a few facts which are temporarily concealed, and whose mere discovery may make an end of all that is mysterious. This belief that she was not personally concerned, together with her exuberant confidence in herself, prevented her from suspecting that she and all her destiny might already have been subtly drawn into this affair, and that this story had grown to be primarily her story. And this belief, this confidence, and the blindness with which life shuts off the realities of our future from us all, prevented her from perceiving that this business upon which she was so impersonally engaged was, more than any other series of experiences of her existence, to shape and determine the answer to life's most dramatic theme and question: What kind of person was Cordelia Marlowe going to turn out to be? What was to be her fate?

Despite all Cordelia's trying to note every look, every inflection of tone, every act of these people, it was not until she had been at Rolling Meadows a week that she gained her first clue to the realities of the situation. Toward eleven o'clock one night she caught a swift questioning look which

Gladys gave Esther, and saw Esther's almost imperceptible nod. Instantly Cordelia's every sense was on the alert. She pretended a yawn, said she was going to get a book from the library with which to read herself to sleep. With the book she ascended the main stairway with the tired manner of one to whom a few pages will be an infallible sleeping potion. Inside her room she dropped the book, slipped outside again, locked her door, and carefully made her way down the hall toward a little-used stairway in the western wing. Fortune favored her, for she gained the porch unobserved.

Standing in a corner of the porch in the black shadow of thick wistaria, not even feeling the chill that had come with night, Cordelia waited in rigid expectancy, peering in every direction into the gloom-flooded lawn. She had an insistent, pounding sense that something was about to happen, something about to be revealed to her; and she felt a conviction that the something, be it big or small, was not going to transpire in the illumined walls of the big house. Minutes throbbed by; a half hour; an hour. Then from the shadows of the house there emerged a vague figure and hurried away to the right, avoiding the path and keeping to the silent lawn. It was a woman's figure; no doubt of it—Gladys. Its blurred outlines swiftly faded into the night.

Cordelia still waited. More minutes passed, then hurrying from the house through the gloom of the lawn Cordelia saw another vague figure. This also was a woman, and indubitably Esther Stevens. She dissolved into the night at about the same point Gladys had entered the blackness. Undoubtedly they were headed for the same spot and according to agreement; but what was there that these two had to say to each other that they could not say as safely in the whispered privacy of one of their rooms? The obvious

answer was that they were to meet a third person, or possibly a fourth.

With mounting tensy Cordelia waited for another shadowy figure to cross the lawn. Minutes passed. But no figure traversed the darkness. And then it came to her that the other person or persons might have been waiting over there in the unknown blackness before she had come out upon the verandah. She delayed no longer, but went swiftly down the steps and across the lawn in the direction taken by the other two.

As she hurried she wondered where might be the rendezvous. Almost any spot in the groping blackness of the pine wood; to find them there was well-nigh hopeless. And then Cordelia realized the direction she was taking, and suddenly she remembered something.

Near the limit of the lawn, and sitting almost in the edge of the pine woods, there stood a playhouse built for Gladys when she was ten years old and used by her for two or three years when in the occasional mood for playing at keeping house. It was really as large as many a comfortable summer cottage, and had cost the indulgent mother of Gladys above fifteen thousand dollars. When Gladys had outgrown the toy, its chambers had been converted into bedrooms for the use of guests when the big house's week-end hospitality was overflowing. In recent years there had been no occasion for such use, but it had been kept in order.

Cordelia recognized, since she was headed straight for it, that the playhouse was the logical place of meeting. She moved carefully around to its farther side, for she remembered that the windows of the living-room faced toward a little clearing in the pines. There were no lights. She crept up toward the heart of a great syringa bush which grew against the house. Cautious as she was, she rustled

the leaves slightly, and her over-acute ears magnified that shuffling of leaves to the clatter of cymbals. Her heart grew suddenly still. She was sure she had been heard.

But there came no sign from the house. More cautiously, she crept further in and tried to make herself a part of the syringa bush's arching branches. And then a leaping thrill went through her like a current of electricity. She had guessed right!—and luck still was with her! A window was open and through it came lowered voices.

In her excitement she did not catch the first words; but the voice was Gladys' and it was angry, loud. The first words she really heard were in a man's voice—a cool, steady voice.

"Soft pedal your talk a bit, Gladys," said the voice. "You're not using the best sense in the world in crying out like this—and the way you did the other night. The other night you got Miss Marlowe out of bed. I don't mind it so much, but it's not particularly safe for you."

Cordelia almost gasped aloud as she recognized this quiet voice. It had the quality of authority, of assured mastery over those it addressed. It was the voice of Mitchell, the self-effacing, ever-present, soft-toned Mitchell—that perfect butler.

"You don't expect me to take any such talk from you calmly!" exclaimed Gladys, in a lower tone.

"You must acquire better control of your nerves, my dear," responded Mitchell. Though assured, his voice had an easy, pleasant, affable quality. "I must say that you have lost a lot in the matter of nerves in the last five years. And I must say that you're making things rather absurd when your nerves make it necessary to arrange to slip off to a place like this when a private talk is necessary. Esther here has far better control. You should try to copy it, my dear."

"Will you please stop 'my dearing' me?" cried Gladys in exasperation. "I'm tired of it!"

"Anything to please you, Gladys. Though I can't give bond for my tongue; it's got a frightful memory."

"And another thing," the exasperated Gladys went on. "I want you—and so does Esther—to stop making up to François."

"Do you, Esther?" Mitchell inquired.

If Esther made any reply it did not come to Cordelia's ears.

"Anyhow—what is behind your always trying to make François so fond of you?" Gladys demanded.

"I like the boy, and I like to make him happy, as I have told you. Isn't that reason enough?"

"Not reason enough for you!"

"Well, of course there might be other considerations prompting my kindness." His tone was meditative, still pleasant; Cordelia could guess how provoking that pleasant quality was to Gladys. "Who knows, I may be thinking of the desirability of some day kidnapping François."

"I wouldn't put it beyond you to try!"

"And if I should try, it would make the business very much easier, and less dangerous, now wouldn't it, my dear—beg pardon, Gladys; I forgot I wasn't to call you my dear—much less dangerous, if François came along of his own accord because he liked me so much? A neat plan. I rather fancy that plan."

Neither of the two made response to this.

"Or who knows, perhaps I am thinking of something else. For example, that I am getting ready to claim him as my own son."

"You wouldn't dare!" burst from Gladys in a choked voice.

"Mitchell—you're not in earnest about any such claim!" breathed Esther.

Cordelia could not tell whether he was in earnest, or merely taking his pleasure in exercising his power over these two. He responded to neither of them, and went on in his pleasant, meditative tones.

"That last idea is decidedly good. It would make a most convincing and affecting newspaper story. Father enters domestic service in search of son lost in war chaos of France. Relationship proved by the instinctive affection between the two; a slightly different version of the ancient Solomon-and-two-mothers stunt. Yes, indeed, most affecting and convincing situation. On the whole I believe I like this plan much better than any I have thought of. It's safer—and there may be much more in it. Yes, when I get good and ready I think I'll claim my son."

"You'll never get him away from me?" said Esther.

"Try that, and I'll fight you!" exclaimed Gladys.

"Fight me? Oh, will you, Gladys, my dear?" Mitchell said softly. "Now will you? I *do* wish you'd try that course. It would be most interesting to match evidence with you in court, my dear—most interesting!"

Neither of the women spoke.

"Yes," said Mitchell, in his soft, meditative tone, "I think I like this plan best. I'll claim François as my son."

There was silence for a moment or more. Cordelia was sure that, in her tense eagerness, she had rustled the syringa bush. But if so, there was no immediate sign that she had been heard within.

Esther was the next to speak. "Suppose we change the subject and get to the matter Gladys wanted to talk about."

"Just as pleases the two of you," said Mitchell. "But be-

fore getting on to that—Gladys, how about that money you were to give me?"

"You've had altogether too much out of me as it is!"

"You'd have given me ever so much more if I'd only asked for it, my dear," returned the pleasant voice of Mitchell.

"Oh, ever and ever so much more, and you know it."

"See here, you listen to what—" Gladys began hotly, but was interrupted by the equable voice of her butler.

"My dear, if I've got to listen to much more I believe I'll first close the window. It's getting chilly, and there's a draft, and the draft must be directly upon Esther's back."

The window came down with a soft thud, and Cordelia heard no more. She wondered what they were saying within, but she had already heard enough to astound her. The subservient Mitchell on a basis of equality with Gladys and Esther—perhaps of superiority over them! What could it mean? What was the true relationship among the three?

She recognized that her own immediate problem was to get back to the house unobserved. But the trio within might finish any moment, and start for the house. The safe course for her, if she would avoid all danger of discovery, was to remain where she was until the three had departed. So she stood in the enfolding arms of the syringa bush, palpitantly wondering, fearing to breathe fully, waiting until the way was clear.

CHAPTER VIII

NEAR THE HEART OF MYSTERY

SHE stood a motionless dryad among the branches for half an hour, until each stiffened leg had changed into a column of prickling anguish. But at last she heard the three leave the house, one after another. She waited on despite the torture of limbs that had gone to sleep, until finally she judged that her path was safe. She parted the branches and attempted to step outward, only to have the paralyzed legs collapse and send her toppling to the soft earth.

For several moments she lay there, a helpless agonized cripple. That was an absurd anti-climax to such an adventure—her legs asleep!—but the discomfort of that condition was a mild sensation compared to the dismay she felt when, after swaying tinglingly across the lawn, she found that all the doors of the darkened house were locked. She had never thought of this contingency, so had not brought her latchkey, and Mitchell, after his return, had seen to his butler's duty of securing the house for the night.

She was locked out! What should she do?

Her legs still unsteady beneath her, she leaned against the door jamb, considering. She thought of ringing the bell; but, no, that wouldn't do—it might in some way lead the three to suspect that she had been eavesdropping upon them. She thought of sleeping in one of the guest-rooms out in the play-house and returning to her own room when the servants opened the house in the morning; but this would not do

either, for such a procedure might rouse just as much suspicion as ringing the bell. She was even thinking of getting out her car and driving into the city when—

All the while that she had stood there thinking, she had been mechanically fumbling at the knob of the main door, unconsciously rattling it; and now, suddenly, the overhead porch light went on, and this body of hers she had been so frantically thinking how to conceal was now no more of a secret than a statue stark against the sun. The door swung open, and before her stood Mitchell. There was no surprise or other emotion in his face; it was that butler's face in which she had as yet seen no alteration.

"Pardon me for locking you out, Miss Marlowe," he said in his impersonal servant's voice—so unlike that cool, assured voice which had been coming to her through the open window. "I thought every one was in."

She was afraid she had been caught. Also she felt very absurd. She had to attempt some explanation, since she had publicly announced two hours before that she was going to bed; but the only words she found in her mouth were those same words that had stumbled awkwardly forth that first time she had slipped from her room in the middle of the night and had encountered him.

"I couldn't sleep, so I went out for a walk in the air."

Her words sounded most unconvincing to her. He seemed to accept them.

"There's nothing better for sleeplessness, Miss Marlowe," he said.

She stepped inside on her still uncertain legs. He closed the door.

"It's rather late, and perhaps you are hungry. Shall I get you a little something?"

"No, thank you, Mitchell. Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Marlowe."

She started for the stairway. And then her tingling, un-dependable legs buckled under her again, and the next moment she was sitting on the floor. Instantly he was on his knees beside her.

"You're hurt—you're sick!" he cried.

For the first time, before her, his butler's grave impersonality had left him. Face and voice were alive with quick concern. Even though Cordelia had just been listening to him when he had certainly talked like no butler, she was nevertheless startled by this swift transformation—by this glimpse at some one else.

She tried to cover the absurdity of her posture on the floor with a little laugh; and in explanation she told a half-truth.

"I'm not sick or hurt. I got tired walking and sat down on the ground. My legs went to sleep—that's all."

She tried to struggle to her feet. That other person that Mitchell had been, departed as swiftly as he had come, and Mitchell was once more the butler.

"Let me help you, Miss Marlowe," he said, slipping his hands beneath her arms.

"Oh, I can make it all right."

"You really need assistance," and he lifted her to her feet. "And I'd better help you to your room."

She protested; but with his servant's formality he insisted. And so they went up the stairway, she clinging to the banister with one hand, his two hands beneath her shoulders with one arm across her back. There was no more attempt at familiarity in those hands than if they had been the hands of a traffic policeman helping a woman across a slippery street, or than if she had been a faltering lady of eighty. But Cordelia was for some reason acutely conscious of those hands,

not helping her too much, but alert for her to topple and strong as steel if she should need such support.

"Thank you very much, Mitchell," she said at the door. "Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Marlowe."

But as she started in, he spoke again.

"I beg your pardon—I wonder if I might venture to tell you something—ask you something?"

At this her heart raced wildly and she stared at him. But his expression was exactly as before; impersonal, respectful.

"Of course you may. Go on."

He seemed to consider for a moment.

"After all perhaps I'd better not, Miss Marlowe. Thanking you just the same. Good-night."

"Good-night, Mitchell."

She slipped through her door, locked it, and stood leaning weakly against it. Two dominant questions pulsed through her. What was the thing Mitchell had been on the point of telling her, or asking her, and about which he had decided to remain silent? And did Mitchell suspect what she had really been doing that night?—what was her real purpose at Rolling Meadows?

Presently she managed to get into bed, and she lay there excitedly thinking, trying to arrange in order the fragments she had discovered that night, and from the fragments trying to reconstruct the whole. This last she was unable to do, but four facts stood out, clear, indisputable.

First, there was a real mystery here at Rolling Meadows.

Second, that adopted French war orphan, François, was somehow involved in the mystery—perhaps was its heart.

Third, Mitchell was the real master at Rolling Meadows. He had some secret hold over both Gladys and Esther, and through that secret he was able to demand money and get it.

He was not merely the perfect butlering automaton. He was a clever man; a man of education; he had talked like a man of the world. He had seemed to be what is usually termed a gentleman; perhaps fairly decent, perhaps very evil; but undeniably a gentleman. And with all this, he was undeniably a trained butler.

Fourth, Gladys had implied that she had known Mitchell for only a year. From the overheard conversation it was clear she and Esther had known Mitchell for five years, and known him well; perhaps intimately—perhaps very intimately. That is, they had known Mitchell from about the time they had gone to France.

So much was fact. The rest was conjecture. And what a world of conjecture Cordelia's mind traversed in swift excitement. Each question was in itself an unexplored continent.

Who was Mitchell—really? What sort of a man was the real Mitchell? A semi-scoundrel or a villain competent to conceive and manage a great scheme, and who was now managing it?

What was the character of Mitchell's secret hold upon Gladys and Esther?

Who was François—really?

Could Mitchell be the father of the boy, as his light remarks in the playhouse might suggest? If so, that relationship might explain the boy's fondness for Mitchell. But, against this presumption, there were Gladys and Esther both claiming François as their adopted son.

Could the explanation be that Mitchell had been secretly married, in France, to one of the two and that François was the son of that marriage? No—such a conjecture was plainly preposterous. Gladys wanted to marry Jerry Plimpton, and the clever Mitchell must know of this matrimonial

ambition. And as for Esther, the quiet, poised Esther did not behave in the least as if she had married Mitchell; and if there had been a marriage, there seemed no sane reason why such a person as Esther should hide both the marriage and her maternity.

Cordelia could not find answers to these questions. But behind those questions was a relationship, a situation, that bulked big—tremendously big! She had made great progress in getting at this mystery. And she was going to clear up the whole of it. No doubt of that!

At last she had something worth while to report to Mr. Franklin. She would see him the next morning—as early as she could make it.

Finally Cordelia fell into a light, restless sleep.

At half-past nine she was at the wheel of her roadster bound for the city. As explanation for the trip she had mentioned casually to Gladys that she had an appointment in town with her mother that morning; and had protected herself by actually making an engagement by telephone to meet her mother at their Park Avenue apartment at twelve.

At half-past ten, throbbing with excitement over her achievement and also with suspense as to how Mr. Franklin would take her report, Cordelia was ushered into Franklin's office. The quality of professional reserve which had struck her on her first meeting as Mr. Franklin's outstanding characteristic, vanished at sight of her. He greeted her with a frank, cordial smile—though not too cordial. She had an impression that he looked younger and more spirited than on her previous visits, though he had then looked no more than his actual thirty-five; perhaps years had been cut off his appearance by the fresh candor of his smile, perhaps by his smartly cut gray suit.

"I've been hoping you wouldn't forget your promise to call when you were in town," he said, as he pushed a chair into place for her.

"This isn't a call. Not a social one anyway. I've come on business. To tell you what I've learned."

"Then you have learned something already?"

"I think I have. And something big! But you are to judge what it may be worth."

Excitedly, rapidly, Cordelia told of the conversation she had overheard the night before—of Mitchell's hidden authority in the household—of François—of the possibility of there having been a secret marriage; and she outlined the possibilities, repeated the questions, that had come to her during the night. As he listened, Franklin was shot through with amazement. He had never dreamed of such results! But his surprise and exultation he concealed under a manner of pleased commendation.

"What you have told me, Miss Marlowe," he said, "helps much towards filling up the many holes in my information. You are helping me a great deal in this case. A very great deal, indeed."

From the day she had accepted Mr. Franklin's commission, Cordelia had felt absolutely confident of her ability to succeed. Nevertheless she relished this praise; and she would have liked it if the praise had been even stronger.

"You are sure you are not disappointed in what I have done?"

That brought her just what she was hungry for. "How can I possibly be disappointed in you, Miss Marlowe? I expected much from you—very much, indeed—but you are doing far, far better than I ever expected! No one could possibly have improved upon what you have done!"

For a time they discussed the possibilities and the questions Cordelia had propounded. This discussion ended, Cordelia asked:

"Have you any particular directions you wish to give me for my further action?"

"I'd like to have you pay especial attention to that butler Mitchell, and learn all you possibly can about him. He seems the center of things out there."

"I had intended watching him and studying him."

"Good. And of course you will do the same with Miss Norworth and Miss Stevens."

"Of course."

"I hardly need warn you that you must be most careful not to let a soul suspect you. Not a soul must know your mission there, much less guess your connection with me."

"I'll be most careful."

"Another point. Concerning that week-end party you said Miss Norworth is going to give." Cordelia had told him of Gladys' plans for a larger hospitality, and that Gladys' first function under this new program was to be a party over the following week-end. "I'd like very much to size up the individuals in this case, and I might have a better chance while a party is going on than when they are alone and on their guard. I presume you can secure me an invitation? As a"—he hesitated—"as one of your friends? It would be much better," he hastened to explain, "if they were not to suspect that I was there for a business reason."

"I can invite any one I wish. Only—only the people there—my old friends, you know—may be a little surprised at my knowing you as a friend. You see, following out the spirit of your instructions, I have never mentioned you to any one as a friend."

Franklin perceived that he had been trying to move too rapidly. "Perhaps then it will be wiser if I write you toward the latter part of the week that I wish to consult you at once concerning your affairs. You of course cannot come into town, and that will give you an excuse to ask me out Saturday. I will then come out as your attorney, and not as a friend or guest. In a few hours I can probably gain all the first-hand impressions I desire."

To this Cordelia agreed.

"Won't you let me return this hospitality in advance, by being your host at lunch to-day? Your mother and sister are lunching with me—a matter of business."

Cordelia pleaded another engagement. As a matter of fact, on her way to Franklin's office, she had stopped to telephone Jerry Plimpton and he had promptly asked her to lunch with him at the Grantham.

"Some other time, then," Franklin rose with her. "One moment, please. I am still the only person who knows about your situation? Your financial situation, I mean."

"Yes."

"I am glad of that. I must remind you to continue the same reticence; and must remind you that the success of our business arrangement necessarily depends upon your keeping your social position as Miss Cordelia Marlowe. I hope you don't mind"—he smiled pleasantly—"my being a partner in your secret?"

"Why, no," she said. It had not before occurred to her as a definite thought that he was the only person who knew her secret; and it did not then occur to her that his pleasant mention of it was a part of a skillful effort to develop in her a growing sense that they two were bound together.

He saw her out with his gracious courtesy which did not presume too far. And then before calling in Kedmore to

give his partner the news, he walked over to one of his lofty windows and excitedly gazed down at the broad panorama of the outspread city, seeing none of it. God, what a gold mine this was he had stumbled upon!—stumbled upon without ever seriously thinking it was there—and stumbled upon it through merely having sent Cordelia Marlowe to Rolling Meadows to fill her time till he found a worth-while case to put her on. That just went to prove how right was the working principle he had so often outlined to Kedmore: that almost every rich and high-placed family had a skeleton in its closet; just discover the skeleton, and the frantic family would pay anything to be allowed to keep that skeleton in the closet and keep the closet locked. The family closets of the rich—those were indeed the world's richest gold mines, if carefully worked!

And what a find, what a piece of luck, was this beautiful, popular, self-confident Cordelia Marlowe! The ideal instrument for working such mines!

But it was not over his particular Golconda, nor over Cordelia as an instrument for precious mining, that Franklin was now most excited. His highest excitement was over Cordelia just as Cordelia; over a somewhat different arrangement for her. In the days which had passed since he had first met Cordelia and had conceived his bold plan for using her, that plan had become a dozen times bolder and more embracing. Instead of merely representing a hope for financial gain, his plan now represented the sum of all his hopes.

New York City, that crowded goal of great and strange ambitions, contained no man with an ambition more calculated, more soaring, more multiform than Robert Franklin's. He wanted money, of course, and was getting

it; money was fundamental to all else. But more than money he wanted wide public recognition, wanted standing with the best society. Hard and shrewd worker at law, his leisure had been devoted to an intensive self-culture, including those superficial graces popular in a man. He was well up on all phases of art that were being talked about; was a devotee of opera, the horse show, the flower show, of all important first nights in the theater. His dancing he had developed under the highest-paid teachers, and each fall he had his steps remodeled by the smartest experts to accord with the latest styles. He was as desirable a bridge partner as he was a dancing partner. He had made himself, and had made himself carefully; and he had gone very far. But for some time he had realized that the further progress of a bachelor of no family would be inchingly slow unless he could secure for himself the magic wings of a fortunate marriage.

And so it had come to him as an inspiration that he should marry Cordelia. He was making enough money, at least enough for present purposes; she had incomparable position. What a combination! And his good fortune had brought her right to his hand! Of course he would be patient and adroit and make the attentive love which every woman desires. And if this did not win her—well, if he skilfully played the cards she had unknowingly dealt him, and skilfully played the additional cards he was dealing himself, she would hardly care to refuse him. Of course he would not go to extremes unless extremes were necessary.

His getting upon good terms with Mrs. Marlowe had been a clever thought. And he believed he had managed that business of going out to Rolling Meadows rather cleverly. The other guests there would undoubtedly re-

gard him as Cordelia's friend and would therefore be inclined toward accepting him as one of themselves. That would help.

Yes, he had, managed extremely well. In fact, marvelously well!

As yet he did not perceive exactly how he was going to carry out his two seemingly contradictory ideas in regard to Cordelia: making her that amazingly valuable business ally which he had first planned that she should be—winning her for the wife who was to lift him to high position. But he would manage it—somehow. Yes, he would manage it!

CHAPTER IX

CORDELIA'S PLACE IN THE SUN

MR. FRANKLIN'S pleasant manner had had its carefully calculated effect upon Cordelia. As she drove up town she was thinking what a gentlemanly, considerably appreciative man he was. It was a pleasure to do one's best for such a man. As far as she could she was going to be nice to him. In a social way, too. Perhaps he would like that.

Cordelia felt immensely pleased. Within herself she was celebrating a national holiday that was all her own. The sense of power she had always had, the consciousness of her ability to do anything she set out to do, had just proved both its authenticity and its reliability. She had achieved what she had said she would achieve, and she would achieve all the rest.

The memory of the dingy oblivion which had threatened her and her family only a week or two before, now returned to her, and she smiled. For a little while that menace, by its strangeness and unexpectedness, had had her floundering; but how she had risen to the emergency—how she had met the situation, saved it and conquered it! People of course could never know how she had mastered this emergency; but if they did know, they would certainly admit that she deserved in all seriousness that old half-humorous title of Cordelia the Magnificent.

This day, on the whole, was one of the most satisfying

days of Cordelia's life. She was going to have far greater days—she knew that; but on this day she was filled with the glorious, expansive sense of being her full self. And so, with this sense of rich success and of having earned a day off, she enjoyed every moment that she moved with the heavy, sluggish traffic up Fifth Avenue, frequently held stationary at the curb by the commands of the semaphore towers. Her slow progress was a subdued, discreet ovation; the unofficial parade of a first citizeness—just what she had long been accustomed to whenever she moved through a crowd. Shoppers in halted cars gazed across at her; women on the sidewalk turned to stare and whispered eagerly to their companions. She knew just what they all were saying, even though their syllables did not carry to her ears. "Look—driving that red car; that's Cordelia Marlowe—the cleverest and handsomest young woman in New York Society." "You'd know her from her pictures in the papers; she certainly looks the leader they say she is."

She was pleasantly conscious she looked her part. She liked these people; all of them. Yes, this was a wonderful day!

Under this pleasant scrutiny she was waiting in the interlocked traffic near Fortieth Street, when a man stepped to the side of her car, his head bared, his face a close-up of delight, his mouth a fount of conversation. It was Kyle Brandon, the motion-picture director-producer. Cordelia was really glad to see him.

This Kyle Brandon, in his youth merely a poor relation of a socially important family (that still very important lady, Mrs. Phipps-Morse, was his aunt), had become a successful portrait painter of smart ladies; then he had gone into motion-pictures as an art director. He had been the right man

at the right time, and now, still under forty and looking even younger, he was reputed worth his millions and was the president and director-in-chief of the famous "Brandon Pictures." He had what few other of the big motion picture producers possess, social position. His social position was perhaps of the second order; but such as it was, it was indubitably genuine.

He had a pink chubbiness of face, and he exuded vitality and confidence. If in manner he were a bit inclined toward the grandiose, that was doubtless the effect upon him of his glamorous business.

Cordelia was again aware that the crowded street was staring; that the people were excitedly whispering that those two were the famous movie man, Kyle Brandon, and the famous society beauty, Cordelia Marlowe. And she sensed that Brandon was conscious of this public attention and that he liked it. She had an amused, flashing thought that he was sorry that one of his camera-men was not over there on the sidewalk shooting this effective picture.

"This is a piece of luck, my meeting you," Brandon was saying in his brisk, confident, ingratiating manner. "I was going to write you and ask you for a talk. About something my aunt, Mrs. Phipps-Morse, has wished on me. She is giving a pageant—big thing of its sort—at her place near Huntington early in September. She's trying to raise money for devastated France, or some French milk fund, or French orphans—don't know just what. And I don't know yet what the pageant's going to be; she told me there was some fellow, some poet, writing it for her. My aunt asked me to put the show on for her, be director-general, and of course I had to say yes. But this much I do know about that show, Miss Marlowe; I certainly want you in it, and if it shapes up

right I'll probably want you for the lead. And if I'm any good as a director, I'll see that you get my best. How about it?"

Cordelia could not help being pleased, used though she was to being singled out. A charity show, a society show, staged by the great Brandon—that should be an event indeed!

"I'll be glad to. That is, if you think I can do it."

"Of course you can! Then that's all settled for the present." Kyle Brandon could not long keep away from what he at times called his business, at other times reverently called his art. "Tell you what, Miss Marlowe—why should you and I stop with this pageant? Ever think of going into pictures?"

Cordelia laughed. "Pictures? I can't act!"

"How do you know? I bet you could! And with me directing you, I know you could!" He appraised her with admiring eyes. "Why, with me directing you, picking your story, getting you the right cast, launching you with the right publicity—you'd be a knockout! Society star deserts social life to become screen star—just think of that publicity! You'd be a sure-fire knockout!"

Cordelia was pleasantly flattered, but her response was a soft laugh of unbelief. There had been a playful quality in Brandon's words, for he knew that such a person as Cordelia would not seriously consider anything in his business power to offer. None the less behind his half-jocular proposition he had a most serious and long-cherished idea. There would be publicity—wonderful publicity!—if he could get hold of a famous society beauty who could also act. What couldn't he do with her, in the smart society dramas which were one of his specialties!—an actress who knew how to be the real lady when she acted a lady, and whom the eager

public knew to be a real lady, instead of those damned, cursing, temperamental ex-waitresses and ex-chorus girls!

"Oh, I hardly thought you'd take it seriously—not with what you have before you," he conceded. "But it's nothing to be laughed at. The money end's not bad. I'm not paying any Mary Pickford salaries, but among my people there are three girls working for me—all really nobodies—not one of whom had a fifth of the qualities to start with that you have right now; and of these three, each girl cleared over a hundred and fifty thousand last year."

"So much as that!" breathed Cordelia, mentally comparing the amount with her own income.

"Not bad is it, for just letting some one point a camera at your face? It's worth thinking about, anyhow. Perhaps even you may some day change your mind. I want you to promise me one thing, in case you ever do."

"Yes?"

"Promise to give Brandon Pictures the first chance at you. I'll offer you a better contract than any other producer."

Again Cordelia laughed. "I guess I can promise that with perfect safety."

"You just bear that in mind—I have your promise! Listen now"—and he smiled with that assurance, with that omniscience and omnipotence which are the gift and aura of motion-picture directors and presidents—"if you'd come in with me, you'd soon be a star, writing your own salary check! And the bill-boards everywhere would be saying 'Kyle Brandon presents Cordelia Marlowe in Her Heart's Desire.' You'll be a sensation! Wait and see!"

Cordelia laughed again. Traffic began to move.

"You're coming out to Gladys Norworth's for the weekend?" she called. "I'm staying there now."

"Then of course I'll be there—to sign you up!"

As she rolled slowly northward along the curb, Cordelia saw that which made her start. This was Mitchell, walking south. His gaze was fixed casually over her head; she was certain he had seen her; but he passed without meeting her eyes. She had thought herself prepared for anything from Mitchell, but she was none the less surprised to see the butler strolling along Fifth Avenue in smartly tailored blue serge, with malacca stick and yellow gloves, and looking as much the well-groomed man of the world as any she might see that morning upon the Avenue.

Yes, as Mr. Franklin had said, Mitchell was decidedly a man to be most carefully watched and studied.

For a moment her mind went back to their little scene of the night before: his letting her in when she had thought herself locked out—the collapse of her palsied legs, her absurd sprawl upon the floor—the strong hands beneath her arms as he had helped her up the stairway. And yes—that something he had started to tell her or ask her, and then had checked himself—what could that something have been?

At twelve o'clock Cordelia was in their closed-up Park Avenue apartment, talking to her mother. Mrs. Marlowe was a kindly, warm-hearted lady, and she had the greatest affection and concern for her two daughters. She was no more than forty-five, her carefully coiffed yellow hair scarcely showed its gray, and she might have appeared a much younger and more elastic person except for her formal bearing. All her life she had functioned within the rigid and narrow frontiers of what a lady can do who has been brought up in profound respect of her own position and the position of a few others who were her equals. It had been hard work to maintain that appearance of unruffled stateliness these last dozen years; hard work, with unguessed cares,

to maintain her daughters in such a position as would guarantee their going on in such a position.

Mrs. Marlowe had been coming into town anyway that day, so Cordelia's message had not inconvenienced her. The talk of the two was almost wholly upon family matters. Mrs. Marlowe explained that she was in the city primarily on a shopping expedition which was to equip her younger daughter with additional summer accessories—dancing dresses were the main item—which Lily insisted were necessities for any girl of fifteen who was really, according to the standards of her day, a grown-up young lady. Fortunately, so Mrs. Marlowe said, she could get these dancing dresses at one of the shops where her credit was good for a year or more; and thus the purchases would be no immediate drain upon the family income.

This led to finances, that eternal Marlowe topic, and for a time they talked finance. And very naturally finances led to Mr. Franklin.

Mrs. Marlowe was eloquent on the subject of Mr. Franklin. He had been most thoughtful, most reassuring; so kindly reassuring that she now looked upon the future without a single financial worry, except of course the care required to live upon such a straightened income as thirty thousand dollars. It was a pleasure to have one's affairs in the hands of such an able and considerate gentleman. He had written her several extremely clear letters, and had been kind enough to come and see her twice when she had been in town and explain matters to her.

Mrs. Marlowe was well pleased with the world and well pleased with herself. "I hope you appreciate, Cordelia, what I have done for you in this matter," she continued in her tone of self-approval. "If I hadn't had the wisdom to see what

Mr. Franklin could do for me, where would we all be to-day, and what would have happened to you?"

That was one of Mrs. Marlowe's little traits: to forget how matters started, and to assume that they had originated in her maternal care. Cordelia managed to keep a straight face.

As for Mrs. Marlowe, she was certainly grateful to Mr. Franklin. That was why she and Lily were lunching with him that day. One could not show such a man too great appreciation.

Mr. Franklin was the bright spot of Mrs. Marlowe's conversation. But she had her worry—Lily. It was a dance or something else every night with Lily. She had suddenly become unmanageable! And the way Lily had begun to drink! Mrs. Marlowe had always been accustomed to seeing wine drunk by ladies and gentlemen, as ladies and gentlemen should drink wine; but in all her life she had never seen such quantities of liquor drunk as were being drunk by the children! Drinking was becoming the most popular childish game. Why, Lily now carried her own pocket flask. The flask was a present; Mrs. Marlowe refused to give money or liquor to fill it; but her friends kept Lily supplied. And, too, Lily did swear such an awful lot. It would be a relief when Lily was in Harcourt Hall, where she would be regulated by discipline. In the meantime couldn't Cordelia do something?

To Mrs. Marlowe, Lily seemed a brand-new problem for which there was no answer.

Cordelia went into the bedroom where Lily, having changed into a fresh frock, was now carefully applying a lip-stick. Lily was slight, with dark, bobbed hair, and had that pert audacity, that shameless inclination to shock, which

sometimes seems the dominant instinct and delight of present-day feminine fifteen.

"Hello, Cord, old girl. Don't touch me, for I don't want to be mussed. Going to meet my best beau."

"See here, infant—how about all this boozing you're doing these days?"

"Mother been telling tales?"

"Never you mind! Better cut that stuff out before it gets you."

"Oh, don't be a damned pill! If a fellow doesn't drink her share, the crowd doesn't want her along."

"How much do you drink?"

"Just keep step—that's all."

"Lily—"

"Don't be a gloom, Cord! Besides, you just please remember I've got a reputation to live up to. I'm the sister of the great Cordelia Marlowe, and that means I've got to travel. So there!"

Cordelia bit her lip. She wanted to slap the cheek of this pert piece of sophistication. Cordelia herself was a contemporary of the flapper; but some quality in her had restrained her from that self-possessed audacity, that unashamed directness, that itch to shock the world, that practice of signalling the world to just watch her sow wild oats, which to Cordelia's mind characterized the flapper when fully developed. If Lily kept her present direction, what would this fledgling be when she reached the flapper maturity of seventeen or eighteen?

"I can stop boozing if I want to," Lily continued. "Can wean myself without anybody's help. Can taper off on one of these infant's what-d'you-call-'ems?—rubber pacifiers. So there's nothing for you to worry your old bean about.

Let's change the subject. I've got a new beau. Now what d'you think of that?"

Even to Cordelia, this newest generation was at times breath-taking.

"Who is he?"

"Can't claim yet that he's *all* mine. You may marry him, or mother may beat me out. But I rather think he'll prefer little Lily. He's been mighty nice to me. He's our brand-new good angel—Mr. Franklin."

Cordelia swooped upon Lily, seizing her by either ear. "Why, you brazen little imp!" she cried. "I'll put some sense into you!"

"Hell—ouch! You leave me alone!" Lily squealed. "I know what's the matter with you. Jealous! You want Mr. Franklin yourself!"

At this last Cordelia loosed her hold in exasperated amazement. Mrs. Marlowe, drawn by the outcry, came in and wanted to know what was the trouble. Lily winked and grinned in an aside at Cordelia, and spoke of having half murdered herself with a damned old pin.

Five minutes later they were down in the street. All were lunching at the Grantham, but Lily refused Cordelia's invitation to ride in the roadster; she wasn't going to make a mess of her fresh dress by crowding three in that dinky, damned little seat; and besides she was going to look at hats before they met Mr. Franklin. So away Lily and Mrs. Marlowe went in a taxicab, and Cordelia rode off alone.

She would certainly have to do something about Lily's precocious interest in men and drink! Was Lily really serious, or merely trying to be glibly teasing and trying to give herself airs in what she had said about Mr. Franklin? But then Lily was young—perhaps her manners and practices were no more than a pose; perhaps she was merely passing

through some brief phase of adolescence; perhaps in a few years she might outgrow it all—or something might happen to her that would tear her loose from, or lift her out of, all such things.

Jerry Plimpton was waiting for Cordelia in the lobby of the Grantham. Cordelia hadn't seen Jerry since the evening before she had gone out to Rolling Meadows. Her heart pumped warm pride through all her arteries as he came eagerly, smilingly, toward her: he was so handsome, so easy of manner, so distinguished, such a splendid figure of the kind the world just naturally bows to. And when they moved through the crowded dining-room to the table he had reserved, she had an even stronger consciousness than on Fifth Avenue that eyes were following her admiringly and enviously; that people were whispering that there went that famous social beauty Cordelia Marlowe and that terribly rich Jerry Plimpton—and what a handsome couple they made!

Just being with Jerry, though she knew nothing important was going to be said or done, seemed the proper culmination of an expansive, glorious day.

While the luncheon progressed, and they talked gaily of nothing in particular, Cordelia definitely came to a decision. Some day she was going to marry Jerry Plimpton. He was personally delightful; he had all those splendid accessories which she knew how to use so well and which would make all the years to come years of unbroken happiness and triumph; and she knew that no woman could fill the place of wife to him—a high place that of his wife, successor to his great mother's glories and traditions—with so much grace and distinction as herself.

She knew that Jerry admired Gladys. That was not to be wondered at; for Gladys had real looks; she had real position; she had more money than any other unmarried young

woman Cordelia knew; and her public manner was very agreeable—only her intimates suspected that Gladys might have her little failings. The possession of Jerry Plimpton, and the splendid things he represented, indubitably lay between Gladys Norworth and Cordelia Marlowe. And Cordelia did not doubt that she would win out over Gladys, and she now let her full powers express themselves in the pleasant effort to attract Jerry.

For the present, of course, it would not be wise to let an open courtship develop. That must wait until she was through with the important business she now had in hand—till she was free from the necessity of keeping on amicable terms with the easily aroused Gladys, who had her own private dreams concerning Jerry. But Cordelia was in no hurry; it suited her perfectly to drift along for a time in this close friendship. Also Jerry was not the man to be hurried. He regarded marriage too seriously to be likely to be swept incautiously off his feet by any sudden tide of emotion; Jerry would give his judgment ample time to consider any urgent recommendations of his heart.

All in all she was most happy with the situation as it stood. Of course there was suspense—great suspense. But when she had decided that her time was ready—then there would be certainty.

Again within her was a swift overwhelming upward rush, as though the whole soul of her were a geyser of gratitude. How great had been her fortune—how great her skill and efforts—that had saved her from going down in disaster two weeks before—that had kept her up here on her old plane of existence, where she could meet Jerry Plimpton! At no time since her escape, had her escape seemed so marvellous a blessing as now when she was sitting here smile to smile with Jerry.

There came an interruption: Lily advancing on their table, followed by her mother and Mr. Franklin. Cordelia introduced the two men. They bowed and shook hands formally.

"Just what Mr. Franklin is that, Cordelia?" Jerry asked, when he and Cordelia were again alone.

Cordelia told him about Mr. Franklin; not quite everything, to be sure.

"So he's *that* Mr. Franklin—and your family's new lawyer," mused Jerry. "He should prove a real help to you. I've heard quite a bit about him. They say he's an able citizen and a comer."

At another table the irrepressible Lily was whispering: "I say, Mr. Franklin—what do you think of that pair? I'll bet you Cordelia marries him!"

"Indeed!" remarked Mr. Franklin. He glanced across at Cordelia and Jerry, and his pleasant expression did not change. "If appearances count for anything, Miss Lily, you'll likely win your bet, for they do look a well-matched pair."

Cordelia's eye caught Mr. Franklin's gaze upon her. His pleasant look warmed into a pleasant smile. She smiled brightly back. Indeed she was going to be nice to Mr. Franklin.

Yes . . . this was simply a wonderful day!

CHAPTER X

MITCHELL IS INVESTIGATED

CORDELIA drove back to Rolling Meadows in soaring spirits after her gratifying day in town. Her thoughts were inclined to play about Jerry Plimpton, and that brilliant future whose brilliance was to be jointly hers and Jerry's. But the practical aspects of her situation intruded upon these pleasant prospects, and regretfully she let practicality force fancy into subsidence. Before she could try to turn these dreams, which included Jerry, into a permanent reality, she had to clear up this situation at Rolling Meadows; and as her roadster sped on she considered what should be her next steps in trying to discover the fundamental facts of the mystery.

Again she wished she might go straight to Esther or Gladys and ask for and be given their confidence; that would be so much the finer and simpler way. But she realized that this direct approach was closed to her; they would make denial or refuse to talk; and with them thus put upon their guard, she would be able to learn nothing from observing them. There was no other course but for her to continue to be a spy. She hated being a spy, even a spy in a good cause; but espionage seemed the only hope for finding a remedy for, and bringing relief to, this situation.

She felt no such compunctions over spying upon Mitchell: Mitchell, that semi-scoundrel, or great villain, who held

Gladys and Esther in his soft and supple but relentless hands. Mitchell, as she and Mr. Franklin had agreed, was the one above all others to be watched and studied. It occurred to Cordelia that even an investigation of Mitchell's room might reveal some enlightening facts concerning this pseudo and real butler. With Mitchell now in the city, this afternoon might afford her the ideal opportunity for an investigation of Mitchell's effects.

But when, towards six, Cordelia hurried up the terrace at Rolling Meadows, there was Mitchell, again in his formal black coat, starting into the doorway with the tea-tray. He saw her, and waited with that impersonal formality of his until she was upon the porch.

"Shall I serve you tea, Miss Marlowe?"

"If you please, Mitchell. Have Miss Norworth and Miss Stevens had theirs?"

"They finished just a few minutes ago. They are now playing with Master François."

She thought rapidly. "If I am to have tea alone, then bring it to my sitting-room."

"Yes, Miss Marlowe. I'll have fresh tea up there for you within five minutes."

She hastened to her suite. This might be her chance, through adroit questioning, to learn something about Mitchell. But her questions had to be indeed adroit; seemingly without purpose beyond mere personal curiosity; otherwise the man might take alarm, and his alarm might mean the end of all her plans here. She knew Mitchell had it in his power to secure the swift termination of her visit.

"I saw you in the city to-day, Mitchell," she began as he set down the tray before her.

"Yes, Miss Marlowe. I had a few hours off and I went in to attend to a little business."

"I thought you saw me."

"Yes, Miss Marlowe."

"But you refused to meet my eye, to speak to me."

"A butler who knows his place, Miss Marlowe, does not expect to be recognized in public by the guests of his employer."

He stood respectfully before her, with the air of being entirely at her command. Never before had he seemed more the perfect butler; never more bounded by the rigid conventions of his position.

"But you do not seem like the average butler, Mitchell. You seem to be—well, something very different."

"I once hoped and intended to be something different."

"Then how did it happen that you became a butler?"

"It started in college when I—"

"Then you're a college man?"

"Yes, Miss Marlowe."

"What college?"

"If you will pardon me, I would rather not say. My parents also expected me to be something different; I would not want their pride to be hurt by finding out what I am now doing."

"I see. You're trying to hide your identity?"

"Yes, Miss Marlowe. So long as I remain a butler. Telling you my college might somehow betray my identity."

"Yes, I see. Then I suppose Mitchell is not your real name?"

"No, Miss Marlowe."

"I understand. You started to tell me how you became a butler. Won't you please go on?"

"It's really a very commonplace experience, Miss Marlowe. My people were poor and I had to work my way through college. For four years I worked in, then managed,

a college eating club. My first two summers I was a waiter in a big resort hotel. That was the best paying work I could get during summers. Then one summer I was chief steward on board a private yacht. The owner liked me, seemed to have confidence in me, and the next summer he put me in charge of his country house as butler. My parents needed financial help just then; I could earn more, at least could save more, as a butler than by doing anything else; so I remained with this gentleman as butler for over a year. I had managed to save more than my parents needed so I started to take a special course in electrical engineering. But before I had finished my course my money gave out and I started to work for a firm of engineers. But when the War was over, and I was demobilized—”

“Then you were in service?”

“Yes, Miss Marlowe.”

“Under the name of Mitchell, or your own?”

“Under neither, Miss Marlowe. I joined in with the Canadians at the beginning of the War. I was afraid my enlisting might cause complications with my own country, so I took another name—just as many other Americans did.”

“Go on, please.”

“I was among the last to be demobilized. You will recall what a hard time the soldiers, particularly those who were last discharged, had in getting their old jobs back. I could not get mine, nor any other like it. No one seemed to want an ex-soldier; especially a sickly one, for I still felt the effects of being gassed. But there were plenty of chances in household service, so I decided to turn again to that. I learned that Miss Norworth needed a butler, and she gave me my present place. It's light work here, and I'm keeping the place until I get back my strength.”

"Miss Norworth and Miss Stevens were in France during the War. Perhaps you met them in Paris?"

"No, Miss Marlowe."

"Of course, Mitchell, you do not intend to remain a butler?"

"I like it here; they are good to me, and a butler could have no better place. But of course I have other ambitions. With the experience I have had in managing household affairs I have thought I might do better to drop the idea of being an engineer and start a restaurant, in New York—that is, if I can find a partner with capital; a small restaurant, but with an appeal to a discriminating clientele."

"You should make a success of it. I'm sure every one will wish the very best for you."

"Thank you, Miss Marlowe. Pardon me for having talked so much about myself—I'm sure your tea must have become quite cold. Shall I get you some hot tea and toast?"

"What you have told me has been most interesting. Don't bother about fresh tea, for I'm quite through. You may take the tray."

He had picked up the tray and was starting from the room, when she thought of something else.

"By the way, Mitchell, last night you began to tell me something, or ask me something. I suppose it was something important?"

"Yes, Miss Marlowe."

"Important to you?"

"Yes, Miss Marlowe."

"And perhaps important to other persons?" she suggested.

"Well—yes, Miss Marlowe."

"Perhaps you have changed your mind, and would like to tell me as you first intended."

"That impulse of last night was wrong, Miss Marlowe."

"I think I should not tell you." He waited for a moment. "Is there anything else you wish, Miss Marlowe?"

"That is all, Mitchell."

After he had gone, Cordelia sat considering the things he had told her. She had trapped him in two lies. He had said he had not met Gladys and Esther in France; she happened to know that he had known them in Paris very well indeed. He had spoken about still being weak from having been gassed; she recalled the ease with which he had lifted her from the floor the previous night, recalled the steely strength of the hands that had supported her up the stairway. What a liar the man was! And that rigmarole explaining how he had become a butler; paying his way through college by working in an eating club, and in summer working in hotels and private families—all that long tale was just pure invention!

Examining the details of the interview one by one, she could not find a single item which she felt she could safely regard as a fact. As an investigation, the interview had been a failure.

As she sat thinking, a disquieting doubt filtered into her consciousness. After all, had she really been the person who had directed that interview? Mitchell's story, such as it was, had come out with surprising ease, requiring no urging at all from her. Instead of her having adroitly drawn his story from him, might the fact not be that he had been adroitly thrusting that story upon her? And if so, what was his purpose?

And again she wondered what was that thing which he had been upon the point of telling or asking her. He piqued her curiosity more than ever. More than ever did she feel that the matter of first importance in her business was to get at the truth behind this man.

The opportunity to go through his effects came after breakfast the following morning. Cordelia was in Esther's sitting-room, and she and Esther and Gladys were playing with François, as was the custom while his governess had her breakfast. There was a knock, and Mitchell stepped in.

"Excuse me," he said. "I have come for Master François."

Esther looked up from the paper elephant she was cutting out, and regarded him coldly.

"You need not bother. Jeanne will be here in a few minutes."

"Jeanne wanted to look after Master François' laundry, and I promised her I would take him out for his walk." He turned to the boy. "Would Master François like to come with Mitchell?"

"Yes, Mitchell!" the boy cried, jumping up and running across the room, his paper menagerie fluttering to the floor. "You'll tell me a story?"

"After I've taken you for a walk and shown you the bunny I bought you in town yesterday. It came this morning."

"A bunny—oh, Mitchell! A really live bunny that can really eat?"

"It can really eat, Master François."

"Come on, Mitchell! Let's run!"

"Master François must first say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mother Esther—good-bye, Mother Gladys—good-bye, Mother Cordelia. Now come on, Mitchell!"

François seized the man's hand and excitedly led Mitchell from the room. Cordelia caught a quick flush in Esther's cheek and a swift angry flash in Gladys' eye; and she wondered again what was Mitchell's real purpose in court-

ing the boy's liking: to show his velvet power?—to taunt and tease them?—or might his impulse be a real affection for François?—a father's affection?

But this was no time to follow up these conjectures. Here was her chance: Mitchell out on the grounds, the other servants at breakfast. Cordelia excused herself and, once out of the room, she hurried for the wing containing the servants' quarters. Mitchell's room adjoined the trunk-room; if seen in this part of the house, her explanation would be that she had come for some article she had left in a trunk.

Of course his room was probably locked. Cautiously she tried the door. It was not locked, and breathlessly she slipped in. Her quick glance showed her a room whose formal orderliness matched Mitchell's butler personality. She did not expect to find a great deal here; Mitchell was too shrewd a person to be likely to leave anything of real importance about; the most she hoped for was a bare clue either to his identity or to his power over the household.

There were a number of books—not many. To her on her present business they were vaguely suggestive, rather than definitely informative. There were a number of volumes dealing with problems of electrical engineering; and a few novels—"Tom Jones," "Vanity Fair," "Gil Blas," "Don Quixote," Meredith's "The Egoist." Rapid as was her survey, she retained a dim impression that the man's fictional preference was toward comedy and satire.

She turned to his drawers and went swiftly through them, then through his closet, scrutinizing each garment and then replacing each article exactly as she found it. His clothes were all of the best, even of the quality a Jerry Plimpton might have worn, but aside from the makers' names, they were unmarked or bore the admittedly assumed

name of Mitchell. Only two articles of any possible significance did she come upon. One was a bank-book in Mitchell's name, showing a credit of a trifle over three hundred dollars, the plausible savings of a servant; it made her think of a safe deposit box, where his real savings, the tribute he had collected here, and his important documents were doubtless hidden away, and it begot in her a desire some day to learn the secrets of that box.

The second article was a letter which she found in the coat Mitchell had worn the day before in town. It was addressed care of General Delivery, New York City, was stamped as received on the previous day, and was upon the stationary of a Cleveland hotel; and address, contents and signature were all typewritten, with many clumsy, amateurish erasures and corrections in the body of the letter. The letter read:

Dear Buddie:

That last two thousand you sent was was a life-saver. A million thanks. Perhaps I have been trying to expand the business a little too rapidly, but the profits will prove this has been the right course. Of course I could have done nothing without the help of your money, and you are going to have half the profits even if you won't take a partnership in the business. I'm still keeping my name out of the firm—still sticking to 'Excelsior'—so that we can use your name if you change your mind and decide to come in.

Of course I don't blame you for not wanting to come out here and buckle down to this routine drudgery, when you are cleaning up so much coin in New York. I wish you would open up and tell me how you are making all that dough. I didn't know that an out-

sider had a chance against those New York business sharps. Not unless a fellow went into the bandit or bootlegging business.

You are certainly the best and squarest pal a guy ever had!

But say, boy, for a clever business man you are running a big risk in sending your remittances to me in the form of drafts payable to "Cash" and "Bearer." Any professional mail-looter would give three silent cheers to get his hands on one of those. Better be more careful.

I'm beginning to get the hang of this damned vest-pocket typewriter you make me lug around to write my letters to you on. Though I don't yet quite see the idea of your wanting all my letters to you type-written, and type-written by my own five-thumbed hands.

May the goddess who adorns the dollar continue to regard you as her favorite child!

Yours till Gabriel toots for final demobilization.

J.

Cordelia returned the letter to the pocket from which she had taken it, and a minute later she was hurrying away in feverish thought. Who was this "J."? Also she asked herself the two questions which "J." implied: why was "J." required to write on a typewriter?—and why was money sent payable to cash or bearer?

In a few moments Cordelia had the answers, or at least she thought she had: these were obviously measures to prevent names appearing anywhere on paper which might later disconcertingly appear as evidence, and to prevent betrayal by an identifiable handwriting.

This letter which had told so little that was definite, had

made Mitchell a still more intriguing personality. Evidently "J." liked him, admired him, trusted him. Mitchell must have a lot of qualities she had not guessed behind that expressionless butler's mask of his.

Obeying a subconscious purpose, she had, all the while she had been thinking of this letter, been moving about the grounds in search of Mitchell; and now in a quiet spot shut off from the sight of the house she glimpsed Mitchell and François and the rabbit which could really eat. This was still another Mitchell she now saw; not he of butler's coat, not he of smart Fifth Avenue garb, not he of that voice of taunting quality which had come to her in the darkness from the open window. He was seated on the grass, the rapt François on his lap, both watching the really live rabbit nibbling at a lettuce leaf; and Mitchell was talking, and his face had an eager, good-humored smile—almost a boyish smile—which matched that of François; and when he laughed his laugh seemed to have as much the ring of spontaneous care-free happiness as that of the boy. Mitchell was undoubtedly having a gorgeous time.

Cordelia slipped away unnoted. Who—*who*—and what—was the real Mitchell?

CHAPTER XI

CORDELIA SEEKS A WAY

CORDELIA wanted a place where she could think undisturbed upon this puzzle of contradictions that Mitchell had become and upon the other problems of her business at Rolling Meadows. She remembered the child's play-house which was being set in order to accommodate the overflow of guests at Gladys' week-end party but which at the present moment was unoccupied. She crossed the grounds, entered the play-house and seated herself at that same open window which looked out upon the syringa bush beneath which she had crouched listening two midnights before.

Less than thirty-six hours had passed since Cordelia had discovered the dominating position of Mitchell in the household at Rolling Meadows, and during this period she had been too much concerned with her information and her actions to settle down quietly and attempt to apply sober reason to the facts she had acquired. To this task she now gave herself; and if Cordelia in all her life had ever reasoned carefully, flawlessly, she believed she was now so doing.

The secret, whatever it might be, was apparently known to just three persons: Gladys, Esther and Mitchell. There were probably no documents or papers of any kind containing the secret which the closest search would enable her to lay hands upon; such valuable and dangerous evidence, even if it had ever existed, was destroyed or else hidden away be-

yond possible finding. This meant that the only sources from which the truth might be learned were the lips of the three; and this conclusion very naturally suggested in turn the business of virtuous eavesdropping. From the popular literature of detection Cordelia had some vague knowledge of dictaphones, and other devices for bringing the cautious ear into proximity with incautious lips; but a little further thought caused her to dismiss entirely the stock-in-trade strategy of listening. Even should she manage again to hear the three in conversation, she would probably learn no more than she already knew. The facts behind this situation were probably so old, so thoroughly accepted by the three, that they would never mention them. These old facts, the entire story—this was what was wanted.

And then the only possible way came to her. She had to secure the full story directly from the lips of one of the three.

That was indeed a difficult task. It would be difficult enough just to unseal any pair of those lips; and it was made more difficult by the necessity that her act should not seem the result of intention, and should not arouse suspicion.

One by one she considered the three, beginning with Mitchell. Mitchell had shrewdness, poise, self-control; he was making a profit out of this secret; to give up the secret would mean to him to give up his profit. She could not imagine the butler ever being so thrown off his guard that he would involuntarily let slip the truth; and he would not tell voluntarily unless he saw that telling would be greatly to his profit. Mitchell, she decided, was out of the question.

Further thought also removed the lips of Esther. Esther also had too much self-control, though of a different order

from Mitchell's, ever to be startled into any unpremeditated disclosure. If she ever told, it would be because she had come to a reasoned decision to tell.

That left Gladys. Gladys was the one who was paying money, the one most desperately determined to keep the unknown facts unguessed. She was the central figure; and from the standpoint of Cordelia's purpose, she was the weakest figure of the affair. For the autocratic, self-centered Gladys had never been schooled to control of any kind; anger, selfishness, whatever strong feeling rose in her, possessed her utterly for the minutes or hours that the storm might last.

Cordelia decided she would get the secret of Gladys from the lips of Gladys.

Just what was that secret—probably? Among all possible secrets, just what was the one possible secret that an unmarried, socially proud young woman would most desperately desire to keep hidden?—would pay most readily and lavishly to keep suppressed?

Cordelia felt no great surprise when, by swift elimination, she reached the answer; for the answer had been lurking unphrased in her mind since she had overheard the voices two nights before in the play-house. An illegitimate child, of course. François was Gladys' son.

The story of his being a French war orphan, the elaborate business of his French and American legal adoption by Gladys and Esther—all this was just careful camouflage to protect the proud name and high position of Gladys. François had been born in France; Mitchell had known Gladys and Esther in France; therefore Mitchell probably had first-hand knowledge of the facts. No wonder he had power over Gladys!

Of course it was possible, as she had before thought, that

Mitchell was the boy's father. That would explain his apparently real affection for François. He might even be the husband of Gladys. No, on further thought his being Gladys' husband did not seem likely. With a husband living in her own house, Gladys would hardly care to pose as single and to be matrimonially interested in Jerry Plimpton.

But these speculations were at best no more than speculations. She had to have facts. How was she to get facts such as she suspected from the lips of Gladys? Her end was laudable—to help Mr. Franklin free Gladys from her entanglement; and any means was justifiable. She thought long; and at length she decided that her best procedure would be to play upon Gladys' great weakness, her lack of self-control. Aroused to anger, to fear, Gladys might entirely lose herself, and suddenly incited by just the right happening or even just the right phrase, the fundamental facts might come tumbling forth from her momentarily unguarded lips. Of course the exact procedure that Cordelia would use would have largely to be determined and shaped by opportunity.

Of this meditated quality of Gladys' temper Cordelia had an almost immediate illustration, for at this point in her thoughts Gladys walked into the play-house. There was hot color in her cheeks and an angry light in her green eyes.

"I thought you were going to help me settle that trouble over the orchestra for Saturday night's dance?" she said almost sharply.

"So I am. I was just starting back to the house. Come on."

"One minute!" Gladys caught Cordelia's arm. "Ailine Harkness just called up a minute ago about the party. She

said she saw you and Jerry Plimpton lunching together yesterday. Is that so?"

"Yes. Why not? Jerry and I are old friends."

"You were behaving as though you were a lot more than just old friends!"

Cordelia began to grow hot at this ungoverned arrogance. "Gladys—say right out just what you mean!"

"You know what I mean! I told you that—well, you know, that there is almost an understanding between Jerry Plimpton and me. And that night at Jackie Thorndike's you the same as promised not to cut in. Are you trying to double-cross me?"

"Gladys Norworth! Do you want me to pack my things and go home?"

"Not if you aren't—"

"Say anything more like what you've just said and I'll slap your face! Now let loose of my arm!"

Gladys glared, hesitated, then obeyed; but her eyes still gleamed with her sullen anger. Cordelia quickly regained her self-control; a break would mean her leaving Rolling Meadows before the mystery here was solved.

"Don't be silly, Gladys. I have a lot of friends who are also your friends, and every time I accept a courtesy from one of them you shouldn't construe it as an act of conspiracy against you."

"Well, I didn't mean to be unfair," Gladys said grudgingly. "But you know what I think about Jerry Plimpton. And you know, or you've guessed, that it's mainly because of him that I'm giving this party."

"I'll see that at your party you have the right of way with Jerry as far as I am concerned. Now let's see to that orchestra."

Her mission here at Rolling Meadows was none too easy,

Cordelia mused wryly, with the two of them both having intentions toward Jerry Plimpton. Rivals! Well, as she had decided while lunching with Jerry the day before, she'd have to avoid danger by keeping Jerry at a distance till she was well out of this business.

She thought much of this flare-up of Gladys on Jerry Plimpton's account; could this ever-ready resentment be so inflamed and played upon that it could be made to lead to the revelation she sought? As the days passed she considered other possible means and qualities that might be used to sweep Gladys into the necessary frenzy of uncontrol; her temper still seemed the best; but Cordelia could settle upon no definite procedure.

On Friday the guests began to come, and by Saturday afternoon some score had answered the roll call of hospitality. There were Jackie and Murray Thorndike, Ailine and Peter Harkness, Jerry Plimpton, Kyle Brandon and a small host who have no individual place in this history. Cordelia tried to keep her promise to Gladys by avoiding any semblance of a tête-à-tête with Jerry Plimpton; she noted that Jerry was surprised by her behavior and she was secretly pleased thereat. Gladys very openly absorbed him. He seemed to enjoy her attention; perhaps pique at Cordelia may have had something to do with his apparent pleasure. But then Gladys was at her very best in Jerry's company, and Gladys when she tried to be her best was second in attractiveness to few indeed. Charm, plus beauty, plus position, plus great wealth—here is a feminine total almost irresistible.

On Friday evening before dinner, according to an arrangement Gladys had made in her invitation, up in Gladys' sitting-room, there was another of those little reunions of the four old Harcourt chums—Cordelia, Gladys, Jackie, and

Ailine. Rather promptly Gladys excused herself from the gathering. She had her duties as a hostess, she explained; her real reason was that Jerry Plimpton was waiting down in the library.

The talk of the three friends who remained was, as was the case at their meetings, almost entirely about themselves. The pretty, eager, gay Ailine, of the tireless and talented feet, was a-gush with Peter's recent successes in Wall Street. Though a broker, and theoretically supposed to make his money from executing commissions, Peter played the market on his own account. His profits for the last few months, said the flushed Ailine, had amounted to over a quarter of a million; and that week they had bought the Fernwold house, just off Fifth Avenue in the Seventies, and were redecorating it throughout. It was not going to be anything elaborate, you know; it couldn't be, for altogether it was only going to cost three hundred thousand; but it was going to be very much nicer than what they now had—they could entertain ever so much better.

Cordelia was pleased to learn of Ailine's and Peter's good fortune. They were lavish spenders, both of them; they liked to keep pace with their richest and smartest acquaintances; and sometimes their friends feared that their combined inheritance, none too large for such living, was being severely strained by their prodigal inclination. It was indeed splendid that Peter was doing so well that they did not have to worry about money; and Cordelia congratulated Ailine heartily upon her good news.

Her tale completed, Ailine left them, giving her reason frankly, with her sparkling smile. There was to be a small informal dance that night; one of the men was an exceptional dancer; and she had promised to meet him before dinner to talk over some exhibition dances they might give.

Dear big old heavy Peter was no dancer, and he good-naturedly let her do just as she pleased about partners. In fact, the spirited, tireless, pretty Ailine did just as she pleased about almost everything; and almost every one—particularly all the men—seemed pleased to have her do it.

Ailine was a sprite—a darling!

When Ailine was gone, Jackie drew closer to Cordelia and said: "I'm glad to have you all to myself at last for a minute or two, Cordie, old dear. I want you to do something for me."

"There's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you, Jackie." That was exactly as Cordelia felt toward her room-mate at Harcourt Hall, her especial chum of their especial quartette. "What is it?"

"You've been visiting Gladys long enough. I want you to say good-bye to her, and come along home with me and spend the summer."

"I can hardly do that, Jackie. I've already promised to stay the summer with Gladys."

"Gladys doesn't need you. And I *do* need you."

The abrupt emphasis of Jackie's last statement made Cordelia start.

"You need me! Why?"

Jackie slowly knocked the ash from her cigarette, lifted her white shoulders, then composedly looked Cordelia straight in the eyes.

"I rather believe you guess why, Cordie, so there's no reason I shouldn't put it into plain words. Murray and I don't seem to be as popular with each other as we used to be. I'm not seeing a lot of Murray these days, and it's a bit lonely being a married widow."

Cordelia was aware of this situation. She liked the restless, generous, impulsive Jackie, and she liked the easy-

going Murray, and she had felt genuine regret over this development.

"And I rather think you know why Murray isn't about the house very much," Jackie continued. "A lot of people seem to know why. It's that French dancer Ziegfeld brought over and put into his last revue."

Cordelia knew this also.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Oh, we're keeping up the appearance of a happy home."

"But, Jackie, if you really tried I'm sure you could keep Murray away from all the dancers in the world."

Again Jackie lifted her beautiful shoulders.

"Perhaps yes. Perhaps no. But that's not the business before the present meeting. The business is, I need you and I'm asking you to come. Are you coming?"

"I'm sorry, Jackie. I've just told you why I can't come."

"Well, then, at least promise me this much: come if you find you can come."

"Of course I'll promise that."

Cordelia went on to express sympathy but Jackie interrupted. No need to worry about her; this was just about what marriage was like; Cordelia would find this out for herself after she'd been married a few years.

Nevertheless all Friday evening Cordelia did feel keen regret over the situation between Jackie and Murray; though whenever she looked at them, each seemed to be happy enough, and several times she saw them dancing together.

On Saturday afternoon Mr. Franklin motored out, as had been planned. He was going on down to Southampton to work a little and play a little golf over Sunday. Cordelia watched him closely when he was introduced to Gladys and a little later when Mitchell, thinking him a guest, asked about his bags. To neither of these two did Franklin be-

tray by any slightest move or inflection that he had any interest other than that of a chance visitor. Particularly did Cordelia watch, with a little catch in her breath, when the butler and the lawyer faced each other, both strong, subtle men. Each played his part to perfection. With a little anticipatory thrill of excitement, Cordelia wondered what would be the scene and what its outcome if ever these two men should meet with masks removed.

Toward the guests he met, Franklin had an easy yet unobtrusive manner. Several knew him slightly, more had heard of him. Cordelia noted that Gladys appraised him thoughtfully; well-mannered, well-dressed single men of standing are to be recorded as possible social assets. Cordelia admired the way he bore himself; each time she saw him she found she was raising her estimate of him. He seemed so courteously reserved, so strictly holding himself out of other people's affairs; yet she was certain that not a thing was escaping him. As a matter of fact, he was seeing even more than she thought.

Toward the middle of the afternoon the entire party went down to the beach; and presently, as she and Franklin walked along the beach apart from the others, Cordelia was telling him of her further discoveries concerning Mitchell, her conclusions concerning Gladys, and of her projected method of procedure. He approved her energy and her judgment. Again Cordelia pulsed warmly under his praise; it was indeed something to have one's ability recognized by so able a man as Mr. Franklin.

He cautioned her, however, against trying to move too rapidly. He would advise that she consult him before taking her next step. As a matter of fact, Mr. Franklin was seeing before himself the danger of her learning too much, getting too far into the inside. If that came to pass, it

would complicate immensely his own subtle, delicately adjusted plans.

He saw that the two of them were being observed by the guests, and he held Cordelia in conversation as much as he dared. He knew that he was establishing the impression among this smart company that he and the very popular, Cordelia Marlowe were friends—and that was well. He was thinking of feigning illness in order that he might remain at Rolling Meadows and improve upon his opportunity. But this deception was not necessary; for on their return to the house Gladys, having noted his attentiveness to Cordelia and seeing him as a further barrier between Cordelia and Jerry Plimpton, promptly invited him to stay on over the weekend. After a decent hesitation he accepted.

Thus came about Mr. Franklin's introduction to Rolling Meadows and its circle. Behind his pleasant, composed features was a mighty exultation over the success of his manoeuvres. First, Cordelia Marlowe had come his way. And now, hardly more than two weeks later, he was among these people—a guest—one of them! Oh, but he was getting on!

CHAPTER XII

HOW CORDELIA LEARNED THE TRUTH

SATURDAY night's dance was a real dance; a dance to please the dancingest and thirstiest dancers. The guests, accustomed to the gaiety, even the abandon of week-end parties, were soon bent upon making this the gayest of the season. To this spirited abandon they were incited partially by the music, which was a smiling, gurgling, swaying negro orchestra; and partially by the plentitude and potency of the punch, champagne and whiskey. Gladys, knowing what would be expected from one who intended to be a popular hostess all her life, had on her return from France laid in a forty years' supply of wines and liquors while buying was still legal.

Cordelia tried to hold herself in abeyance. This was Gladys' party, and she wished Gladys to have the pleasure and the credit that are properly the hostess'. But she could not help it that she was more in demand as a partner than any other woman; always it had been so; and secretly she gloried in this popularity, else she would have been something other than her sex. Whenever there was a dispute among claimants for a dance, she invariably gave her favor to Mr. Franklin; he was her guest, and then a further reason was that choosing a neutral, an outsider, would excite the least jealousy among her men friends; and so she found that a third of her dances were with Franklin, who to her surprise proved to be one of the best dancers in the party. This man could apparently do everything!

She had a few dances with Kyle Brandon. As before, he talked with enthusiasm of her possibilities as a great motion picture star. Also he told her he was now getting busy on that pageant to be given at his aunt's, Mrs. Phipps-Morse. It was going to a big thing; the biggest of its kind ever attempted. And Cordelia's part was looking bigger and better every hour he thought it over. She was going to like the part. Just wait and see!

Despite all her seeming care-free gaiety, Cordelia took in everything that was happening. She noted, with a stab of jealousy, that Gladys' most frequent partner was Jerry Plimpton. As for herself, she had not once danced with Jerry. Well—that was just as she had planned it.

And her eyes went inevitably to Mitchell, presiding imperterbably over the servants at the buffet, or moving with his butler's perfect impersonality among the hilarious guests. Again and again the thought shivered through her: what would this smart crowd think and do, if that carved expressionless face should suddenly alter and he should drop into their joyous midst the bomb of what she guessed to be the truth.

But the most persistent, most enduring merry-makers eventually grow weary, even when stimulated by wine more precious than diamonds and rubies. By four o'clock half the guests were in their beds, and the crowd was rapidly dwindling, though the grinning, singing negroes twanged guitars and blew into saxophones with an unabated vigor which suggested that they could maintain their musical pace until old Marse Gabriel sounded his clarion signal for them to drop these instruments and take up harps of gold. Not until this hour did Cordelia have her first dance with Jerry Plimpton, which she told him was to be her last for the night;

and as they danced she noted that Gladys was swaying in the arms of Franklin.

"Let's have a bit of fresh air before you go up," Jerry remarked when the dance was concluded; and on Cordelia's acceding, he led her out upon the porch and over to a shadowed corner. Neither was conscious that Gladys and Franklin had also stepped forth, apparently with this same desire for air.

Nor for that matter, did any of the four know that the cautious, ubiquitous Mitchell was watching every move of them all.

"Now I've got you here and you've got to listen to me, Cordie," Jerry grumbled reprovingly. "Why have you been dodging me the whole evening?"

"Have I been dodging you?"

"In that very answer you try to dodge me again. Till just now you haven't danced with me once. Each time I asked you, you had all the next dances promised. What was the grand idea in treating me just as if I wasn't here?"

"It gave you all the more chance to pay your respects to your hostess."

"Oh, Gladys can go to—" He checked himself. "You are not going to get away with a thing like this without paying for it. And a big penalty."

"What, for instance?"

"I'll let you pay in instalments. The first instalment is, I'm going to kiss you."

"You've drunk too much, Jerry. Don't be a fool."

"I'd sure be a fool if I didn't."

He slipped his arms about her and kissed her. This was far from being the first time Cordelia had been kissed, and she neither felt surprised nor did she pretend resistance. Also she recognized instantly that Jerry's kiss was not that of

a driving love, and she felt no lifting thrill. Rather it was the semi-maudlin sentimental kiss that has for its inception equal parts of titillating music, alcohol, and languorous summer darkness. Jerry could undoubtedly be the serious lover, but he was not the serious lover now, and wisdom cautioned her against letting his sentimentality sweep onward into temporary fervor.

She loosed his embrace and moved a pace from him. "You've had too much punch, Jerry. Behave. Let's go in now. I want to go to bed."

"Not till you pay another instalment."

He kissed her again. Then they strolled back in, and a minute later Cordelia was on her way to her room.

Franklin and Gladys had seen, in shadowy silhouette, the embrace and kisses; but had not heard the whispered words and so did not know the rather tepid quality of the dalliance. Franklin felt Gladys' fingers bite into his arm; and that clutch violently affirmed all that his watchfulness during the evening had told him. For his own part, what the kissing suggested suited him no better than it did Gladys. But he controlled his wits; he perceived that in one respect at least the girl beside him was an ally.

"I presume those two are engaged," he murmured softly, and with subtle purpose, after Cordelia and Jerry had gone in.

"She—she told me—there was nothing between them," Gladys returned, speaking with greatest difficulty.

"I'm sure they must be engaged," he insisted in his soft, even voice. "I said as much to myself when I saw them at lunch at the Grantham the other day. You should have seen their manner to each other; there was no mistaking its meaning. They are undoubtedly engaged, and for some reason are hiding it for the present."

"Excuse me," Gladys choked out, and was gone.

Franklin was satisfied. He had handled this situation very skilfully. He had put a spoke into that wheel! He had, indeed—but even the very clever Mr. Franklin was hardly clever enough to foresee just how that spoke was going to affect the running gear of his own very complicated plans.

Cordelia had been in her room no more than a moment, and before starting to undress was before her long mirror for a final appraisal of how she had looked during the evening, when her door was violently opened, as violently closed, and there stood Gladys, her white bosom heaving spasmodically, her green eyes blazing with wild accusation and mad hatred.

"Gladys! What on earth is the matter with you?" Cordelia exclaimed.

Gladys came toward her, body tensely bent, fingers crooked like talons. "You liar, you!" she shrilled gaspingly. "You—you dirty liar!"

Cordelia stiffened, and a dangerous look came into her own eyes. "What's this about?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, you damned sneaking liar!" screamed Gladys.

"Are you crazy? Do you want all your guests to hear you? If you've got anything to say, at least lower your voice."

"Let them hear me! I'd like nothing better than to have them know the truth about you! The sort you are!"

There was, however, little likelihood of the guests hearing even this shrill, defiant voice; for the rooms of Cordelia, Gladys and Esther were side by side at the front of the house, and the guest-rooms were all in the wings and to reach these rooms the guests did not have to pass through

the part of the house where Gladys and Cordelia now faced each other. Nevertheless, Gladys' fortissimo of anger had in her last words subsided to a less penetrating tone.

"Out with it quick!" ordered Cordelia angrily. "What are you trying to say?"

"As if you didn't know! I saw you kissing him! Kissing Jerry Plimpton!"

"So that's it? What's that to you?"

"What's it to me? Why—why—kissing him after you told me he was nothing to you—after you had promised not to interfere between him and me! Why—why—Oh, I could kill you, you rat!"

Gladys' face twisted and writhed with the vehemence of unlovely passion. All that was primitive, elemental, childish and savagely direct in her undisciplined selfishness, now ruled her utterly. She felt no shame, no reticence, no restraint due to the mere habits of civilized manners; she was just an uncontrollable flame of mad egotism.

Cordelia herself had never been more angry. She had come here to try to save this girl. Why, Gladys didn't deserve saving!

But before Cordelia's temper escaped its leash, there flashed upon her partial remembrance of the inspiration she had had the other day in the child's play-house. If she could only make Gladys lose all control, in either anger or fear! At this moment Cordelia was conscious of no clear plan, but she proceeded exactly as if guided by one.

Her manner was angry, but her anger was assumed. Also her manner was taunting.

"Why shouldn't I kiss Jerry? Jerry seemed to like it. And what makes you so angry? Because Jerry didn't prefer to kiss you?"

"Get out of my house! You hear me! Get out of my house! You cheap flirt! Kissing like a cheap shop girl on a park bench!"

"At least, Gladys dear, Jerry chose to kiss me, and not you!"

It was an unseemly, unsightly quarrel between the star graduates of fine old Harcourt Hall. Gladys grew yet more wild.

"Jerry didn't choose; you made him! You're trying to coax him away with your kisses. You're after his money. Everybody knows you've got barely enough to live on, and that's all! All you've really got is an empty name, and a few good looks, and a cheap popularity, and a scheming head! And you're scheming to get Jerry's money!"

At this Cordelia could barely hold herself in; perhaps it was the element of truth in Gladys' words that so inflamed her. But the growing anger she showed was still directed, acted towards a purpose. She looked as if she were upon the instant of exploding.

"What have you got, you poor ninny? Not a thing but money! You admit I have family, looks, popularity, a good head. And you haven't a thing but money! That's the only way you'll ever get a man's attention—buying it with your money!"

Cordelia had tried to say something which would rouse Gladys to the last limits of her anger; she could have chosen no greater insult.

"Get out of my house! Pack your things this minute! Get out!"

"And you think you can buy Jerry Plimpton with your money—the only thing you have to attract a man! When money is the last thing in a woman that would interest Jerry

Plimpton! You poor fool! Why you know Jerry will never—”

“You shut up!” Gladys’ voice was an almost animal-like snarl. “You get out of my house! Get out! You lie! I’ll show you which of us is the fool! I’ll show you whether I can interest Jerry! I’ll show it to you by being married to him inside of a year!”

Her panting voice cracked in its rage. She was utterly gone, utterly lost. Cordelia’s moment was come, and swiftly she struck.

“You think Jerry Plimpton will marry you? Marry you after you have told him *François is your child?—your illegitimate child?*”

The devastating Gladys swayed back. Her flaming rage was gone as a candle that is suddenly blown out. Her tense figure loosed as though it were about to collapse, her livid features became gray and gaped and twitched with idiot looseness, her green eyes now blinked with stupefying fear and horror.

“How—how did you—find it out?” she finally asked, in a choked whisper.

“I was told.”

“But—they all promised they would never tell!”

The next moment Gladys was abjectly clutching Cordelia, wildly pawing her, pouring out a frantic jumble of words. “You must never tell, Cordelia! Promise me you’ll never tell! Please! For God’s sake! It would ruin me—I couldn’t stand it—and I don’t deserve it! I’ll do anything you ask me to—I’ll give you anything—anything! Please! For God’s sake!”

The very sight of this cringing, cowering creature, the instant before so arrogantly insulting, made Cordelia feel

sick. She wanted to throw off those clutching hands, close her eyes against that slavering face. But before she could reply to Gladys, Gladys had entered a new phase.

"It's all a lie, Cordelia! He is not my child! I swear it! He's Esther's! They've put it on me to shield her! To shield her! Just because by accusing me and threatening me they can make me pay money! I even have to pay Esther. It's the God's truth! I swear it! You believe me, Cordelia—of course you believe me!"

Cordelia pulled away from the hands that had alternately clutched and imploringly patted her.

"Don't lie like that!"

"It's not a lie! It's the God's truth, Cordelia! It's the God's truth! I swear it!"

There was a knock at Cordelia's door. Again Gladys was clinging to Cordelia, whispering frantically.

"Don't make a sound! Don't answer!"

"Come in!" Cordelia called.

The door opened and Esther entered, wearing a dressing-gown.

"I thought I heard Gladys in a temper at you, Cordelia, and I thought I'd better come in and stop her," Esther said. And then with surprise she noted the attitude of the pair, Gladys imploringly holding to Cordelia. "Why this sudden change? What's it all been about?"

"Don't say a word, Cordelia!" Gladys gasped quickly. "Please! I never told that before to anybody, and I'll never let it go any further. Not a word, please—for Esther's sake!"

"What is it?" Esther demanded sharply.

Cordelia's reply was drawn from her not alone by Esther's question; she saw in this new development of the situation her opportunity to learn yet more of the truth.

"I had learned that Gladys was the mother of François, and told her so. She was just denying it and was saying you were his mother."

Esther crossed, took Gladys by one shoulder and looked squarely and sternly into the frightened face for a long moment. Gladys' gaze wavered and fell.

"I—I lost my head," Gladys stammered in a whisper. "It's—it's true about me, Cordelia."

Esther loosed her hold upon her step-sister and turned to Cordelia. "How did you learn of this?"

Cordelia had had her answer prepared these many days, and it came out with convincing simplicity, and in a manner to awaken no suspicion that all this might be the result of preparation and part of a great plan.

"I told Gladys that some one had told me. That was not true; I was angry when I said it. The fact merely is that I had noted a likeness between Gladys and François, and a possibility had popped into my head. A while ago Gladys came in here and was very insulting. I completely lost my temper, and struck back by accusing her of being François' mother. She admitted it. With me, the whole thing was just a shot in the dark that chanced to strike the target. That's all there is to it. And I'm very sorry that I lost my temper."

Cordelia perceived that her explanation had entirely convinced the two.

Again Gladys was eagerly fawning upon her. "It's not so bad as you think, Cordelia. You know only the worst; it's not fair to me to have you think the worst of me. And since you know the worst, I want you to know all of it. Then you'll see that I'm not really to blame, that luck's been unfair to me all the way through. Listen—I'll tell you the whole story."

But just then soft steps were heard crossing the room. The three women whirled about. Coming toward them was Mitchell. He had entered and closed the door so noiselessly that they had not guessed his presence.

"What are you doing here?" Esther demanded sharply.

Cordelia had long been wanting to see the butler's face when it would not be the face of the butler. She again had her wish. The face was keen, and smiling, with the cool, easy, ironical good humor of one who feels himself the thorough master. In this unmasking smile, in this real Mitchell which Cordelia felt she was glimpsing for the first time, there was nothing brutal, nothing vulgar, nothing menacing. A villain and a devil undoubtedly, Cordelia thought—but a gentlemanly devil.

"I'm here, Esther, my dear," Mitchell answered with bland pleasantry, "because I happened to be watching our darling Gladys, and I saw the look on her dear face as she followed Miss Marlowe upstairs. That look made me fear that something was due to happen which might possibly concern me. So I followed Gladys, and—you will all excuse me, I am sure, for you will admit that a gentleman must be prepared to protect his name and his interests—and I listened outside the door. I heard all that was said, for the singing voice of our Gladys has a carrying quality that has been equalled only by Madame Sembrich in her voiciest days. I heard Esther stirring in her room; I got out of sight; I saw her come in here; I decided the party would not be complete without me, and entered just behind her. Is my explanation sufficiently adequate, dear Esther?"

"You will leave us this instant!"

"I'm sorry to appear disobliging to you, Esther; particularly since, as you know, I admire you so thoroughly and since you and I have really always gotten on very well to-

gether. But I must remain; I have business in this company."

"You get out of here!" snapped Gladys in her choking scream. "Get out!"

Mitchell regarded her with sober, rebuking face. "Gladys, I've often told you that I feared I'd be compelled to turn you across my knee and spank you. Unless you compose yourself, I shall have to conduct that somewhat intimate ceremony before the eyes of the present assemblage."

She glowered at him furiously, but held her tongue.

"I shall remain," Mitchell continued, "because I overheard that our little story was to be told in full to Miss Marlowe. I feel that it is my right to be present to check up on the details which concern me, and to see that I am not slandered."

Cordelia, her interest in the story racing ahead, could no longer hold back the surmise which had been with her these many days.

"I already know your part. You are François' father. I've seen how fond you are of him."

Mitchell turned on her a pained, reproachful look.

"You are correct about my being very fond of François, Miss Marlowe"—and at that moment she felt all doubts of the sincerity of his affection for the boy vanish. "But really now, aren't you rather unjust to me when you think that I would choose such a person as Gladys to be the mother of my child?"

"You—you—" choked Gladys.

"Careful, Gladys, careful. Remember your weak heart, and don't forget the dangers of apoplexy. Shall we get along with our history? It's a long story, and I'm sure we will endure it better if we are seated."

He drew chairs together: not with his manner of a butler-

ing automaton, but with smiling ornate courtesy that was seasoned with mockery: mockery which Cordelia sensed was directed chiefly at Gladys. Cordelia could not keep her eyes off his smiling face; she did not know what to make of the man; but somehow she felt growing in her a tentative, dubious liking for him, even though he did seem an undoubted scoundrel.

"And now that we are all comfortable and cozy," continued the easy pleasant voice of Mitchell, "let's unfold our tale."

CHAPTER XIII

A ROMANCE OF REGRET

AND so in the stillness of half-past four in the morning, with the chief figures of Gladys' great world from which she had been striving to hide her story sleeping in profound unsuspection all about her, the hidden and repented romance of Gladys was at last unfolded to Cordelia: Gladys, Esther and Mitchell all contributing their portions to the history. In the telling there was bickering and denial from Gladys, contradictions, explanations, elaborations, corrections from the other two. It revealed no new aspect of Gladys' character: it merely threw into stronger, more dramatic light the Gladys that was known: an heiress of leisure who believed that to her belonged the world, who loved whatever shone brilliantly at the top, whose egotistical will brushed aside all opposition and seized with swift directness what it desired, and who dodged and frantically ran away from any unpleasant consequences of having had her own imperious way.

The tale was a portrait of Gladys' soul. But in truth not of her alone, for New York City, America, has its ten thousand Gladyses: duplicates in soul, differing only in the details of their different social levels.

Reduced to its essentials, and arranged in chronological order, the history which the three told in fragments, was a story which in its earlier phases was matched by scores of love affairs that developed swiftly and rushed to swift con-

summation during the reckless emotionalism of the Great War. In the Paris of that period Romance took no thought of the morrow; that vast belt of bursting shells and stifling gas which bounded northern France had destroyed all certainty of a morrow. To-day was the only certainty; and recklessly, without thought of the future, Romance seized its only chance.

In 1916, Gladys had met a Sergeant Grayson of the Canadian Forces while he was spending his leave in Paris. He was the latest of those young heroes who, at that period, were shining for their brief day with the glory of a supreme fixed star, only to have their brilliant flames flicker swiftly into oblivion. During this day of his glory he was being universally praised, and he had been slated for a commission. The glamour of his fame, the adulation with which his friends exalted him, made him from the first moment a figure of super-fascination to Gladys; and even when on the day of their first meeting he informed her that he was a citizen of the United States, and that until he had crossed into Canada and enlisted he had been a mechanic in a Detroit automobile factory—even that admission of his lowly origin had not lessened her fervid adoration. He was a great hero; the hero of the hour. He was utterly splendid. Within two days they were engaged, and they determined upon marriage before his return to the front.

Gladys now confided her great honor and happiness to Esther Stevens, who was at this time confined to the hospital of the Countess de Crecy with influenza. Esther had opposed the marriage.

"Do you think he's not good enough for me?" Gladys had demanded, "because he was once a mechanic?"

"He may be altogether too good for you. I can't say, since I have never seen him. But that has nothing whatever

to do with my attitude. I am thinking of you both when I say the two of you are now living in a period of hysteria, and when I ask you both to remember that your marriage, entered into in this time of high emotion, will be lived out through sober, commonplace years. Neither of you is now in a state of mind to choose the person who will best suit you during the unexciting and perhaps disillusioning years which will come when this awful war is over. Be good friends in the meantime, but wait till peace and a normal state of mind return before you decide upon marriage."

"Then you won't give your consent?"

"Most definitely I will not. Later on you will thank me for holding you back from such a course."

Gladys had argued no further and had not told Sergeant Grayson of Esther's objection. She was not going to let any stick like Esther tell her whom and when she could marry. She had taken the lead in the matter, and two days later she and Sergeant Grayson, accompanied by his best friend Sergeant Farrell, had slipped away and been secretly married. Three days after the marriage Sergeant Grayson had left Paris to rejoin his company.

He had not been gone another three days—less than a week had passed since the marriage—when Gladys had begun to regret her action, and every day her regret had become more acute. It grew into shame. Each day in that period of the War had its own brilliant hero, and in the swift succession of radiances that flashed across the sky of heroism, the fame of Sergeant Grayson was sadly dimmed—in fact it was being all but forgotten save by a very few. In that epoch of great and crowding events, a single day was a long span of life for average hero-ship.

With Grayson's fame faded, his glamour gone, Gladys was confronted with the unromantic reality that she was secretly

married to a nobody who was just an automobile mechanic. Her soul writhed with the awful humiliation of her situation. She, Gladys Norworth, married to an ordinary mechanic! What would her world say when it learned? What was she ever, ever going to do?

And then, when Grayson had left her hardly more than a fortnight, and before his actual promotion to a lieutenantcy, there had come the news of his death in action. This news had gained no more space than a brief paragraph; that was how long hero-ship lasted in those tense days.

Gladys had wept when she heard this news. She had wept from relief. Since soldiers had to die anyhow, his death had been providential. How lucky she had been in that the marriage had been a secret one! Now, no one need ever know of her shame; not even Esther, who had advised against the marriage. His death had given her story its only possible happy ending.

Perhaps no young widow was ever before so happy as Gladys.

A month after her husband's death, Sergeant Farrell, who had just gained his commission as a lieutenant, reappeared in Paris and called upon the widow of his friend. From the first moment of his call Gladys made no attempt to conceal that she considered her marriage a terrible *mésalliance*, that she was happy to be so easily freed from such an entanglement. Lieutenant Farrell called again, and on this occasion she noted that his manner was strained, embarrassed; it frightened her; and finally she drew from Farrell that which made her profoundly grateful to the great luck which had been guarding her. Before Sergeant Grayson had gone into his final action, so Farrell told her, he had had a premonition that his end was close upon him, and he had confessed to Farrell that some fifteen months earlier he had married

a poor French girl in Paris; and he had asked his friend, in the event of his death, to carry out his instructions for providing for this earlier wife. To attend to these instructions was Farrell's present business in Paris. Through Lieutenant Farrell Gladys met the French wife. There was an infant of four or five months; also a wedding certificate.

With this new development Gladys at first went almost frantic with fear—horror—with an even greater shame. A bigamous wife! No marriage at all! The bigamous wife of a mere mechanic, hardly better than her own chauffeur! How her friends, how all Europe, how all America, would laugh at her if they knew the truth!

And then she remembered. Grayson was dead. The marriage had been a secret. In response to her frenzied appeal, Farrell promised silence, as much for his dead comrade's good name as for her own. Again Gladys was saved! No one need ever know! It would be just as though it all had never happened!

She felt an inner shame, a vast chagrin, over her secret humiliation; and she knew she would always feel this chagrin and shame. But the world would never know of her shame—that was the great thing! The world would never know! Oh, but how luck had been with her when she had decided to keep that awful marriage secret!

Relief flooded into her, her old pride in herself returned. But this relief and pride were of brief duration. Soon Gladys knew she was to be a mother. Once more a frenzy of fear and shame seized upon her, unsettling all control, all reason. No longer was silence possible. She told Esther of the clandestine marriage; told her everything, and demanded to be saved. Esther wasted no single word in reproof; she suggested that they investigate that earlier marriage. The frantic Gladys would not hear of this; the

marriage was all right, and investigation would lead inevitably to the discovery of her own illegal marriage and of her shame. Esther tried to discuss a reasonable course with her; but Gladys would have no such procedure. She had thought of a way by which the world would never know; if Esther would not help her she would kill herself.

Esther had had to yield to Gladys' plan—in its essentials a very ancient plan. At this time France was already asking aid of its friends in handling the problem of its war orphans. In conformity with Gladys' demand Esther let it be known that she and Gladys had decided to adopt an infant, and had her application registered with the proper relief organizations. Thus suspicion was forestalled. Then—through the kindness of the Countess de Crecy the two were transferred to duty in a hospital at Dijon. Shortly thereafter they took a secluded villa in the hills outside the city; and in this closely guarded sanctuary François was born. When Gladys' strength was fully regained she and Esther returned to Paris, where Esther sent word to the various relief organizations with which she had previously filed applications that they had been suited in the matter of an orphan. Thereupon, in due legal form, Esther and Gladys jointly adopted little François, and on their return to New York at the close of the War this joint adoption had been confirmed.

In Paris toward the end of the war Farrell, now a Captain, had once more called on Gladys. He had seen the boy, and Gladys had told him of the adoption. He had smiled, but by no word had he given a hint that he was aware of the deception.

Back in America Gladys considered that all was safely hidden. She was now even grateful that the marriage had not been legal, was even reconciled to François' illegiti-

macy; for had the marriage been legal, she would, in her first terror at learning she was to become a mother, have made known the marriage, and that marriage to a mechanic would have made her an absurd figure to be forever laughed at. Yes, granting her original mistake, things had all turned for the very best.

For two years since her return to America, Gladys had felt this security—though keeping to herself—and given thanks to her protecting stars.

And then one day Farrell, now a civilian, had called upon her. He was in a sad financial way, he had told her; he had regretfully referred to an episode of Parisian days, and had intimated that he might be driven to make profitable use elsewhere of his knowledge of that adventure, and of the maternity of François, offspring of that brief and regretted romance. The old-time fear of Gladys had leaped from its peaceful grave in twice-fold its former greatest panic. The upshot was that Farrell had become her butler, and his butler's wages were but a small fraction of the money he was being paid.

Such was the story that came from Gladys, Esther and Mitchell. Through it all Mitchell smiled with satiric, imperturbable good-humor, every moment perfectly at his ease, with no evidence of feeling guilt or shame.

There was one aspect of the situation that still puzzled Cordelia. Why should Mitchell, able to make Gladys pay any price for his silence, have chosen to become her butler? During the recital he had apparently shown no desire to hold anything back, so Cordelia now asked him this question.

"I was still suffering from having been gassed," he answered. "I thought that a good home, a quiet life, and light work would help my recovery."

His quizzical amiable smile made Cordelia feel that he was playing with her.

"You said something of the same sort to me the other day. But that wasn't your real reason."

"It was a real reason, but possibly not my greatest reason. You see, Grayson was my best friend, and despite his somewhat Oriental aptitude for wives, I admired him as a real man. I rather resented the manner in which Gladys promptly began to look down upon him—even before she knew of his instinct for connubial plurality. And somehow, after she did learn, I was yet more resentful of the way she came to be ashamed of him, not because of his mulierose failing, but because he had been a mechanic. So it pleased my low, vengeful nature to be close to Gladys where I could rub things in a bit and watch her squirm."

"That may also have been a reason," said Cordelia, "but it doesn't sound like your main reason."

"And right you are, Miss Marlowe." His smile was bland, enigmatic. "But that's all the witness can admit at the present moment. Perhaps you will some day learn the main reason—perhaps you will not. It will depend very largely on what our dear Gladys does."

Through all the talk Gladys had maintained an attitude of belligerent resentment toward the others, of an indignant, poignant sympathy for herself. She now burst forth.

"It's not fair, the way you've talked about me!" she cried. "And it's not fair, the fix I'm in and the way I suffer! I'm not to blame! I never did anything wrong, not intentionally!"

"People suffer sometimes as much from their foolish acts as from their sins," said Esther.

"I wasn't foolish! I was just plain unlucky! And because I was merely unlucky, I've got this thing hanging over

my head—and with Mitchell always threatening to tell!"

"If you had only acknowledged your marriage at the time as I begged you to," Esther remarked with the bored patience of one repeating an oft-made argument, "and had not tried to conceal the other things, people would have been inclined to regard you merely as unfortunate, and many people would have sympathized with you; and by now the whole affair would have been accepted and partly forgotten. And you would not have Mitchell and his threats hanging over your head."

"Exactly what I have often told Gladys myself," commented the bland voice of Mitchell.

"No use talking about what I might have done!" Gladys cried bitterly.

"Even now," Esther continued, "it would be best for you if you told the facts. That would free you instantly of Mitchell."

"It's the truth," agreed Mitchell. "It would end me in a second. I've often told you that, Gladys. And in the future, please remember that I am now giving you that advice again. So go to it, Gladys—tell everything."

"And have everybody laugh at me, and turn away from me!" Her voice was again rising toward a shriek of exasperated rebellion at her unjust fate. "I may be suffering, I may be paying, but what I've got is worth what I pay!"

"All the same," said Esther with a grim sigh, "I wish it would all come out somehow, so we'd be through with this business."

The very idea was too much for Gladys' raw nerves. She again lost herself in panic and seized Esther's arm.

"Esther, if that ever happens, you'll stand by me! Remember, you promised! You'll stand by me, Esther! Like you said!"

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“Esther, if that ever happens, you’ll stand by me! Remember, you promised! You’ll stand by me, Esther! Like you said!”

"On the condition we agreed upon."

"You mean François?"

"Yes."

"But, Esther—"

"You know François is the only thing that keeps me here in your house. I care for him more than you do, and I'm a better mother to him. He's to be mine—all mine, remember. You still promise that?"

Gladys wet her lips. Her green eyes were still bright with their frantic apprehension.

"Yes—yes," she whispered.

Before Cordelia could even wonder what this unknown compact might be, Gladys had whirled about and had cringing, fawning hands upon her.

"You see I'm just the victim of bad luck, Cordie, don't you? You understand that, don't you, dear? And you'll never tell what you've heard to-night! Promise me you'll never tell! Think how it would hurt me! Give me your word!"

Cordelia remembered her mission in this house, her obligation to Mr. Franklin. Her reply was carefully evasive.

"I give you my promise that I shall never say a word to injure you."

"Thank you, Cordie—oh, thank you!" And then at once, her hands menacingly crooked, she was glaring at Cordelia in furious, suspicious hatred. "I don't believe you! It'll be just like you to tell Jerry Plimpton! You'd play any trick to get him away from me!"

"Gladys!" Esther caught her arm and pulled her backward.

Once more there was a swift change in Gladys. Again she cringed and cowered.

"I didn't mean it, Cordie. I just went out of my head.

That's all—I just went out of my head. If you'd been through all I've been through, you wouldn't blame me for forgetting myself occasionally."

"You're coming straight to bed!" ordered Esther in undisguised disgust, and with a "good-night" to Cordelia, she led Gladys toward the door.

Mitchell held the door open for them, and bowed and whispered a courteous, pleasant-toned "good-night" as they passed. Then he turned and moved quickly back to Cordelia, and smiled at her his provokingly ironic but good-natured smile.

"There are a few things we still have to say, you and I, Miss Marlowe. I shall call for you in ten minutes. I'd rather like a ride in that car of yours. You might change into something suitable."

With that Mitchell moved swiftly out and closed the door.

CHAPTER XIV

A RIDE WITH MITCHELL

MITCHELL'S request, or command, accorded perfectly with Cordelia's own desire. He had not half revealed his true character, she was sure of that; and she was almost as curious to learn more of his suave, debonair, mocking personality as she was to learn why he wished to talk to her, and what he might have to say, at five o'clock in the morning.

She changed rapidly into a suit, her thoughts racing exultantly. At last she had the full secret of Rolling Meadows which she had been commissioned to secure. Mr. Franklin would be surprised—she could imagine his surprise when she told him!—at the promptness of her work, as well as at the clever manner in which she had stilled all suspicion by pretending that her discovery was a pure accident precipitated by a pardonable loss of temper. He would praise her again; praise her warmly, for she deserved it. Certainly Cordelia Marlowe had proved again that she could manage things! No one could have handled the affair in a more clever way!

And certainly she was earning the money which was keeping her at the top. After this proof positive of her ability and practical usefulness in helping to handle a big and delicate affair—her ability as an endowed and very private good angel to help save people in distress—there was no doubt of her remaining in triumph and admiration, through her own efforts, up in her accustomed place.

She wondered just how Mr. Franklin was going to handle the formidable yet indefinite force which Mitchell was. Of course he would somehow quickly rid Gladys of her incubus; that was Mr. Franklin's business. She felt regret that she necessarily would receive no public credit for her great share in this service.

And yet Cordelia felt no thrill of elation on the score that it was Gladys whom her clever, anonymous efforts were to extricate. Fundamentally, and aside from Gladys' character, Gladys' situation was commonplace enough, was even excusable; a marriage she had believed legal, and a child from that marriage. Only the fact that Gladys was Gladys, and insisted on being Gladys, had developed what should have been merely an unfortunate affair into a potential charge of social dynamite. Really, it didn't matter much what happened to Gladys. She deserved just about everything she was likely to get.

But, oh, what an explosion the thing would make! That is, if any one ever touched off the charge!

In her swift meditation, her hasty moralizing, Cordelia did not perceive a certain likeness, a sistership, between herself and Gladys: that in different ways, both she and Gladys were striving for the same end: to keep from falling from their high places into disrepute or oblivion—to retain their splendid places in this beautiful world which was theirs by right, the only world they knew, the only world in which living seemed possible.

When a cautious knock sounded, Cordelia opened her door and stepped into the hall. Mitchell had exchanged his butler's coat in favor of a dark sack suit.

"No one will see us," he said, "there'll be nobody stirring for hours. But if we are seen, you can mention casually that you had a headache, thought a ride might cure it, and

asked me to go along as a sort of footman to guard against the busy ubiquitous bandit who is making New York famous. Of course," he added with his mocking smile, "we might have talked in your room—but a tête-à-tête in your room at five A. M. with a man, and a butler at that, might possibly have led to a scandal, and God knows we're not starving for another scandal at Rolling Meadows."

Five minutes later the roadster was flitting through the pearl-gray dawn. They drove inland a few miles, turned into a dirt road, then swung into a track which led into an unfenced woodland of the low scrub pine which on most of Long Island is the only excuse for forest. A hundred yards within, Cordelia stilled the motor in a little spot that had been cleared by fire. Above the scrawny, ignoble trees the morning was stealthily pushing up its edge of salmon-pink.

She turned to her strange passenger. His manner was courteous enough, but he was regarding her with that ironical, whimsical, challenging smile which that night she had seen for the first time break through his butler's mask.

"Is this place quiet enough for your purpose?" she asked.

"It is perfection," he answered. "I wish to compliment you on your courage in coming to so secluded a spot with a man of my character."

"Don't talk rot!" she said shortly. "Why did you wish to see me?"

"Because I knew you wished to see me, and it is my instinct to gratify a lady's every wish. No, no—excuse me—don't be angry," he said quickly, as he noted the hot flash in Cordelia's eyes. "I'm so used to chaffing Gladys that I get started in that manner before I think. I'll be serious. No, not too serious; but I'll try to talk sense. I wanted to see you, and see you promptly, because I

thought we might have some interests in common. At least your discovery made you a possible menace to my interests. So I thought we'd better talk things out."

"What shall I call you?" she asked abruptly.

"Mitchell will do as well as anything else."

"But that is not your real name."

"So I informed you. Nor is Farrell my real name. We'll have to keep the real name on the list of things unknowable for a time. If you ever feel you know me well enough, you may call me Bob. Till then, in private as we now are, you may address me as Mr. Mitchell. But in public I will be just plain Mitchell."

She saw this last speech was meant neither to tease nor to offend her. She regarded him with a direct, cross-examining gaze, which he met with a courteous smile.

"Just who are you?" she demanded.

"I told you who I am the other day."

There was just one way of dealing with such an impudent, facetious person: that was to take the upper hand, and to give him straight-from-the-shoulder talk, to ask hard, direct questions.

"I don't believe a bit of that story you told me the other day," she said severely, "about how you came to be a butler. You told at least two lies that I know to be lies!"

Her accusation did not seem greatly to fluster him. "Just which two lies are you referring to?"

"You told me then that you had known Gladys and Esther only a few months; that you had not met them in France. You had known them for five years."

"Yes, that does sound rather as if I had fibbed. And the other one?"

"You told me you were working as a butler because you needed light work. You had been gassed, you said, and

were still weak. You weak! That night you let me in, and I fell, you picked me up as if I were a feather."

"Yes, that does sound like another fib," he admitted.

"And what's more, I knew at the time you told them that they were lies!"

"And I," he said gently, "at the time I told them knew that you knew they were lies."

"What!" she stared at him. "Then why did you tell them?"

"That I shall answer at some other time—perhaps."

"How did you know that I knew?"

"How did you know that I was lying?" he countered.

She did not answer. That eavesdropping at the window of the child's play-house was a matter about which she preferred to say nothing.

"I shall answer your question before we leave here," he said. "And perhaps you may find that my answer is the answer to both your question and my question. Now as to the lies I told you"—his tone had become that of apologetic inquiry—"is a person really lying when he is fully conscious that his lies are not deceiving his listener?"

"That is pure quibbling!" she exclaimed.

"When is a lie not a lie? Always an interesting subject. But discussing it might lead into metaphysical labyrinths far from our present business. Perhaps we'd better return to your original question: Just who am I?"

"Yes, who are you?" She was still trying to keep her attitude of ascendancy. "You have some of the qualities of a gentleman. And you are something more than just a butler. Why are you masquerading like this? Just who are you?"

His answer was not direct; he spoke whimsically, mockingly, teasingly.

"Suppose we consider the possibilities—since you think I'm masquerading. Just who might I be? I might be a sociologist, or a novelist, masquerading to get first-hand material for a book upon the idle rich. Or I might be an ardent lover, playing a part to be near the one I love; some more "She Stoops to Conquer" kind of stuff, this time with reverse English. Or I might be Haroun-al-Raschid, disguised and moving shadow-like about my own particular Bagdad, to see how my subjects, my servants, live, so that I may be more kindly and more wise and more just. Or I might be an international spy, seeking to discover the document and the plot and thereby foil the enemy. Or I might be a gentleman detective. Or I might be a harum-scarum clubman, lately on a carouse, now fulfilling the terms of the foolish bet he lost. I might be— But why go on? You can supply all the possibilities; you've met all these situations, all these characters, in stories."

"But just which one of these are you?"

"Just which one I am not telling."

"But why not?" she persisted.

"For my own reasons. Perhaps because I like the amusement of keeping you guessing at mystery. And perhaps because if I told you who I really am, and why I am doing what I am, you wouldn't believe me. You'd say it was utterly improbable. And it would seem so amazingly improbable merely because it is really so simple and probable."

"You are talking riddles," she said.

"No—just now I'm trying to talk most simple truth. If ever you do learn all about me, that's what will surprise you—the obviousness of everything. I'm the most obvious man alive; you merely don't happen to see me, that is all. The only surprise you'll ever get is that there is nothing

at all to be surprised at. So I warn you—please expect nothing.”

“That makes you sound more of a mystery than ever.”

“Who knows”—and his cool eyes were now laughing at her—“perhaps that’s just what I was trying to make myself sound like!”

His talk, while piquing her curiosity, had half angered her. It had seemed to her that all the while he had been quietly trying to make sport of her.

“Whoever you are,” she declared, “you will admit that you have behaved like a scoundrel! And you will admit that you are a scoundrel!”

“Yes, I am a scoundrel,” he agreed amiably, as though he liked the character. “And when you know all about me, if you ever do, you’ll know positively I am a scoundrel. Whatever mistakes you may make concerning me, don’t mistake me for anything else.”

“But you are a man of ability, even if you are a rogue. Why waste your time being a butler?”

“I’m not wasting my time. I do not know of anything I could do at present that would pay me as well as Gladys is paying me. Besides, I am learning a lot which may later be of use to me. Besides, I like comedy; and I don’t know of any better comedy than those self-appreciating fine people now at Rolling Meadows giving me orders and my taking them like an inanimate, errorless automaton. Besides — But, excuse me—my chief reason for being a butler is one of those little items I am keeping to myself for the present.”

“You realize, of course, that you are practising blackmail?”

“Blackmail, of course,” he agreed pleasantly.

"Do you consider that honorable for a man?" she asked indignantly.

"But, my dear Miss Marlowe," he mildly protested, "I've just been telling you I am not an honorable man. I'm a scoundrel. And a scoundrel just naturally blackmails. He can't help it; it's what he was made for, just as a singer was made to sing. And if he must blackmail, can you think of any individual belonging to any discovered sex who more thoroughly deserves to be blackmailed than Gladys?"

Cordelia found herself without an answer.

"As I said earlier to-night I could not touch Gladys if she had the decency and courage to play square. But Gladys is a snob and a sneak and a coward. She thinks she is overwhelmingly important; what the world thinks of her means everything to her. And I know of no worse indictment against the world than that the fool world does bow down and worship her and her kind. For proof of this, see the photograph supplements of the New York Sunday papers. I mean no personal offense, but your own portrait is often in that same gallery of the brief immortals. I'm no Socialist, no Anarchist; I'm not even a quasi-Malthusian, if you know what I mean; but I sometimes think that a social uprising, or a good-natured selective plague, that would reduce the population to the extent of eradicating these treasured, carefully bred feminine orchids—I sometimes think that such misfortune would be a grand favor to the human race. But I beg your pardon—I didn't mean to grow serious and polemic."

Again Cordelia found herself without words, and found herself wondering more than ever at her companion. Was his talk mere persiflage, fantastic foolery, or behind it was there a vein of seriousness?

"But to get back to my blackmailing of Gladys. I have

at all to be surprised at. So I warn you—please expect nothing.”

“That makes you sound more of a mystery than ever.”

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